

My Ongoing Journey to Wholeness in Christ

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... for God is not a God of fragmentation but of wholeness.

1 Cor 14:33

Introduction

Sometimes in their sermons preachers tell jokes about women that are nothing more than cartoons and stereotypes to get a laugh. These are hurtful whether or not we feel hurt. The implications that women are reduced to caricature in church go far deeper than issues about women. The normative nature of joking, notably but not only about women (along with our acquiescence), reflects low expectations of church, church leadership, and our acceptance of something far less than whole, that is, less than the gospel of Christ. What these reflect about ourselves is addressed in this essay. For the sake of God's church, we females need to change (and so do males). A helpful place to start is to consider that there truly is more to experience in our relationship with God. The two—the status quo of the 'old' and the journey to the 'new'—are directly related in an ongoing struggle between the lure of reductionism, which I explain in a moment, and wholeness (biblical peace) as God's people.

Involved in the struggle are pressing issues for women (and men) about our individual 'person', our relationships, discipleship, and corporate church practice. In all that follows, I focus on key issues specific to women, though the underlying dynamics are the same for men. Interspersed throughout are bits of conversations with various women that illustrate the obstacles we females face, as well as my own experiences of working through relational barriers in my discipleship journey with Jesus—to wholeness in Christ, and into God's whole story. This essay is written particularly for current and future women church/ministry leaders who are dissatisfied with the status quo and who desire to grow in relationship with God, individually and corporately as God's family, the church. I engage this journey together with you. As we continue, it will be helpful to discuss some perspective for further context to better understand this journey.

My convoluted journey as a female begins in childhood. As a little girl, I had sometimes wished I were a boy because the boys I knew had more fun than us girls. I also developed an aversion to the idea of "daughter," an aversion that went much deeper than having less fun than boys. During my college and young adult years, the idea of "daughter" was repugnant to me because deep in my experience, "daughter" had come to mean a fragmented and reduced person. How so?

Fragmentation singles out one aspect of a person—for example, one's biological sex—and then uses that fragment to define the whole person in fragmentation's disjointed process called reductionism. Reductionism is the common experience of all human persons, although this process is experienced in different ways for females than for males. Most, if not all, human contexts (society, culture, family) make distinctions based on gender, by which females are often discriminated against, even if it appears

supportive. In various ways, we are treated as “less” (or weaker) and males treated as “better,” and merely by living in our society/culture (in both West and East) and our families, girls receive both these overt and subtle messages. Most females tend to believe these messages, and live by them. Yet, many women are quick to point out that, given the gains in U.S. society in the past forty years, things aren’t as bad as, say, in our grandmothers’ day. Beneath appearances, however, we are still dealing with discrimination based on gender, including in church.¹ Other familiar reductionist criteria used to discriminate between persons are race, ethnicity, economic status, age, and abilities.

As one of the many forms of reductionism, discrimination based on gender cannot adequately be addressed without recognizing the dynamics of reductionism. And once we understand how reductionism works against wholeness, we can understand all forms of discrimination in the human experience. Any form of reductionism prevents our growth to wholeness as persons, fragmenting us and our relationships, and, thus, what it means to be created in God’s image and likeness. Reductionism in all its expressions directly conflicts with God’s desires and purpose for all human persons. To be made whole can’t be experienced if we address only one of its forms, for example, by addressing discrimination based on gender only. The latter, however, is an urgent starting point, an unavoidable “way in.”

For me, being a girl meant being less, being lost without knowing I was lost, and increasingly unhappy and angry but not knowing why. ‘Daughter’ was inferior to ‘son’ simply by virtue of being “just a girl.” And being just a girl was exacerbated by relational issues I had with my biological dad. These roots of daughterhood eventually emerged as a huge barrier in my relationship with God as my Father.² But, who’d have known? The image of normalcy and niceness that I cultivated and projected was an effective masquerade, convincing even myself that I was a nice person, as if that were significant to God! As you move through this essay, I encourage you to reflect with the Spirit on your own experiences as a girl while growing up as a girl, daughter, and sister.

The purpose of this essay is two-fold: (1) to expose reductionism, its specific consequences for females, and clearly grasp its consequences on all relationships, and conjointly (2) to illuminate what is involved in wholeness as God’s daughters (and sons) and to take our place with Christ in God’s family, in reciprocal relationship with the Spirit. This is the experience of the relationships together necessary to be whole individually and as the church, God’s new creation family “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12).

I’m grateful and excited for this opportunity to share with you in this essay. At the end I include a note from a Christian brother to us, his sisters, which I hope you’ll read with the “eyes of your heart” (cf. Eph 1:18). Before we continue, it is necessary to establish a framework for the deeper context in which our conversation must take place in order to engage the depth of the issues and to vulnerably involve the persons participating.

¹ Recently some pundits say that increases in opportunities for women in politics, education, and the business world show that the United States is now a woman’s nation. I disagree. How can the US be a woman’s nation when, for example, women’s earnings remain about 75-80% those of male counterparts?

² “Father” is how I address this person of the Trinity, not to be gender specific but relationship specific.

Wholeness and reductionism

Growing in wholeness necessitates the depth of involvement—analogue in intensity to what my husband calls “taking the bull by the horns”—in an ongoing relational process with God. Essential to the relational process is to ongoingly address three interrelated critical issues that deal with our assumptions about human nature and function (theological anthropology):

- (1) How we define our *self*, our ‘person’.
- (2) On the basis of how we define our *self*, how then we see others and engage in relationships with them.
- (3) How we “do” relationships carries over and determines our church practice.³

As we reflect ongoingly on these dynamics, what emerges in our understanding is the need for ongoing change from the old way of defining our self to the new, in order to go deeper in all our relationships (with God and others). Experiencing the new is all about “relational work,” cooperatively with the Spirit, in which God exposes our relational barriers, responds to issues—such as anger and pain—in our hearts, and shows us our responsibility and complicity in reductionism of ourselves and others. The latter has been a tough area for me personally. In this journey, our deep illusions are exposed so that we can experience God for *who* he is and *how* he is with us—to relationally know God, God’s intimate presence and involvement, his forgiveness, encouragement, and wholeness (peace). Wholeness is all about experiencing the new of *who* and *what* we are as whole persons in God’s family, just as God desires and planned for all persons from the beginning.

Since wholeness and reductionism work interactively in life, we need to discuss them together. Prior to that discussion, in order to “see” wholeness and reductionism, we must first address the basis for how we see things, our perceptual-interpretive framework and its lens, which is discussed next.

Old and new perceptual interpretive frameworks

We all have a mindset and perceptual-interpretive framework that forms our understanding of everything we encounter in life. This framework forms a ‘lens’ that functions like eyeglass lenses, which determines what to pay attention to and what to ignore. We all function with an “old” perceptual-interpretive framework and lens. Jesus and Paul both stress the significance of what lens we use (see Lk 8:18; Rom 8:5-6, 12:2), and the need for a new one.

The old lens gets us to focus on *what we do* or *what we have*, which are the *quantitative* outer aspects of our ‘person’. What we do (e.g., job, education, achievements, the various roles we function in) or have (e.g., attributes, material possessions, image), become the aspects by which we *define our person*. These aspects

³ For further discussion on reductionism of the whole for church life and practice, see T. Dave Matsuo’s *The Person, the Trinity, the Church: The Call to Be Whole and the Lure of Reductionism* (Wholeness Study, 2006), ch.7 “Ecclesiology of the Whole,” and *Sanctified Christology: A Theological & Functional Study of the Whole of Jesus* (Christology Study), ch.8 “The New Relational Order and the Ecclesiology of the Whole” on this website (www.4X12.org).

define our person from the *outer in*, and are measurable in quantitative terms of *how much, how high, how long*, and so forth. The consequence on our person of defining ourselves by what we do or have is that the primary part of our person, our heart, gets ignored or hidden; thus we become distant from our hearts. And the only part of the person left to focus on is fragmentary, at best.

In turn, and this is critical to grasp, defining ourselves from the outer-in aspects of what we do or have *determines how we function* in relationships. That's because we also define others with this same quantitative lens, and relate on the basis of what we (and they) do or have. Since our hearts are distant, we do not open our hearts to be vulnerable, so instead we give what we do or have, resulting in shallow or distant relationships. How *we do relationships* subsequently carries over into how we practice church. Even with sincere intentions, we will engage with God and each other in church in terms of what we do (e.g., service and ministries), or what we have (e.g., money)—engaging only the outer-in aspects without the whole person. Females characteristically function in church by replicating domestic functions in the serving roles (preparing food, serving and cleaning up), and limited teaching roles (younger children), which rarely engages the depth of the person they are.

During his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated God's different lens, the lens that focused on the *qualitative* aspect of the person, that is, the heart in its function for relationship—intimate relationship. God defines persons from the *inner out*—whole persons—and does relationship on this basis only. Unless our old lens is transformed, we cannot grow in our relationship with God and, therefore, we won't experience the depth of our person in wholeness, our relationships cannot have the depth to be whole, and the church cannot be whole in God's likeness. The new qualitative lens helps us to see, hear and receive God's word as his communicative acts to us, to pay attention to God's relational messages in order to receive God deeply as we read Scripture, and to respond in relational compatibility with God's involvement.⁴ Therefore, it is vital that we understand and pay attention to these relational messages that apply to all communication (verbal and nonverbal)—not only from God but in all our communication:

- What the speaker is saying about the other person
- What the speaker is saying about the relationship together with the person
- What the speaker is saying about him- or herself in this relationship

We miss God's relational messages because our old lens focuses on what God does (e.g., in situations) or has (e.g., power to do something), rather than God's whole person as communicated and embodied in the person of Jesus for us to grasp and respond to. God's communicative acts are only for relationship. Receiving God's relational messages has helped my fearful heart to come forth to deeper connection with my Father. In addition, we must also grow in taking responsibility for what we are communicating to God and others because God holds us accountable for our part in this relationship of intimacy. Both God's messages and holding us accountable are deeply affirming of us in our whole

⁴ For a fuller discussion about the importance of our perceptual-interpretive framework for listening to and receiving God's heart, see *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ: Engaging the Intimate Relational Process* (Spirituality Study, 2004) by T. Dave Matsuo, on this website. See also my essay on spirituality, "Listen to My Son."

person, not in some limited aspect of us.

The whole of God

Growing with God in wholeness involves questioning, and even challenging, our theological (and other) assumptions and our biases about every aspect of life. Pertinent to the focus of this essay, we need to specifically challenge our assumptions about the human person, because it is directly tied wholeness.

