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• INTRODUCTION •

EVOLUTION OF THE WORKSHOPS

This work has grown out of my own experience as a member of the population being studied. In the 1970's, I was invited by a friend who was writing a sociology textbook on *Women As Strangers*. She asked me to write a chapter on *Women and Religion*.

This opened up a whole new world for me. Although the book never came to be, I met many, many wonderful women. I met Catholic women, some in religious congregations, some in cloisters, some married, some single. I corresponded with one of the first women rabbis, was honored to be befriended by a woman in the Salvation Army, and met many women of various denominations. One of these women was Mary Buckley, a prominent theologian and professor at St. John's University in New York.

When I met Mary, I had no idea of her prominence as a scholar and teacher. I just found her to be a very interesting woman who served great Irish soda bread. After we talked for a while, she invited me to a gathering of friends. The gathering included writers, theologians, teachers, nurses, students, married women and single, nuns and laywomen. At that time, I was a high school guidance counselor. I am a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph who, at that time, was a guidance counselor in one of our high schools.

For some of the women, this group was the first encounter they'd had with nuns since their own elementary school days. For me, it was the beginning of friendships with women I would never have known otherwise. We were a remarkable little bit of everything. In some ways we became sisters through this group.

At first, we met regularly to talk about books and ideas. Most of the time, the book got put aside and we just talked about ourselves and our lives. Then, a small group of us decided we'd like to do something more active, so we "borrowed" a local political clubhouse one evening a month and invited speakers on topics that interested us. They were very interesting women and only later did we learn how prominent many of them were in their fields of expertise. From these sessions, some of us began to talk about doing our own workshops and programs. From these seeds of thought grew the team of "Women for a New World" and the workshops that are central to this work.

The first workshops began in and grew from our multidisciplinary prayer discussion group in which psychology, spirituality, and a holistic approach to living were introduced in a setting familiar and safe for Roman Catholic women. Our journey led some of us from a gathering of interesting women, to a discussion group, to the creation of psychospiritual programs for women.

In the course of our personal and professional evolution, my colleagues and I found that others, like ourselves, had experienced a shift in their worlds, causing them to feel conflicted. No longer comfortable with fulfilling the traditional definitions of their roles as *good women*, they had not yet found personally acceptable ways to voice their concerns or to name what they valued in themselves.

Our initial program, *Touching Your Lifethread*, confirmed our experience. Based on feedback from participants, we added a follow-up program, *Revaluing the Feminine*. Each was created as a “stand alone” program. Some women came to only one; many women participated in both. These workshops, which are more fully discussed in *CHAPTER IV*, are, in effect, feminist weekends for not women who are not necessarily feminist.

Each workshop is designed to provide a vehicle for exploring the developmental issues of women trying to balance traditional roles and identities amidst the challenges raised by a changing culture. As one participant wrote, “I’ve always been taught and felt that you should be generous and unselfish, but sometimes I want to scream ‘What about me?’” This question sums up the challenge and task facing women determined to grow into their own wholeness.