First, to clarify what biblical wholeness is not, it is not about New Age spirituality, secular feminism, holistic medicine, or organic and unprocessed food. Wholeness is not a static condition, an attribute to achieve, or something we experience as an individual. The only basis for our wholeness as human persons is the triune God, in whose image and likeness we have been created (see Gen 1:26-27). Wholeness is a function of relationship with God our Creator. Dave Matsuo (my husband) defines this basis for our wholeness:

The whole of God is constituted in the life of the Trinity. Yet the wholeness of the Trinity's life is not signified by the titles of the trinitarian persons nor by the roles they perform. While each trinitarian person has a unique function in the economy of the Trinity, that [function] neither defines their persons nor determines the basis for their relationship together—that is, how they relate to and are involved with each other. Their whole persons (not modes, nor tritheism) are neither ontologically apart from the others nor functionally independent, but always by the nature of God are relationally involved in intimate relationship together as One (perichoresis) by the relational process of love, functional family love (Jn 10:38; 14:9-11,31; 15:26; 17:10-11, Mt 3:17; 17:5). *This is the whole of God, the wholeness of the Trinity's life, which Jesus vulnerably shared for his followers to belong to and experience in likeness of the Trinity in order to be whole* (Jn 17:21-26, my italics).⁵

The 'whole of God' is the *relational context* (family) of God, in which the trinitarian persons interact together in the intimate *relational process* of heart-to-heart connection, at such a depth together as to be one, that is, inseparably whole. While Jesus lived on earth during the incarnation, he embodied and thus revealed this intimate oneness with the Father for his disciples to grasp in his words, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). Jesus also revealed the Spirit as he prepared to leave his disciples, telling them that the Spirit is Jesus' relational replacement to be with them (see Jn 14:16, 25-26). In all this Jesus embodied and openly and vulnerably revealed the dynamic function of intimate relational process of the Father, Son and Spirit in the relational context of the whole of God—God's family.⁶

Because of our old interpretive lens and preconceived notions about God, it may seem strange at first to think of transcendent God as open and vulnerable. Here we need to use a qualitative perceptual-interpretive lens to challenge and go beyond our old assumptions. Vulnerability for relationship characterizes all of God's communicative acts toward his human creatures throughout both the Old and New Testaments, as God

⁵ T. Dave Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology*, ch.3, subsection "Tactical Shift."

⁶ For a full and enlightening discussion of equalized and intimate relationship of the Godhead, see *Sanctified Christology*, ch.2 subsection "The Relationship of God."

ongoingly sought (and still seeks) our relational response of faith; but God ongoingly experienced (and still experiences) our doubt, relational distance, or rejection—if not explicitly, implied in our relational messages, as discussed above. God’s most open and vulnerable communicative act to us was the incarnation of the Son. Jesus openly and vulnerably embodied the whole of God: God’s being as intimate, God’s nature as relational, and God’s presence vulnerably involved—for all of us human persons to experience in person-to-person relationship. He presented his person—and continues to present his person today through the Spirit—for the deepest relational connections of intimacy. A shorthand phrase for this openness and vulnerability of one’s whole person necessary for intimate relationship is “nothing less and no substitutes.”⁷

Thus functioning in the dynamic of wholeness—“nothing less and no substitutes”—Jesus embodied and extended the relational context of the whole of God (i.e., God’s family) by the dynamic relational process (i.e., family love) for relationship together with all who follow him as his disciples.⁸ Indeed, Jesus always gave primacy to relationship by seeking connection with the whole person (signified by the function of the heart), for intimate connection (the coming together of hearts open and vulnerable to each other)—the only way that God does relationship. Therefore, only with our whole person from the inner out (nothing less and no substitutes) is our response back to Jesus compatible with his person, in order for the relational connection to be made (cf. Mary’s connection with Jesus in contrast to Martha’s, Lk 10:38-42). The quality and depth of this relationship is also to be engaged with each other in God’s family, the church. These are the relationships of wholeness that Paul refers to as “the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3), which Christ made a reality (Eph 2:14-15).

The experiential reality of all this often escapes us, however, and we may not know how to go further and deeper. This is where, and why, we need to challenge our theological assumptions about human ontology (theological anthropology), and what it means to be created in God’s image. Paul challenges these very assumptions in his directives for women, which tend to be misinterpreted or simply ignored (e.g., 1 Cor 11:3-10).⁹

We theologically know that God created us for relationship with himself and with other human persons in the church, God’s family. Let’s think about this more deeply. His purpose is made evident in the creation accounts when God said that it was “not good for Adam to be apart,” and God then created Eve to constitute for Adam the human relational context (Gen 2:18-24), in likeness of the triune God (“in our image according to our likeness,” Gen 1:26-27). Adam and Eve’s subsequent actions disobeyed God’s terms for this relationship, thus establishing the human pattern of acting in self-autonomy for self-determination ever since. What we easily ignore about this human condition is that we do this by defining our person based on what we do or have, and try to do relationship with God and others on that basis. Even as devoted and sincere Christians, as long as we

⁷ If we focus only on what Jesus did (miracles, teaching, eating with sinners, etc) or had (power), we miss his person and relational involvement. The former focus results in an incomplete Christology, the latter a complete Christology. For an insightful study about Jesus’ whole person, see *Sanctified Christology*, ch.1 “The Person Presented.”

⁸ This is why Jesus states that “whoever serves me must follow me” (Jn 12:26)—Jesus’ paradigm for all who seek to serve him.

⁹ For further study of Paul’s perspective on women, see T. Dave Matsuo’s *The Whole of Paul and the Whole in His Theology* (Paul Study, forthcoming Oct 2010) on this website.

define ourselves from outer in by what we do or have, we are engaged in a fragmentary process of reductionism, unknowingly and unintentionally, which is discussed more fully in the next section.

The experiential reality of these relationships together with God our Father, both individually and corporately as his family, is to experience wholeness and well-being, which is the Hebrew meaning of *shalom*, or “peace.” *Shalom* is much deeper than the Greek concept of peace as merely the absence of conflict, like harmonious co-existence. Peace as wholeness points beyond the common focus on only what we are *saved from* in a truncated soteriology, to inseparably include the dynamic whole relationships as God’s new creation family that we are *saved to* in full soteriology.¹⁰ Wholeness is essential of God, as Paul says: “God is not a God of disorder [fragmentation and reductionism] but of wholeness” (1 Cor 14:33). The following definition captures well the significance of biblical wholeness:

Wholeness is the conjoint function of the whole person involved in relationships together necessary to be whole—transformed relationships both equalized and intimate. The whole person is defined from the inner out signified by the importance of the heart in its qualitative function.¹¹

As we move through this essay, I hope it will become clear also that wholeness is predicated on grace, and that wholeness and grace are inseparable, and are both only for and about relationship on God’s terms, and, as such, are irreducible and nonnegotiable by our terms.¹² Presenting to God anything less than our whole person from inner out—such as our accomplishments, ministry work, our knowledge of theology—easily becomes a substitute from outer in and conflicts with God’s desires. Anything less than whole relationships are relationships based on reductionist assumptions about the human person and thus are relationships engaged on our own terms, not God’s terms of grace. Now, what about this ‘reductionism’?

How reductionism works

The prime indicator of living in reductionism is a lack of self-awareness and insensitivity to the relational and qualitative in life. Why? As little children, we initially function in relationships openly and vulnerably, trusting in other persons until we learn to close off our hearts. This “hardening” comes through experiences of disappointment, being treated as less, ignored, rejected, and suppressed. We learn to exercise caution and control to keep a safe distance in relationships, and relational trust is choked off as we hide and protect our heart, distancing it even from ourselves. Indeed, we lose awareness of our hearts (self-awareness) and sensitivity to the qualitative (the deeper aspects of ourselves and relationships) as we shift our focus instead on the quantitative, notably what we and others do and have.

¹⁰ There is so much more to grasp and embrace about God as the God of peace/wholeness, and the full significance of the gospel of peace/wholeness (what we are saved *from* and *to*) than can be discussed here. For a deeper study, see Matsuo’s *The Person, the Trinity, the Church* (Wholeness Study), and also *Sanctified Christology* (Christology Study) on this website.

¹¹ T. Dave Matsuo.

¹² For a full discussion on grace, wholeness, and reductionism, please see *The Person, the Trinity, the Church* (Wholeness Study) on this website.

Girls are specifically also socialized not to express anger. From this lens, we learn to participate in various relationships, but in place of our whole person from inner out, we offer something outer in—anything less or any substitutes for our genuine *self* in the form of “what we do” or “what we have” to try to do relationship with others. The experience of such relationships is the shallow involvement, for example, of doing activities together but not making deeper connection. This is how reductionism always counters intimate and satisfying relationships. The deep drive girls and women have about physical appearance is the pattern we have learned about making substitutes for our whole person, signified by our hearts.

When I define myself by what I do or have, I also project these criteria onto others and relate to them primarily by what we both do or have. In relation to God, I try to establish connection with God by these criteria, whether based on what I do/have or limited to what God does or has; such a connection is not for the primary purpose of intimate relationship but what we do for each other in a quid pro quo exchange. Reductionism shifts the focus of the relationship, and substitutes these types of secondary and outer-in terms. Living this way functionally eliminates the need for God’s grace as the basis and base for relationship with God and others, essentially trying to do my relationship with God on my terms, not on God’s terms.¹³ Grace clarifies, however, that there is nothing—nothing!—we do or have that can establish us with God. We can come before God only by his grace, which demands our real, genuine and sinful hearts, humbly, openly, and vulnerably—nothing less and no substitutes, as Jesus showed us—to receive his forgiveness in order to experience God’s intimate presence and involvement with us. These are God’s terms for relationship with him and the only terms by which God does relationship.

How does this all specifically apply to us as women?

Gender distinctions and discrimination

The dominant expression of reductionism in human experience is making distinctions among persons based on our biological sex. On the basis of this outer-in distinction, we are assigned by most families and cultures certain values and expectations on the assumption that males are better and females are less. From this humanly-determined distinction of better-less, all sorts of fragmentation has been breaking down persons and breaking relationships apart. Gender distinction and discrimination range from the overtly violent to the sometimes subtle treatment of girls and women as less than whole persons, as in paternalism. Gender discrimination can be expressed directly in personal relationships, or indirectly at the level of social systems and institutions. Men might not discriminate against women in their personal relationships, but they can still indirectly participate, and benefit from, the institutionalized gendered hierarchy in which, for example, men make more money than female peers who have equal education and

¹³ The “demands” of grace challenge all of our efforts of self-autonomy, self-determination and self-justification. See Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology* (Christology Study), ch.2, subsection “The Demands of Grace.” Cf. Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church* (Wholeness Study), ch.7, subsection “Grace as the Functional Basis” for a discussion of ecclesiology of the whole. Both studies are on this website.

capabilities.¹⁴

Distinction making and discrimination based on gender means that girls and women often go unheard and ignored (even by other women, including Christian sisters). Instead of being full participants, we are reduced to stereotypes, not only in the prevailing culture—movies, music, advertisements—but also in church sermons! It is important to note that the stereotypes of females may appear to be positive (e.g., self-sacrificing mothers, the longsuffering wife, the pure virgin) but such stereotyping focuses only on a limited aspect of women, and thus reduces the whole person.

I am sure most women, if not all, would deny that they believe they are “less” than males. I did for a long time—until I saw that my intellectual belief did not convince my heart. I therefore ask us all to pursue with the Spirit what false perceptions may fester deep in our hearts. A true indicator of what we believe is how we engage in personal relationships. We females learn to present to others anything less and any substitute for our whole person—that is, present what we do or have from outer in to try to meet others’ expectations in order to be valued. In place of our whole persons involved with open and vulnerable hearts, we learn to do whatever we think is necessary to get approval and affirmation, notably from males though not limited to them. The relationships we engage from outer in can be experienced only as shallow and unsatisfying, both for ourselves and for the other persons we are involved with. For the church as God’s family, this has deep consequences for individuals, corporately together, and what the church presents to others. Consider the following example which, though not in a church context, took place at a Christian conference whose focus was on women:

Donna¹⁵, an active member of a local chapter of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE)¹⁶ attended a national Christian conference addressing domestic violence. Donna was working with inner city single mothers, and excitedly looked forward to the conference. She reported back to the CBE chapter about the conference. Her strongest impression from being among the Christian sisters (and brothers) there? Feeling invisible.

To feel invisible is to feel less, and among Christian sisters this experience is especially dismaying—a relational consequence for how we do relationships with anything less and any substitute for our whole person in whole relationships with each other.

What we do and have

A professor once told me she never got married because all the men she knew just wanted a mother.

In my first marriage, I tried to be the good little Christian wife. In the area of sex,

¹⁴ Any male who is serious about treating women no differently from males would need to be willing to give up the benefits of favoritism, prestige, and power accorded him by virtue of being male. That males benefit from gender discrimination at a cost to females should give our brothers in church pause. To the extent that they don't care reflects the extent of reductionism of their own person and their perceptual-interpretive framework.

¹⁵ Note: the names of all the women mentioned in these anecdotes have been changed.

¹⁶ CBE is an international organization dedicated to promoting an egalitarian reading of Scripture, for the purpose of developing and supporting women as church leaders, notably the position of senior pastor.

being a good wife meant doing whatever my husband wanted. Essentially he wanted me to function as an object, and I did. This was disastrous to my person, to his person, and our relationship. Our marriage broke.

An elderly Christian sister is no longer emotionally able to serve as conservator for her older brother who has Alzheimer's and is verbally abusive. "You're supposed to take care of family," she explained to me. She is in the process of resigning, but is beset by guilt about it.

From early childhood on, we females are defined—and define ourselves—by certain roles. The roles of daughter, girlfriend, wife and mother come with expectations to perform perfectly, or, at the very least, not fail. In a Christian context, these roles often come with the added so-called authority of a particular interpretation of Scripture. We *do* many things for others, especially for males and our families. The Christian sister mentioned above could be any of us. She also took care of her ailing in-laws for a number of years, though, as she says, "I was never the care-giver type," as if there's a type. The direct physical caring for elderly parents falls primarily on daughters. To not do what's expected is to risk disapproval or rejection, and becomes unthinkable. Never mind that our own health is compromised, or that our other relationships suffer. Our self-talk goes something like this: "If I don't take care of my parents, then I am a bad daughter. So I'll take care of my parents even if it kills me and the rest of my own family." The unspoken deeper issue, however, is "I'll sacrifice and prove how loving I really am."

We women are good at the role of martyrs and promoting the martyr syndrome because it is something we can do, we can meet the role expectations. It's important for Christians, however, to examine the idea of sacrifice in spite of what our culture says. Consider that Jesus told some Pharisees to "go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Mt 9:12-13). There is a false view that love (*agape*) is all about sacrifice; it is false because sacrifice is about what *I* do (the focus is on myself), but *agape* is about the depth and quality of involvement in relationship with the other person for that person's sake.

The outer-in aspects by which we define ourselves extend to what we *have*. What we have includes our image, appearance, possessions, and relationships of all kinds—male-female, family, children, and so on. Ironically, some women say that it isn't material possessions or what they do that define them, but their relationships; these women devote their lives to family and friends, often with a great deal of sacrifice and strain. If we examine these more closely, however, we might detect that the basis for defining themselves is *what one has*. For example, the significance of a boyfriend or husband is often more the idea of having one rather than the person he is, and I measure his commitment or love by the quantity of things he does for me or gives me. In other relationships, the focus is on the quantity of activities with friends over the quality of the interactions (cf. the phenomenon of Facebook friends, or, more important, church activities).

In spite of having relationships, lacking the quality relational connections for which God created us leaves us in the condition of being relationally "apart." This is why we can be lonely even if we have a large quantity of friends and family, and even amongst other persons, including active involvement at church. I'm sure you can name alternatives that many of us choose to get others to like us so that we're not left alone.

Yet, shallow relationships leave us (and the other person) feeling lonely and down, that “I’m not good enough,” and that “something’s wrong with me”—however subtle those feelings might be. We conclude that we need to have more or do more—always quantitatively more. This is how the lure of and enslavement to reductionism get reinforced in our human contexts.

Three Christian women (seminary students) spoke of their pasts, which were defined largely by sexual activity. One had been married to a sex addict, and the other two had been promiscuous.

While most of us have not worked as prostitutes, many of us have used sexual activity in all its varying degrees to get the guy, and to try and fill our need for deep connection, both before and after becoming Christians. How we dress also can easily be about defining ourselves and relating to males *as* bodies, seeking attention and approval by being attractive to males. If we are ignored for being less attractive, we feel inferior in comparison to other females. Whether we feel good or bad about our bodies, this entire dynamic is the embodiment of reductionism of ourselves, of other females, and of males.

We legitimately need deeper relational connections of our whole person with other whole persons in heart-to-heart connection (intimacy) for which we are created. Our culture promotes the lie that intimacy equals sexual intercourse and sexual intercourse results in intimacy; this is the prevailing view about intimacy. Sex addicts acknowledge that they are seeking to fill a need, but such connection doesn’t satisfy our human need for true intimacy of hearts open and vulnerable for deep connection. The false promise of intimacy through sex is an irresistible lure for girls and women to have sex. Sex without the involvement of our hearts is not intimacy. Also, we can experience relational intimacy without any sex at all. Sex apart from intimate relational connection of our whole person (signified by heart) can satisfy only sexual desire or ego, but it can never satisfy our deeper human need for relational intimacy. That’s why even in marriage, without giving our whole person to the other during sex, intercourse is reduced to a physical activity not to be confused with relational intimacy. So is sex better than nothing? No, it isn’t because reductionism is hurtful. And whole persons will not be satisfied with only physical sex.

We are queasy about intimacy on two fronts: (1) the false equation of intimacy with sex, and (2) real intimacy in relationships that require our open and vulnerable hearts. For many women, including Christians, the former is easier to engage than the latter, which is too threatening. So, whichever the reason, we use sex as a substitute for intimacy, knowingly or unknowingly. Our participation in sex as a substitute also reduces the other person.

The reduction of females is so embedded in our culture that it is normative. The primary expression of this is our preoccupation with our physical appearance, a preoccupation lasting our entire lives. My own preoccupation with my appearance became so entrenched as to be a functional “enslavement” by the time I was thirteen. Underlying this preoccupation was my need and desire for approval rooted in my fear of rejection and abandonment, which reflected the deeper issue of the lack of relational connection with my parents and God to affirm my whole person. It is significant that during my teenage years I became increasingly angry toward my biological father, which

I share more about later.

What are we to make of how we go along with being treated as less than whole persons? Some women are controlled by force and abuse, and others of us passively defer to others, doing (almost) whatever is needed in order to get by (i.e., avoid rejection). Those of us who rebel and do the opposite of what is expected of us are in truth still defined and determined from the outer in. Ironically, living in these ways reinforces the lie that we are less than males. This lie leads to more reductionist behavior, which reinforces the lie in an enslaving downward spiral.

Something less and some substitute for whole persons and whole relationships

Apart from God's initiative of grace as the basis for whole persons and relationships, the reality of our human condition leaves us with only two alternatives. One is to despair and give up, perhaps withdraw, or worse; the other is to create illusions about our person and relationships built upon what we do or have, which we do even as Christians, unknowingly and unintentionally. For example, have you ever thought about the extent to which your thoughts, time, and energy, and conversations revolve around things to enhance our image, physically or intellectually? This is the outer-in focus epitomized by the feeling "I gotta have that" or "I want to achieve that."

I recall realizing one day how much conversation with my mother and sister revolved around clothing and other purchases; it was a significant part of how we related to each other, and I did not even enjoy such talk, yet I submitted to it. In my family, one of my mother's top priorities was that we should be *like everyone else*, which meant to have what was in style. For my mother, being different was to be less, and I ingested her perceptual-interpretive framework that focused on appearance. At some point I gave up attempts at beauty as prescribed by *Seventeen* magazine simply because nothing worked; being resigned, however, could not resolve for me the deeper issue of feeling inferior due to my different appearance as an Asian American in our dominant white context.¹⁷

My friend Laura, preparing to be a pastor, confessed her habit of racking up credit card debt. She is working on listening to the voice that asks "Do you really need that?" Sometimes she's able to put the item down and walk away, but it's a struggle.

As a non-Christian, I adamantly did not want to look like certain Christian women who were, in my opinion, uncool. After becoming a Christian, however, I was still concerned about image. I believed that I needed certain things (like Laura above), essentially to feel okay or better than others. This self-image emerged further in constructing my intellectual-image by academic achievement (what I do) and the accumulation of further knowledge (what I have), which always needs enhancement to feel good enough in the comparative process of reductionism.

Telling ourselves that we don't need something can be helpful insofar as it brings out our tensions from reductionism that we feel less. We are still faced with the deeper matter with God about what (or who) defines our person. In the absence of meaningful

¹⁷ As a teenager, I thought that straight surfer-girl hair was cool, that my hair was inferior. My hair has always been partly naturally wavy, and gets frizzy in humid weather. I was different from the prevailing white ideal of beauty, thus I felt I was less.

relational experience to define us from the inside out, we will just keep on buying things, accumulating things, achieving things. And this enslavement keeps us from experiencing God's love—which is what we really need and want.

At one phase in my adult life, I'd regularly go out for Saturday breakfast with a girlfriend. As I've reflected on it, there was very little connection taking place between us, and we've drifted apart. It took me awhile to recognize how much I liked the *idea* of going out, though the actual activity didn't bring us close.

Years later I recognized that I had presented something less and some substitute for my whole self to my friend over breakfast. Not only did the idea of talking with someone give the illusion of having a close relationship, as it did for my friend and me, but the more the better. I would measure our friendship by quantity of time spent together. In my relationship with God, prayer has also been an illusion, the idea of making relational connection. God doesn't participate on my/our terms, which explains why I didn't feel I knew God even though I was a serious Christian, and studied the Bible, prayed, did ministry—many years in ministry.

In church life and practice, ontological simulations can take the form of activity we participate in together, which can include church activities and “fellowship.” And we measure success always in quantitative terms—quantities of time spent together, amounts of ministries, numbers of people at worship, numbers of conversions, and the like. This is a subject for another essay! The point is that we are so susceptible to ontological simulations that they have become the norm, the status quo, sadly even in our church practice.

Both Paul and Peter tell us in the New Testament that we are slaves to whatever controls us. The control they address is whatever we allow to determine how we live, what we submit to for how we choose to live. For us females, that means believing false messages that say we are inherently inferior, and then trying to build ourselves up by what we do or have and thus engage in relationships. Paul says: “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey....?” (Rom 6:16a). Peter says the same thing: “People are slaves to whatever masters them” (2 Pet 2:19). Paul goes on to tell us that we are slaves of either sin, the sin of reductionism, which leads to death, or of obedience, which lead to righteousness (Rom 6:16b). As matters of obedience, they are only relational matters, which should not be confused with reductionist substitutes of what we do from outer in. The negative consequences of our reductionism affect us individually, our personal relationships, and extends to our understanding of church and church life. Let's now look at further consequences on relationships.

Relational consequences

None of us live in a vacuum, and thus there are negative relational consequences rooted in defining ourselves from outer-in criteria. The way I determine how I measure up is always in a comparative process with others.

Laura, mentioned above, explained to me why she avoids a particular seminary

classmate saying, “I know I shouldn’t, but I always end up comparing myself to her.” Her alternative to comparing herself to the other person is to simply avoid her.

Laura’s alternative removes her from the situation in which she compares herself, but it doesn’t get to the root of the comparative process. We are all familiar with comparing ourselves to others because in one way or another, we all define ourselves by quantitative criteria—and will continue to until we experience redemptive change. In any aspect life—physical appearance, education, job, boyfriend or husband, family, ministry, social situations, and so forth—we measure how we’re doing always in the comparative process with other females, and even with males.

In our sociocultural context, this comparative process is simply the nature of reductionism, in school, work, sports, social life, and even in the context of church and ministry. As it inevitably extends to personal relationships, however, it is problematic because the comparative process creates barriers. Friends, family members, other Christians become my implicit “competition.” When I come out “better,” I feel good about myself, but it is always at the cost of someone else being less. When I come out “worse,” I feel bad, and envious of the other person. My sense of well-being always comes at the cost of someone else, reducing their integrity as a person. That is, in defining myself from the outer in, this is also how I define other persons, even Jesus. Beyond reducing the other person, my comparative process precludes an intimate relationship since the comparative process precludes openness and vulnerability of my authentic self with the other person. This is the nature and consequence of stratified relationships, which, if equalized, would make relationships vulnerable.

Many of us females engage verbally in the comparative process. While critical comments are explicit expressions, snide and sarcastic comments are simply the implicit expressions of competing—all designed to make us “better than her,” always at the other person’s expense. Jesus critiques this dynamic from reductionism in his Sermon on the Mount: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mt 7:1-2).

On another level, when we women believe the lie that what we have to say doesn’t matter—others miss out. For God’s family, the church, this is a particular loss when future women leaders are silenced by reductionism’s lies.

Esther, a female seminary student in her late twenties confided to me her disappointment with herself. Although she believed that she had something important to say, she didn’t feel free to speak up in class, even in a small group. Too nervous about sharing her thoughts as we went around the circle, she passed. “I thought I’d gotten past that,” she said mused sadly.

The constraint felt by Esther can be agonizing (I know!). No matter how strongly we wish to speak, we freeze up. The feeling of inferiority tells us that our thoughts are not as important as what others say, or that a question we have is insignificant. Moreover, we invariably compare ourselves with others who seem smarter and self-confident, and feel “something’s wrong with me.” In the comparative process, we fear failure or coming up short, so we do only what’s safe, or we don’t try at all. Either way, by our reticence or doing the minimum, others miss out on our whole involvement and participation. I’ve

been helped by the comments that there are no stupid questions, and that the question I ask may be what others want to know too!

Beyond the seminary classroom, as female seminarians go out into ministries and churches, these issues will continue to affect not only the women themselves, but the experience of church life and practice. Instead of our whole persons functioning freely from inner out, our contributions will continue to be limited. Beyond our control, those who choose leaders will continue to pass over women because they are women. And under our control, we may limit ourselves to what is failure-proof. Until the underlying reductionism (for both women and men) is addressed head on, the church will continue to be less than whole, and function as less than whole in its identity as God's dynamic family. This issue isn't about everyone exercising their so-called spiritual gifts—which, in its common approach essentially defines persons by what they do or have from outer in—but about whole persons functioning whole together in relationships in likeness of the Trinity, to live whole and to make whole.

There are two related important issues needing fuller discussion than is possible in this essay. One, the comparative process in personal relationships stratifies relationships, which progress to hierarchical relationships and solidifies into stratification of persons on broader sociocultural levels, such as institutional sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and so forth. The second related issue is more familiar to the Christian academy, the debate between complementarians and egalitarians, both sides of which function with a quantitative perceptual-interpretive framework to define the person and determine human function.

I have thus far addressed the relational consequences of reductionism in our human relationships; however, the foremost relational consequence of reductionism is on our relationship with God, because how we define ourselves and how we function are rooted in what we believe about ourselves as human beings. The source of who defines us is a relational issue, for either we believe and trust God's words to us, or we believe the lies, which are from Satan, the father of lies (Jn 8:44). To believe lies is to reject God and all that God communicates. This is the primary relational implication of reductionism, and its counter-relational work.

Reduced persons in reduced function

Women still experience gender discrimination in churches, in both extreme ways and seemingly benign forms. In any form, however, the persistence of making distinctions from reductionism diminishes our personhood and thus limits the quality and depth of our involvement in relationships. Related to gender-based distinction making and discrimination is the culture of censuring, the suppression of our hearts (including but not limited to frustration, anger and pain) as God's daughters.

In a popular New Testament seminary course, "Women, the Bible, and Church," the assignment was to write a reflection paper on a book citing negative teachings about women by the early church Fathers.¹⁸ The next day, a 30-year old classmate

¹⁸ The course at Fuller Theological Seminary assigned the book by Catholic scholar, Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical

discussed her paper with me. Ruth had written two versions. She called her first draft “my real paper,” meaning the one in which shared what she really thought and felt about the early church Fathers. Her second draft was the one she turned in to be graded. Coincidentally, I too had written my “real” paper first. This was the response that freely spilled out. Then I too wrote my second paper.

A year later, Fuller’s weekly paper featured articles about the challenges that women face in church ministries. Anna wrote “It is most difficult to write about these experiences without getting into the dirt of what I think is really wrong....” Like Ruth in the first example, and about the same age, Anna acknowledged that her first draft was the one in which she expressed her true thoughts and feelings, but was not the one she submitted.

‘Nothing less and no substitutes’ for our whole persons in relationship is what God seeks because that is how God is and does relationship. As I talked with women young enough to be my daughters, I was astounded to see their resignation about how things are, the same resignation I have seen in myself. Another young woman recognized her anger as we talked outside class, but she didn’t want to deal with it. Christian culture and contexts don’t encourage women to address the anger in our hearts. Our notable lack of wholeness is reflected in the lack of presence and depth of involvement with others—nothing less and no substitutes—and renders us functionally as missing persons. Again, this is the counter-relational work of reductionism.

The prevailing sociocultural context continues to suppress and control women by labeling and ostracizing. In church, the constraint takes the form of a culture of niceness (in interaction with guilt). Thus we have lots of nice girls and nice women, but ones lacking vitality and joy; many are burdened with depression or endless unmet needs. In the Christian academy, that same constraint insists on being irenic in order to avoid conflict—which is the Greek sense of peace as merely the absence of conflict or war. By contrast to the Greek sense, the Hebrew *shalom* is only about wholeness and well-being of God’s people together as family in the relationships necessary to be whole! When Paul states that “God is not a God of disorder, but a God of wholeness” (1 Cor 14:33), he has in view God’s bigger picture of whole persons in whole relationships constituted in the whole of God.

For the building up of the whole person of these future church and ministry leaders, for the hundreds of women who have taken the class, our first drafts were no less important than the second. The second draft, the appropriate [read censored] paper, took precedence for the requirements and purpose of the academic class, making the whole person secondary. Not having any established means at seminary for them to address their hearts reflects the lack of wholeness in seminary education that is incongruent with how God does relationship, as embodied by Jesus’ presence and involvement with persons. Jesus would refuse to require Anna and Ruth to limit their involvement to only the intellectual level (cf. “I thank you Father... because you have hidden these things from the wise and [educated], but have revealed them to infants...,” Lk 10:21). No, Jesus

Press, 1983). The early church Fathers were the acknowledged keepers and defenders of the church’s earliest beliefs. Unfortunately, many of their views were harshly negative toward women, views which have informed the Western church’s perspectives on women’s value and roles in the church.

would have said at the very least, “Share with me the drafts written from your hearts,” because Jesus does not fragment persons; he seeks to engage only the whole person with his whole person.

Such constraint on females—imposed externally and internally—is a common means of treating us as less, and living as less. During my teen years, I’d get angry at my father. I was not able to articulate what I was angry about because it was not clear to me then, so I could only talk back in frustration, and got in trouble with other family members, especially my brother. Eventually I simply went into emotional hiding; I became a missing person, and a passive aggressive and cynical one at that.

I have come to believe unequivocally that the anger/pain women feel is only partially about being less and mostly about the lack of intimate relationships for which God created us. It is the underlying issue of the human condition and reduced human ontology—the lack of intimate relationships necessary to be whole. I am also convinced that this very anger turned inward is the most under-acknowledged and unaddressed cause of women’s depression and physical problems; indeed, it is the underlying cause of widespread social malaise in so many forms. As our sociocultural context looks to more quantity and variety of substitutes for meaningful relationships, exposing and fighting against reductionism becomes even more critical.

Lack of awareness of the relational and insensitivity to the qualitative

My grandmother (*Bachan*) wore a perpetual frown and stayed emotionally detached from us, her grandchildren. Bachan’s tight frown was common for women of her generation; even their smiles turned down at the corners of their mouths, frown-like. I later realized that family photos show me as a teenager with the same frown-smile.

I could neither recognize nor articulate why I was deeply unhappy until many years later, when two insights gave me an invaluable “aha.” The first insight was that one cause of depression is suppressed anger (another cause is despair). Suppressed anger does not disappear, but gets turned inward, directed toward oneself. My tight smile-frown reflected my heart, though I was not able to identify what I felt. The second related insight was that what underlies deep anger is usually hurt from relationships, which also was true for me.

Modern medicine and drug companies have contributed to the fragmentation of women through “medicalization,”¹⁹ which is to perceive and treat our physical ills as problems to fix with drugs or surgery, as if humans were machines. Rather than being treated as whole persons for whom the inner and outer are irreducibly integrated, we have been made to believe, for example, that all we need to do is take drugs to not feel angry, anxious, or depressed. Anti-depressants, behavior modification, anger management, and biofeedback cannot account for the whole person. They are inadequate outer-in fixes for women; the result is shallow and temporary because our whole person, signified by the heart, is not recognized and responded to.

¹⁹ H. Gilbert Welch, “Life, medicalized”, op-ed, *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 2010.

During my teen years when I was upset and sought a listening ear, I was told “Don’t feel that way” and “You shouldn’t feel that way.” I took these words literally, unfortunately, and the only way for me to not feel upset was to distance my heart. I just shut down and went into my own little world, losing myself in the piano, guitar, or other solitary distraction.

Throughout my college years, I didn’t care about much. This may sound odd since I worked at my studies, set career goals, even studied overseas. On the outside, my life seemed fine, but if you looked more closely, I was far from fine. In hindsight, I believe I was mildly depressed during my college years, distant from my heart, even detached. I recall feeling numb and listless for much of those years. I found school to be a chore (“your job,” I was told). I didn’t care much about other people, even my family and friends. I didn’t care very deeply about many important things, or whether things I did were harmful to myself, or hurtful to others. The extent of any moral compass I had was to guide me to avoid the negative—to avoid failure, avoid going to jail, avoid getting pregnant, avoid causing my parents great shame. Still, I was searching for meaning, dissatisfied with what I knew (e.g., material goods), trying to find some significance in life.

I never got the connection with my parents that I sought (though decades later I was resolved about it). Deep within, I felt that I’d failed as a daughter. My behavior became geared toward avoiding negative reactions from them, and I learned how to stay within the comfort zone of doing the right thing. My anger turned toward myself, and I blamed myself for the lack of connection with my parents. Sound familiar? This carried over into my relationship with God. Only recently have I acknowledged and rejected the lie that relational connection with God depended on me, on what *I* had to do, a lie that contradicted my theological understanding about grace.

As a very young girl, Sarah loved Jesus. She also sang beautifully. By the time I met her, she was in her early 30s, leading worship and singing in church. Yet, all wasn’t well for Sarah, for she would go into months-long states of depression, sometimes cutting herself, and sometimes driving off for days.

Cutting, eating disorders, various other addictive behaviors expose the lack of wholeness among many girls and women. Relational hurt turned inward becomes self-destructive. The link between depression and anger/pain turned inward is being made by mental health professionals these days, yet the responses to remain largely as outer-in approaches of medicalization.²⁰ Let’s now examine more deeply the underlying pain of so much female anger in light of human ontology created in the image of God.

²⁰ In some positive news from science, Sharon Begley reports that studies now indicate that anti-depressants do not really work for most persons; much of their effectiveness can be attributed to the placebo effect (“The Depressing News about Antidepressants,” *Newsweek*, Feb. 8, 2010). I hope that this points scientists and medical experts to consider the need for qualitative responses to whole persons, not an outer in fix of fragmented persons. I hope that these findings will compel us as Christians to challenge our theological assumptions about human ontology—our nature and function.

The human condition: being relationally apart

It is recognized by scientists that if infants are deprived of warm nurturing human touch, they become distressed and die.²¹ This illustrates the reality of our human condition ‘to be apart,’ which God said is not good. All children need relational connection for a sense of well-being and worth (wholeness) from those who raised them.

Certainly, as a young child I could not understand that being provided for and receiving material goods would not meet my deepest needs as a human person. Both my parents were present in our family life, which created natural expectations for meaningful relational connection. Although I was well cared for, I did not have such connection with my parents; thus I experienced the condition of ‘relational orphan’. I didn’t understand why I was unhappy, and had no help to articulate my feelings. I’d see my brother get into trouble for his outbursts; both his outbursts and my parents’ reactions scared me, as any conflict did. I suppose my siblings would not appreciate me speaking for them, but we all developed life patterns to avoid negative consequences, to gain approval through what we did or had (notably in school), and interpreted approval for what we did or had as relational connection. “Better than nothing” could have been my life motto. The trick was to figure out what the other person wanted us to be and try to conform. In school, it was easy to figure out—simply perform to academic expectations and—bingo!—certain approval. There is no mystery, then, why school performance creates so much anxiety for children, for we perceive disapproval for relational rejection, and one’s sense of well-being is at stake. Similarly, we girls learn very early on that we can get approval, or disapproval, by the clothes we wear and how cute or pretty we are. Those aspects are critical to Paul’s argument and underlie his discourse about women (1 Tim 2:8-15; 1 Cor 14:33-35).

It never surprises me to hear in the news about when an otherwise quiet person explodes in violent acts. Sometimes I think I was not so very different from that person. The lack of deep relational connection, cultural constraints, along with expectations to measure up to, add up to a wide range of consequences on relational orphans. I needed to deal with the source of my anger, but before I was willing to, it was essential to know that some of my anger was not because I was a bad person.

We must not understate the depth of this pain and where it comes from. Some of us females (and males) are so adept at covering it up by giving the appearance of being perfectly well-adjusted. But the hidden reality emerges as insecurity in primary relationships (expressed in clinginess, competitiveness, jealousy, and manipulation), in perfectionism (compulsions about physical appearance, being the perfect girlfriend, perfect wife, Super-Mom, fantastic homemaker), ailments (migraine headaches, depression, addictions, mysterious pain), and lack of heart (living in first gear, passivity, resignation).²² We are enslaved to worrying “What will so-and-so think of me?”—including God.

Of course, dealing with anger, pain, or other buried feelings is only one aspect in the journey to wholeness. At some point in our lives we each have to take responsibility

²¹ In his book, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connections* (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), neuroscientist John Cacioppo notes the case of Romanian orphans that demonstrate this human reality, 130-31.

²² Language that epitomizes this resignation is often spoken by women: *ni modo* (Spanish) and *shikata ga nai* (Japanese).

for how we choose to live, no matter the awfulness of our pasts. My concern in this section is to shed light on the counter-relational consequences of reductionism on our person and relationships. By discussing these things together openly we can break into the status quo of reductionism, in order to recognize the kind of fragmented living that outer-in approaches entrench us in, and to grow together as God's family to fulfill God's design and purpose for us—to be whole, live whole, and make others whole in God's relational whole.

Indirectness and censoring

The saying "time heals all wounds" is a deception from an outer-in perceptual-interpretive framework. Just as changing one's circumstance does not change a person from the inner out, the passage of time and physical distance do not either; they are only variations of circumstance. Time and physical distance only lessen a wound's immediacy by allowing the heart to hide. For example, it is a common pattern for grown-up children who move away from home, only to return and fall into old patterns with old buried emotions.

A life pattern developed for me: when upset with my family members, I'd "leave," which was the easier alternative than deal directly with the other person openly and vulnerably. I either physically left the room, or I left emotionally by closing my heart and mouth (OK, maybe not my mouth). Suppressed anger, however, sooner or later leaks out as passive-aggressive behavior. Some women break things, abuse their pets, hurt themselves, slam doors, and engage in sarcasm and repartee. The goal of repartee is to hurt the other person, but it is insidious also because one who engages in it claims with false innocence, "I'm only joking!" and blames the other person with "you're too sensitive!" Moreover, as much as I hated being the loser in repartee with my father and brother, I engaged in it for decades as a matter of fighting for my life, for self-preservation, whenever I felt threatened, such as when I was questioned about my decisions. A lot of my old negative ways came out at my husband, and it took a lot of work to sort out the old causes of my anger.

Migraine headaches, like depression, have higher rates among women than men. Migraines plagued me as a preteen for a couple of years. They started after our family moved closer to my father's work, uprooted from our close-knit neighborhood. I was fearful and shy outside of our family, and felt quite lost. Emotionally, we kids were on our own. Recently it has been said that migraines run in families, as if genetically caused, another outer-in explanation from a modern medical framework. Perhaps there is a genetic propensity, but I suggest that migraines in families are related to family dynamics. I can't help but think that my siblings' migraines have the same root cause as mine.

Many of us are reluctant to admit negative feelings toward our parents because we are taught that it is selfish and ungrateful to criticize the persons who sacrificed for us so that we could have more than they ever did. This guilt constrains us. The constraint is deepened by Christian culture, which teaches us that God's commandment to "Honor your father and mother" means that negative thoughts and feelings toward them are unacceptable. Thus, we grow into adulthood censoring our hearts, made worse by the weighty spiritual dimension. Whatever our authority, we are generally left with two choices: censor our hearts, or open them up. Censoring our hearts becomes a deeply

ingrained pattern of coping with bad feelings, having discovered early on that expressing anger results in disapproval, rebuke, or rejection.

No, time, distance, and hiding do not heal the wounds of our hearts. We are deeply affected because we are persons made in the image of God, after all, and thankfully there are edifying ways to deal with difficult feelings towards others.

Stuck on *me*

The dominant mode of living for women is to be an object—to be controlled by what others say, by our circumstance, and by our feelings. In an earlier section, I mentioned Donna, who was upset about being ignored, which seemed to determine how she then functioned during the rest of the conference. Her reaction illustrates how we females live as objects, letting our feelings determine how we live. Another woman illustrates being victim to feelings:

Jennifer recently retired and was preparing to go to graduate school to step out in a new adventure with God. She ended up not going because, prominent among other factors, her fears of failure and being abandoned determined her life, rather than stepping out in trust, that is, in dynamic reciprocal relationship with the Spirit.

Jennifer lives in fear of failure, and thus of being rejected and abandoned because she defines herself by what she does or has. This is common for us—our fears control us so that we avoid threatening situations by staying in our (self-determined) comfort zones. Being controlled by feelings makes life all about *me*; my feelings become my master because, again, as Paul and Peter said, we are slaves to what controls us, to what we obey. Vis-à-vis God's terms for relationship, we remain in our self-autonomy; this is counter-relational living: stuck on *me*, preserving *me* (see Mk 8:35).

To live as an object is outer-in living, letting situations and other people determine how we live. We live on the defensive, passively waiting to see how to react to situations and circumstances as reactors, not responders. As objects, we passively let others take the lead; we are cautious and measured in relationships; we seek to preserve ourselves. On the other side of the same coin are those of us who are controlling and manipulative, trying to ensure receiving something from others to feel okay. We treat God similarly: go to church, read the Bible, pray, engage in ministry, mistakenly believing that the more the better—so that he'll love me, like me, and make my life better. It is a subtle attempt at God's involvement and care in the way I want. Thus, we define God by what he does, as an object for what I can get from him.

Living as an object means not taking responsibility for one's life. A common consequence of this on others is the unfair expectation this places on others to please us, usually on a boyfriend or husband, even a pastor, or on a church if one is a pastor. We expect them to make us happy, and blame them for our unhappiness, our dissatisfaction, problems, failures and inadequacies. "He" can never do enough for me, much to his frustration and resentment which would understandably increase over time. My husband recalls that as a boy he tried hard to please his mother, but no matter what he did (and he did a lot), it was never enough to please her—and this deeply angered and hurt him. Comic strips and jokes that men have no clue what women want poke fun at the matter, but in real relationships, it's a source of great tension and conflict. I am not at all

implying that the males are innocent participants in these strained relationships revolving around women. But if we women are serious about growing in our relationship with God, we need to reject this common object living and its counter relational implication. No matter how we try to spin it, living as object, from outer in, by necessity revolves around *me*. Most important, living as passive objects precludes our response to God as whole persons. As object, I do not approach God vulnerably as a subject, which requires a person to function in faith (a relational response of my person made vulnerable to God's person). The further relational implication is that I ignore the Spirit, ultimately to the diminishment of the whole body of Christ, the church. We do not live as subjects who vulnerably love God and build each other up as God's family because we are not willing to engage in this deeper level of involvement. What we really need is a swift kick in the butt.

Some women rebel against male-dominated societal norms, exercising their "equality" and "liberation."²³ Yet, rebellion doesn't exist apart from the thing it is rebelling against, thus it only reacts—which is still functionally determined by what it reacts to. Paradoxically, then, when we react or rebel, not only are we *not* free, we are essentially affirming the "truth" of those messages, and life continues to revolve around *me*. Hence, all these ways of living—passivity, manipulation, and rebellion—reflect a lack of wholeness and true freedom, and by extension, a lack of love (about how to be involved in relationships, not about what to do).

Engaging in relational work

In the Introduction I wrote that the idea of 'daughter' had become repugnant to me. Now I boast joyfully about being God's daughter. The transformation from there to here has been my journey to wholeness in Christ. In function, it has been my journey from "slave" to daughter in God's family.

Based on God's relational nature, our relationship with God can only be engaged reciprocally. That is, relationship is never unilateral, though I have wished it were. The relational work involved is never about steps to take, nor does it entail mere intellectual assent to static doctrines or theology; these are outer-in approaches concerned about what to do or information to have. In our journey, we certainly learn new things about Jesus in the process. Jesus, however, has come only to engage us in relational work together, in which we grow in the relational progression from disciple, to friend, and all the way to the Father as adopted daughters and sons to take our place in God's family. Jesus' call to "Follow me" is only for this relational work together, in reciprocal involvement with the Spirit, who is present and involved only for this purpose (cf. Rom 8:9-17; Gal 4:6-7).

Earlier I discussed enslavement to reductionism, in function living as slaves and relational orphans. Jesus speaks directly to this when he once told some reductionist Jews "a slave does not have a permanent place in the family; the daughter and son have a place there forever" (Jn 8:35). Hence, as long as we define ourselves by what we do or have, we will never experience intimate connection with God and each other. As we respond to Jesus' initiative and call to follow him with nothing less and no substitutes, the outcome

²³ I'm not referring here to women who leave abusive relationships as a matter of survival but avowed feminists.

is to be made whole in God's family by family love. This is beautifully illuminated for us in what seems to be an unlikely encounter between Jesus and a woman who was not only "less," she was considered "least."

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' interaction with a former prostitute reveals keys for us to grasp for our journeys with him (please first read Luke 7:36-50). This interaction illustrates that grace, faith, and peace (wholeness) are dynamics only for the purpose of relationship. A known prostitute entered a dinner party attended by Jesus. The party's host, a Pharisee named Simon, was shocked that this woman brazenly came and physically touched Jesus. According to Simon's religious beliefs and practices, Jesus should not have allowed her to touch him because she was considered unclean. But here she washed Jesus' feet using perfume (a tool of her trade), her tears, hair and kisses. Simon could only see the woman in terms of her occupation, defined by what she did—that is, from the outer in. In a sense his attitude is understandable, in that his lens was a product of his human context.

Jesus, however, saw the woman with a different interpretive lens. Jesus perceived her from the inner out, that is, her open and vulnerable heart (representing her whole person) expressed through her actions—and received her. "Your sins are forgiven" signifies that Jesus did not define her by her actions and past life because he redeemed her from her old identity (outer in) and now redefined her from the inner out by grace and forgiveness, for relationship with himself. Now, in her response to grace and forgiveness extended to her in Jesus' person, she freely expressed her heart in response compatible with Jesus' involvement with her; she made her whole person vulnerable to him by the relational response of trust, the faith that we often redefine and shape by our human terms.²⁴

This scene illustrates Jesus' presence and deep relational involvement with her, in which she experienced the truth of who she was now as God's daughter, redeemed from reductionism of her old life, from being defined by her gender and occupation, and thus being rejected. She received God's grace as sufficient for relationship together, making possible such intimate and joyful connection together. Jesus removed the relational barrier and she responded to him. Imagine Jesus enjoying the moment they shared, enjoying her whole person!

God's priority, purpose and grace for coming to us in the incarnation—only for relationship together—are embodied by Jesus in this remarkable scene for all of us to take in. The depth and quality of the interaction reveal the heart of God and the relational function of grace. Jesus made himself openly and vulnerably available to anyone, embodying God's presence by grace. That's why we need to understand that grace is not a lovely sentiment or a doctrine to possess. It is the relational means of God extending himself to us, the means that accounts for the impossible gap between who/what/how God is (transcendent, holy, etc.) and who/what/how humans are (mortal, sinners, etc.). Grace functions only in and for relationship with God. Anything less, even if doctrinally correct, disembodies grace from the Person who enacts it.

Experiencing grace and forgiveness in order to come together in this relationship with God is redemptive reconciliation. It is redemptive because the old must die in order for the new to emerge in reconciled whole relationship together.

²⁴ This sister's worship of Jesus is a challenging example of how our worship needs to be freed for the connection God seeks (cf. Jn 4:23-24).

Jesus' final words to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (v.50), connects faith and salvation with wholeness (peace). Biblical faith is our response to Jesus' person with relational trust, making oneself open and vulnerable (childlike trust), nothing less of our person and no substitutes from outer in—how this woman was involved with Jesus. She relationally trusted Jesus, for example, that he wouldn't push her away as she washed his feet. She certainly must have anticipated negativity from some of the other people, yet that didn't stop her from giving herself to Jesus. This faith is not the common notion of faith reduced to something we possess, nor blind faith that has no objective basis—both perspectives from reductionism.

Being saved (*sozō*) means to be redeemed and healed and made whole in God's relational context and process, going beyond our common thinking about salvation, which stops short at only what we are saved from (the old), in a *truncated soteriology*. For our salvation to be whole, we need to fully grasp what we are saved *to* (the new)—relationship in the family of the triune God, to be whole and in the relationships necessary to be whole, in *full soteriology*. We can now experience belonging as daughters (and sons) to the family of God, the church (God's relational context) by God's relational process of family love. Functionally speaking, this is also the meaning of adoption, not the idea or an illusion, but the experiential reality of what we are saved to.²⁵

"Go in peace," then, is about wholeness and well-being (Heb *shalom*), as the woman experienced being made whole in relationship with God in God's grace. The woman was no longer defined from outer in and nor did she let anything from the outer in constrain her, but as a whole person she loved Jesus freely from her heart (inner out). Beautiful, and in a sense so simple.

The conflict between the old and new is further illuminated in another interaction Jesus had. Luke's Gospel tells us that one day Jesus and the disciples were welcomed by Martha into her home (please read Lk 10:38-42). Martha's sister, Mary, sat at Jesus' feet listening. But Martha was "distracted by her many tasks;" so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Mary took a big step to go beyond what was expected of her as a woman and got in trouble with Martha. Not only did Martha not like Mary's choice, she also tried to prevent Mary from being more involved with Jesus! We don't know how Mary was before Jesus came into their lives, but we can reasonably say that Mary rejected (died to) the old definition for women of what they did or had, and was redefined "new" in Jesus' primacy for relationship together. To be accountable to God and step out with him is to risk the cost of disapproval of and conflict with others, but the prospect of knowing Jesus intimately, however, is his call to us—"the love of Christ compels us" as Paul said.

In Jesus' reply to Martha, he could just as well be saying to us, "Your priority on serving (e.g., preparing a superb dinner, or even ministry in church) is keeping you relationally distant from me. Stop defining me and our relationship by what you do, come over here and be relationally involved with me. Moreover, stop defining me with the lie

²⁵ For a discussion of the relational growth process of God's daughters and sons as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, see Matsuo, *The Relational Progression* (Discipleship Study), ch.6 "Discipleship Formation" on this website.

that I want what you *do* over being together with your whole person” (my paraphrase of Lk 10:41-42). This is the significance of Jesus’ paradigm for serving, noted earlier. Jesus calls us to account for how we respond to his presence and involvement with us. This conflict between old and new isn’t merely the difference between “doing” and “being” but is the question: On whose terms are we involved in relationship with God?

We cannot control what other people think about us, but we are accountable for how we live. Martha conformed to her cultural context’s outer-in definition and expectations for women by preparing food for her guests. She did the right and honorable things for women to do in that time. The point here isn’t that we shouldn’t be hospitable, but about what defines us and determines our priorities. In contrast, Mary didn’t let cultural and family expectations constrain her, but chose to openly and vulnerably respond to Jesus’ presence. Jesus’ words are definitive for us today, as he indicated his own priority for relationship together—the new source for Mary’s functional identity. Relationship with Jesus had primacy in Mary’s life, and redefined her person from the inner out. John’s Gospel highlights the significance to Jesus of this intimate relational connection with Mary (Jn 12:1-8), just like the connection between Jesus and the ex-prostitute (cf. Lk 7:36-50; Mk 14:3-9; Mt 26:6-13).

It is no neutral matter to remain in the old, which, as noted earlier, engages us in the counter-relational process of comparison and competition with other women and/or men. To God, any such counter-relational work is sin of reductionism. No matter how broken down we feel, we can choose to live as a subject in God’s family, for example, starting by reflecting and talking with God, admitting need or desire to change, or asking for prayer about growing in relationship with God.

Illusions (ontological simulations)

There is a subconscious self-imposed blindness to reductionist alternatives that we Christians accept as normal, notably in our relationship with God. We settle for less, and try to justify ourselves by creating illusions and putting a positive spin on them. The alternative is to admit things aren’t as good as we wish, and to be willing to change.

Necessary for growing with God in wholeness, therefore, is to have our illusions exposed for what they are, and to become sensitized to reductionism’s presence and influence. This issue is urgently relevant to us females, because we’ve learned to create and live with illusions in order to get by and feel okay about ourselves in contexts in which we are ongoingly reduced because of our gender. Only in the past decade have I clearly realized many of my illusions, as if scales have fallen off my eyes!

As Christian women, it is disturbingly easy to think we’ve changed, and to think that how we live is congruent with our theology. I have struggled a lot with this particular illusion, until problems in relationships (e.g., relational distance, insensitivity, passivity) have forced me to face the heart of the matter. My illusion has been the result of outer-in functioning, in this case, intellectual assent (and very sincere assent at that!) to theological concepts. Having correct doctrines and propositional truth does not result in transformation of how we function from inner out. Apart from relational work and experience (e.g., as the ex-prostitute and Mary show us), our efforts are illusions, only the appearance of change—that is, ontological simulations as substitutes for being transformed from the inner out—no matter how sincere we are in our practices of piety.

Peter’s practice illustrates the masquerade of outer-in living, as well as the hurtful

consequences on relationships in the church. Not long after Jesus had ascended, he spoke to Peter directly in a vision, telling him that God extends salvation not only to Jews, but now to the Gentiles (see Acts 10). Led by the Spirit, Peter then went to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and preached to the Gentiles there that the Good News was extended also to them, and baptized those who received Christ. On subsequent occasions, Peter proclaimed this same message (Acts 11:1-17; 15:6-11)

Later, Peter contradicted these very desires of God at the church in Antioch by making distinctions between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles and separating himself from the latter. He thus persuaded other Jewish Christians to do the same, fragmenting the church (Gal 2:11ff), so that “even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (2:13). In family love, Paul confronted Peter about his hypocrisy (Gk. *hypokrisis*), for “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (2:14, NIV). The Greek word *hypokrites* means one who outwardly displays an identity different from one’s own, as an actor, to give an illusion. Peter’s distinction-making in God’s family illustrates the lack of wholeness in his person, and its clearest evidence is in relational fragmentation and distance.

The gap between Peter’s theology and his practice is symptomatic of an experiential gap with God, and therefore not living whole. Although Peter had received a direct revelation from God, having correct theology remained an outer in acquisition, not something that reflected his relational experience with God. Preaching this new theology, however, gave the appearance that Peter lived it—that is, an *ontological simulation*. Peter still needed to be equalized from the inner out, to be defined only by grace in his relationship with Jesus and the Spirit. Church leaders, teachers, and seminary students take note!

The *hypokrisis* in Peter’s life illustrates for us the qualitative difference between outer-in change (*metaschematizō*) and inner-out redemptive change (*metamorphoō*). Jesus and Paul both warned against *metaschematizō*, and for the necessity of *metamorphoō*.²⁶ Jesus says, “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43-45). This redemptive change requires both dying to the old (reductionist ontology and function from outer in) so that the new can emerge, made possible by Jesus’ work on the cross *and* the experiential reality of ongoing intimate connection with the whole of God.²⁷

Even as we Christians strive for correct theology, earnestly practice spiritual disciplines, actively do ministry—done with all sincerity and good intentions—we are susceptible to *hypokrisis* and *metaschematizō* because reductionism pervades human life. Thankfully, we have the Spirit to expose our illusions from reductionism so that we can address them.

We women have at least an inkling, with more or less certainty, that female gender does not make us less than males, and that discrimination based on gender is wrong. We try various alternatives to prove the lie wrong. I have engaged (unknowingly)

²⁶ *Metaschematizō* and *metamorphoō* are discussed in depth in *The Relational Progression*, ch.11, subsection “Reductionist Alternatives.”

²⁷ For a full discourse on Peter’s relationship with Jesus, see *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ* (Spirituality Study), ch.5, subsection “Being Relational: The Pursuit of Peter,” and ch.2, subsection “(2) God’s Nature as Intimately Relational.” See also Wholeness Study, ch.2, subsection “Convergence with the Trinity.”

in *metaschematizō* just like Peter, trying to change from outer in. I would never have even thought about illusions but for my own experience of having them painfully exposed, as God has kept pursuing my heart for deeper connection together.

While in college (during the '70s), with the women's movement in full swing (along with other movements for self-autonomy and self-determination), I considered myself to be liberated from the traditional mindset of male superiority and female inferiority. I believed intellectually that women and men were of equal value, should have equal opportunities and equal pay. I rejected the message from prevailing culture that as a woman I needed a special relationship with a man, marriage and children to be "the best I could be." Instead, I would pursue a career, live independently, and be fulfilled.

My nascent feminism was solidified theologically after I became a Christian before my senior year, eagerly affirming Paul's statement that "there is no longer Jew or Greek... slave or free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Thus scripturally fortified, with other Christian sisters I marched for women's human rights, against domestic violence, and advocated for garment workers in Los Angeles. As a Christian, I was committed to being fair-minded and sensitive to all others. It was thus deeply disturbing to discover the wide gap between my correct theology and how I actually lived, notably how I functioned in relationships. This illusion-dispelling forced me to get in touch with my hidden heart!

Certain circumstances forced me to see that my theology was only an outer-in assent with my mind, but that my heart was not congruent with my mind. One situation was that during an English language class with women from Mexico and Central America, the topic came up about men and machismo (male superiority in Latino cultures). Some of the women talked candidly about their spouses' control over them, including forbidding them to come to our class. As we talked together, I could hear in my voice and sense my own resentment and anger toward males, betraying my still-unresolved anger toward them as a group. My anger revealed unfinished business in relation to my dad, and that somewhere in the hidden nooks of my heart there lingered my belief in the lie that I was inferior as a female. The point to grasp here is that being equalized can not occur from the outer in by merely affirming a propositional truth, no matter how sincere or strongly motivated we are. Having correct theology does not automatically translate into transformation from the inner out; it is an illusion from *metaschematizō*, just as Peter demonstrated.

My *hypokrises* was also exposed through ongoing tension and conflict in relationship with a male partner in ministry. Whenever he questioned things I did, or gave me negative feedback (for the purpose of my growth), my pattern was to react with defensive anger and throw the responsibility back onto him. In so many words I would say or think, "Can't you say anything positive about me?" "Why are you so critical and judgmental?" "I'm *trying* my best!" What I really wanted was affirmation and approval from him for what I did because that is how I defined myself. Furthermore, I valued his opinion more than that of any female partner because he was a male. The implications of my true beliefs were painful to realize. I had not truly been equalized, though I professed to be. Believing I was inferior as a female also implied that I believed all females to be inferior, thus their opinions were less important to me. Because I believed males were *more* worthy, receiving approval or affirmation from males would increase my own

worthiness and importance. Admitting all of this was a very bitter pill for me to swallow.

Another ontological simulation that women fall victim to in the effort to counter gender distinction-making is the false promise from secular Western feminism of liberation and equality. So-called liberation for women is largely about gaining self-autonomy for self-determination, and equal access to what men have and do (e.g., same power, privilege, and prestige). We take this to mean entitlement to do what each individual wants; *I* define and determine my identity and significance. Certainly, we should pursue equity for all persons. What is critical to grasp is its basis. Self-autonomy keeps me in outer-in reductionist alternatives, determined by me yet shaped by my sociocultural context, of what *I* do and have, in the comparative process necessary to measure my success. In this system, I have to keep performing and having certain things (e.g., knowledge and resources) in order to measure up, and other persons are my implicit competition, as noted earlier. The inevitable outcome is stratified relationships.

Only Jesus is true equalizer of persons. Liberation for self-autonomy keeps us functionally enslaved to the burdens of believing we are inferior, as well as having to continually prove ourselves to ourselves, God, and others in subtle efforts at self-determination. Just as Jesus redeemed and made whole the ex-prostitute and Mary from the inner out, so also he seeks to redeem and equalize us from the lies of gender distinctions and discrimination. God did not free women (or any persons) to self-autonomy; he freed us *to* relationship as his daughters, whole persons in God's family, and the relationships together necessary to be whole in his new creation family. This is complete soteriology that does not leave us only saved from sin, in an incomplete soteriology, but saved to our place in the family of God as daughters (and sons) with its relational process of family love—full soteriology.

A further way we inadvertently create illusions is to characterize relationships—with God and others—as better (i.e., intimate and satisfying) than they really are. If we want to grow, we have to honestly assess the depth and quality of our relationships—with God, family, church family, and beyond—to help us think about whether or not we are unknowingly and unintentionally engaged in counter-relational practices from reductionism.²⁸

Growing in 'nothing less and no substitutes'

A heart that is ignored or hidden lacks self-awareness and sensitivity to the qualitative and relational (cf. Jesus' words, "the love of many will grow cold," Mt 24:12b). Our hearts remain isolated (relationally apart) for decades, even in the midst of many people in our lives. Growing in wholeness requires our hearts to be open and vulnerable for relationship together in the response of trust that is compatible with how God is first open and vulnerable with us. This dynamic process has emerged for me since I first acknowledged that I was messed up and could not fix myself. I was tense and all bottled up inside, and scared to be accountable for all that lay buried in my heart. Venturing into this vulnerable territory could mean possibly losing control and falling apart. Many times I cried out to God, "I believe you are in control; help me in my unbelief!" (cf. Mk 9:24).

²⁸ I highly recommend Dave Matsuo's *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ* (Spirituality Study) and its Study Guide & Growth Plan, on this website. The study guide provides important questions for reflection and interaction that encourage thinking relationally.

When it became apparent that suppressed anger (indeed my heart) was a major barrier in my relationship with God, I knew I had to address it directly. It was crucial for me to learn that anger comes with the territory of being a person and I needed to be honest about it. I embraced Paul's words, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger; do not make room for the devil" (Eph 4:26-27). Most important to me was that Jesus himself got angry about the abuse of the temple. God himself gets angry—what a relief! We can even express anger at God. God welcomes us to pour our hearts out freely to him. Just look at the Psalms with this lens!

Jesus' anger about the temple was congruent with who he was (is). Seeing this freed me to see that there is such a thing as legitimate anger, since I used to believe all anger was unacceptable. There is reason to be angry, as when children aren't given the quality relational connection and care they (we!) innately expect. Parents have the responsibility to deeply connect with their children, and children count on them for this. As persons created in God's image for the deep relational connection constituting belonging, being deprived of it causes pain and anger.

On the other hand, anger can also come from all kinds of self-centeredness, and reflects our lack of wholeness. But rather than get stuck trying to figure what is and isn't legitimate (which is about not wanting to make a mistake), by opening our hearts in relational trust in God, and freely letting the anger come out, we can ask the Spirit to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate anger, so we can deal with it. Whatever the cause, we need to reject this self-concern about doing the right or wrong thing—a relational barrier with God; our part is to stay involved in the relational process with him.

This next section summarizes my early experiences in the dynamic relational process to wholeness, the reciprocal relationship with the Spirit of opening my heart to God, to receive him as my Father who has first loved and initiated toward me (1 Jn 4:19). It has been a reflexive process in which I have had to address the same issues several times (*"that again?!"*), but each time going further and deeper with him. The relational process I share here is not to be taken linearly as a 1-2-3 series of steps, which would reduce the process to what to do (which I have gotten into, for sure). Neither is the relational process a once-and-for-all event, nor a string of instances, which reduce the relational process to merely going from one situation to the next as a passive object (though I have treated the process in all these ways).

I specifically **committed myself to God** to work through the barriers in my relationship with him (e.g., anger toward my biological father). Initially I needed a "coach" who guided me to stay in the relational process, reminding me to be honest, to pray, and sharing God's promises along the way.

It was scary to come like a little girl to her Father. With the prayer to "help me in my unbelief" and with the Spirit's involvement, I **entrusted my heart to him, telling him how scared** I was to release all this anger and pain, and that I needed him now. As an important part of the relational process, I **affirmed God by telling him "I'm counting on you to be who you say you are and to do what you promise."** This affirmed God's person and that he would not reject or abandon me, but would receive me because of his grace ("my grace is sufficient for you," 2 Cor 12:9). Relationally, it pleases God to count on him because he wants us all to experience him intimately for *who* he is and *how* he is in relationship together. This is to relationally experience God's love, not the knowledge

about *hesed* (Hebrew) and *agapē* (Greek)—his presence and involvement, nothing less and no substitutes. I claimed his promise that “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb 13:5b).

Slowly at first, I made my **heart open and vulnerable** to God, to **release to him the anger and pain** of being treated in life as inferior because I am female. I identified and rejected all the messages (both spoken and unspoken) from family, culture and society that were lies I had believed. At times I did not want to open my heart to God because I didn’t want to feel the anger and pain. I was afraid to let go of the control of my feelings, which I’d kept suppressed for years. It terrified me to completely lose control of myself. This might sound overly dramatic, but that is exactly how I felt. Others who were present spoke God’s promises and assurances to me throughout the time(s).

To direct my anger, I had to learn to give other persons (e.g., my dad) their responsibility in our relationship, **no longer making any excuse for the other person**. It seems to be ingrained in many of us to excuse others. Some common excuses are

- they grew up in a different time
- that was how they were raised; it’s the traditional culture
- they didn’t know any better
- they sacrificed for you
- they did the best they could

I needed to suspend dealing with any truth to these (i.e., to hold them in tension) while addressing the relational issues. Here again is where we can trust the Spirit to discern and give feedback about what is truly the other person’s responsibility, or whether we are trying to justify ourselves.

Out poured sobbing floods as I let go of my heart to God. It felt as if a dreaded darkness with long tenacious roots was at last being pulled out. And to my relief and amazement, my Father received me. He did not reject me or say “You shouldn’t feel that way,” or imply that all my problems were because something was wrong with me. With further guidance, I imagined my father sitting in the chair opposite me, and I told him what I had needed and wanted from him, my hurt and anger at so many things he had said and done, my disappointment and sadness. In this process I didn’t censor anything, or didn’t try to figure out the right thing to say. I felt freed in expressing deep feelings. Intermittently I would have to stop and address God.

Beyond mere catharsis, I needed to experience God with me. How did I experience God’s response? As I let my heart emerge, it was my Father’s relationship-specific presence and involvement through the Spirit, who assured and comforted my heart by reminding me of many relational words and promises from Jesus (not disembodied spiritually), which responded to my heart deeply (cf. Jn 14:26). God’s specific responses that my heart needed came as the Spirit reminded me of relational promises such as, “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me” (Ps 27:10, NIV). God as my Father is not relationally distant like my Dad; I can fully count on God to be all that he says he is and to keep his promises. God indeed is righteous, not as a mere attribute, but in our relationship together.

There were subsequent times that I dealt with further feelings on my own. Because I had gone for years out of touch with my heart, it helped to start those times by writing a letter to my dad (that I didn’t intend to send), in which I freely told him all that I was never able to say as a child. A couple of times I ended up furiously scribbling. At

other times, I just needed to scream into a pillow, or throw socks at the wall, or pound my bed with the pillow, just to physically express residual fury and frustration.²⁹

By believing the lies (from Satan), this means not believing God (e.g., I'm created in his image, he loves me, his grace is sufficient for our relationship). Relationally, I had in effect called God a liar and rejected God (because we can't fragment God from his words). To take responsibility for this, I **rejected the lie** that I'm inferior as a female and **repented of believing Satan's lies instead of God. I claimed Jesus' work on the cross which redeems my heart of sin, and received his forgiveness.** I thanked God for his grace for our relationship and the depth of reconciliation I ongoingly experienced.

God's response is always his presence and intimate involvement. I experienced God's comfort in relationship-specific ways (i.e., specific to my person, my need, and our relationship), not something he did for or to me unilaterally, such as merely take away pain—the qualitative contrast with how the medical field deals with deep pain.

Once as a child, I was anxious and couldn't sleep. I went and woke up my dad, a physician, looking for comfort. His response? He gave me a half a sleeping pill and sent me back to bed. God, my Father, deeply comforts with his presence and intimate involvement.

I could now **forgive specific persons** who had hurt me. This was an equally important step of trusting my heart to God.³⁰ I let go of what I had wanted/needed from those persons, namely deep relational connection, by **saying good-bye** to them in my heart and **grieving** the loss: "I'm not waiting to receive from you anymore; I'm moving on. Bye, Dad." In doing so, I let go of hoping to have the deep connection with him that I had long hoped for. I again needed to **affirm God as my Father** and take in the reality that I'm his chosen daughter whom he loves. I could now receive and experience my Father's vulnerable heart! Moreover, I could also "see" my dad's person and be involved with him much more freely.

"Spirit, bring out whatever is in my heart that I need to see" is a prayer I still pray when I know there's something going on but I can't get a hold of (cf. Phil 3:15; Rom 8:26-27). "Go deep, don't leave anything hidden there." Indeed the Spirit searches my heart, and brings forth things I had no idea were there. I'm still getting to know the Spirit.³¹ Moreover, as God responded to my heart, I could distinguish better what was legitimate anger and what was anger from selfishness, to see more clearly where I was at fault and take responsibility for myself.

I have also at times pleaded with God to just say the word and change me—to *do*

²⁹ Important note: in order to not create needless alarm (e.g., with your neighbors), be sure to muffle the volume! Also, cover your screaming pillow with a towel because it can get drool-y. Wholeness isn't for the faint-hearted or squeamish.

³⁰ Due to the limits of this article, I don't discuss reconciliation fully, only to say that forgiveness opens the door to full reconciliation between open and willing parties. If one party is not open, then reconciliation does not take place.

³¹ The Spirit is Jesus' relational replacement with us on earth, not some impersonal power, not an "it." Before Jesus' death and resurrection, he comforted the disciples with the promise that he wouldn't leave them as orphans (i.e., relationally apart from family). Jesus promised his relational replacement, the Spirit, who would be with them as Jesus was (please read Jn 14:15-27). The Spirit is given only for relational work, as Paul makes clear in Romans 8:14-17, 26 and Galatians 4:6-7.

something, and do it unilaterally. Such is a prayer from my reductionism of both myself and of God, defining God by what I want him to do. This is how I have tried to push for relationship on my terms, to circumvent my part, to stay the passive object, to keep relational distance from him. God will not participate on our terms—he cannot. Thankfully.

To mention briefly here, God has also pursued my heart specifically in the matter of the distinction based on race, and discrimination. Only about seven years ago, God exposed deep pain in my heart as a person of color, a third-generation Japanese American. Again, I poured out the pain in my heart to my Father, rejected the lie I had believed (i.e., being inferior as an Asian despite the stereotype of our academic achievement), which had influenced how I lived. I rejected the outer-in criteria of race to define my person, and received my Father's grace and love.³²

The emerging relational outcome

Experiencing and knowing God as my Father is in a sense very simple. It seems so easy for small children to connect with God until they learn to suppress their hearts. Yet as an adult, my journey to wholeness has not been about getting back to the Garden, to some idyllic state, or back into the womb, but is the relational process of dying to the old, and rising with Jesus as daughter in his new creation family. At the moment of writing this essay, I am working with the Spirit to come even more deeply before my Father in vulnerable involvement, trusting him to be who, what, and how he says he is in our relationship. I am asking, seeking, knocking to be opened to the depths of his heart, waiting and counting on him, to go further in faith—both to participate deeper in his life and to further share God's whole life vulnerably with others—and doing so expectantly. I have never felt so vulnerable.

Any focus on what I do or have, or on what God does or has precludes this relational connection—which is the reason I never had meaningful connection with my biological father. My relationship with Dad never got beyond what he and I did or had, not even to his death. And because of this, I never knew him, as I am growing in knowing God my Father. I knew Dad only from the outer in, about what he did successfully and had materially, or what I did successfully (or not). He had wanted me to be a physician also; if I had not resisted his expectations and eliminated myself from that course, I would be a physician today. It made me sad to acknowledge the reality of my relationship with Dad, to have any illusions now clearly dispelled, though on a deep level it was no surprise.³³ I have been amazed all the more to realize that God wants me/us to know him by experiencing his vulnerable heart, not just know information about him, and that all his communicative acts are on his initiative, only for the purpose of relationship

³² Like my denial of believing I was less as a female, I had denied to myself feeling less as an Asian. I could acknowledge how I truly felt only with the Spirit's deep help. Thank you Spirit!

³³ The issue of illusion about my relationship with my dad came from memories of childhood. I recall as a little girl sitting and playing with Dad, but as I grew older, this didn't happen anymore. I grew up thinking our relationship had changed at some point. In hindsight, I saw that I was the one to initiate these and any other moments together, and that I stopped after we moved.

together.³⁴ Wow.

Equalized and intimate relationships in God's new creation family constitutes my (our) new primary identity; all other identities from outer-in distinctions are rendered merely secondary (not obliterated) or completely insignificant. All these human-shaped distinctions from the old, that fragment, stratify relationships in hierarchies, have been equalized in God's family. As those deemed inferior in our human contexts (females), we are "equalized up," and those deemed superior (e.g., males) are "equalized down" (cf. James 1:9-10a). Since it is the relational function of grace that equalizes us with each other, grace's demand of 'nothing less and no substitutes' means that these relationships together are also intimate—inseparably, irreducibly, and nonnegotiable equalized and intimate!

As a side note, there are further issues that are problematic for these equalized and intimate relationships to be realized, which will have to be addressed in a separate essay. One such issue is the debate about women's place and function in church, of which both sides—complementarians and egalitarians—are premised on a reductionist theological anthropology resulting from an outer-in perceptual-interpretive framework. I suggest, therefore, what emerges from either position is less than whole, for persons and church, which the whole in Paul's discourse on women always challenges for their wholeness.

Wholeness is only about being made whole and living whole in relationships in God's relational context and process (God's family, the church)—the relational outcome 'already' of God's pursuit of us according to his desires and purposes, for which he created us in his image and likeness, and for which the Spirit is given for ongoing reciprocal relational work. Getting back to jokes about women in sermons, the lack of sensitivity toward women, the excuse that "I'm only joking," and our acquiescence, all directly point to the vital immediacy of fighting against reductionism and our need to grow in the wholeness of God. Until God's story comes to its eschatological conclusion, our journey to wholeness continues. There is much relational work to give ourselves over to, individually and together as his daughters (and sons), so that God's family can be freed from its reductionism, to reject our counter-relational enslavements, and to emerge as true daughters and sons of God—in intimate and equalized relationships together. This is the wholeness that Jesus prayed for in his "formative family prayer" in John's Gospel:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (Jn 17:21-23).

Thank you, Father, for sharing your heart with me (and all of us). Thank you for your vulnerable presence and intimate involvement—nothing less and no substitutes—so that we can count on you to be who you say you are and do what you promise. Take us further and deeper with you so we can grow and truly experience wholeness as your very own daughters (and sons) all together!

I conclude here with a personal message from my husband to us, his sisters,

³⁴ This illuminates what Jesus says in his prayer to the Father: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you...." (Jn 17:3).

which he originally included at the end of his study on wholeness.³⁵ Since we are made whole only in relationships, listen with your heart to his heart, with even greater urgency.

A personal note from a brother: “A relational challenge to my sisters”:

God has created and embodied your person in gender by design and purpose. Don’t let this distinction, however, reduce you from the primary significance of God’s purpose. This has less to do with your uniqueness as a female individual and more to do with the whole of God’s desires in the big picture for redemptive reconciliation of our relational condition “to be apart.”

God has gifted your person in gender for this qualitative purpose, which has everything to do with the church as his family. If you only function apart from the church or give up on the church, you will fail to use your whole person to fulfill our primary purpose to build God’s family, thus leaving my gender in particular with only its simulations and illusions of church family.

Certainly for you to function wholly within the church is a struggle and may seemingly be without opportunity. Yet we need you to demonstrate the grace imperative for the qualitative purpose and function of church practice. With the Spirit you can go beyond your situations and circumstances to help us distinguish between the prevailing church as an organization or institution from the reality of the new creation church as family—into which I suggest God is asking you to lead us all further and deeper. My gender needs your help to get out of our enslavement to reductionism, both in personhood as well as relationships, in order to experience the whole of God together in intimate interdependent relationships equalized in family love. Your willingness to make your person vulnerable in these relationships will demonstrate the grace and redemptive changes necessary to be whole as this new creation church family. God calls us both to build this family, yet current conditions suggest for you (yes, embodied in your gender) to take the lead. Please don’t wait for my gender to give your gender “permission” to act. Just as the Canaanite woman, the prostitute and Mary did, let the heart of your whole person be expressed to and involved for the whole of God.

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³⁵ *The Person, the Trinity, the Church* (Wholeness Study), ch.11 “Nothing Less and No Substitutes,” subsection “A Suggested Relational Conclusion.”