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Reflections of Teachers at Midlife

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"Saturating Language with Love"

Variations on a Dream

MARLENE A. SCHIWY

FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS IS ROOTED IN THE HEART. THE FEELING COMES WITH THE THOUGHT, AND AS THE THOUGHT IS SPOKEN, THE HEART OPENS AND FEELING FLOWS TO DEEPER, RICHER LEVELS.

Marion Woodman, *Leaving My Father's House*

Leafing back through my journal in search of clues to my recent entry into midlife, I discover a dream I had recorded in April, shortly before I received the invitation to write this piece. In my dream an anonymous and disembodied voice says, "The only way to practice God is to saturate language with love." As I hear the words being spoken, I know they are true. I feel urgently that language must be taken apart and permeated with a whole new dimension and color—the dimension of love—before it can be reassembled and made whole. In the dream I don't doubt that this is possible.

I know that an impersonal voice heard in a dream carries archetypal weight. And I knew in April and know now that this dream holds something important for me.

The night before that, my graduate modern European literature class had been discussing Christa Wolf's concept of the "living word," wherein language might be reunited with the knowledge of the senses rather than continuing in the service of Western culture's three-thousand-year-long "dangerous experiment with abstract rationality" (1984, 268). Instead of producing more heroic narrative, Wolf proposes, the living word would

"greet with a smile the wrath of Achilles, the conflict of Hamlet, the false alternatives of Faust," preferring instead "to name the inconspicuous, the precious everyday, the concrete" (270-71). The feminine realm, in other words.

And there is another likely thread of meaning tied to the dream. My Wednesday evening Women's Journal Workshop had been immersed in the work of Jungian analysts Marion Woodman and Helen Luke, who tell us that feminine consciousness is rooted in the heart and manifests itself as an unfailing courtesy and kindness toward everything in life. "To hear the feminine," Woodman tells us, "we have to dare to open our receptors to old words with new meanings. Love spoken from the mind is one thing; love whispered from a volcano is another" (1992, 124).

I know immediately that these threads, with their common theme of language, are interwoven. But what kind of transformation would it take to rescue words from disembodied abstraction, to restore their concreteness and eroticism, to render language thick and fleshy, pulsing with vitality and life? And what would it mean to "saturate language with love"? Perhaps there is a clue here that I can follow—in my life, and in these early midlife reflections. I turned forty-five in October.

INTERNAL GESTURES

In the early years of teaching, my anxiety level rose as the time to walk into class approached. My breathing was quick and shallow, and often a headache accompanied me through the door. I felt the terrifying responsibility of maintaining control over myself, my words, my body, and not least, the class. My sense of self was tenuous. At the worst of times I felt it could at any moment leave my body, fly out through the top of my head. It took an enormous effort to "pull myself together" and hold my bodily space. Even while I yearned for freedom and ease of movement in the classroom, I felt the need to protect my boundaries. If I let go and relinquished control for even a moment, who knows what might happen?

It took voice lessons and a Gestalt course in group process to bring me back into my body. As I learned how to breathe deeply instead of cutting sensation off below the neck, I began to trust that there was enough oxygen and that the ground beneath my feet would support me; that I would neither "fall apart" in front of the class if I relaxed, nor float away or be obliterated by anxiety when things did not go as I'd hoped. To the contrary, my body, when I breathed deeply into it, felt solid and firmly centered. It

"SATURATING LANGUAGE WITH LOVE"

wasn't going to leave me or go anywhere. For several semesters that became my mantra as I walked to class: "My body is heavy and solid on the earth." As I said the words, my breathing slowed down and deepened, and I felt my all-too-solid flesh become my ally, my friend, my support.

That is the first internal gesture I remember making in the classroom. There have been others over the years, perhaps most important among them, remembering to keep my heart wide open.

MY HEART, WIDE OPEN

In my work with the Women's Journal Workshop I have felt a great and unprecedented freedom to use myself exactly as I am—imperfections and all—as an invitation to intimacy, and to express the love I feel for the women who come and the material we explore together. I know that over the years the workshop has called on all that is best in me. My ability to listen with focused and loving attention. Warmth and readiness to nurture. Embodied presence and willingness to serve others. Sensitivity and discernment, intuition and spontaneity, empathy and love of beauty. For almost a decade now, the workshop has kept my heart wide open. Here I have been able to teach effortlessly from the deepest center of my being, where heart and mind and soul all nourish each other. From my journal:

I am reading Helen Luke in preparation for Wednesday's workshop. It is always so good, so important to be reminded to dwell in the feminine realm, to value what is receptive, responsive, quiet, and hidden as much as the outward heroic quest of the masculine. Luke writes about "receptive devotion" and "creative resonance" as quintessential feminine qualities that are not recognized, much less valued in this culture. I love the term "creative resonance" because it evokes the vital receptivity and active responsiveness that can "hear women into their own speech," in the words of Nelle Morton. A listening ear had to be present in order for the Word to be received, and Morton sees here, "a complete reversal of the going logic . . . a depth hearing that takes place before speaking—a hearing that is more than acute listening. A hearing that is a direct transitive verb that evokes speech—new speech that has never been spoken before." At best, this is what takes place in the workshop.

This is the most holistic and satisfying work I have ever done, from preparing original handouts and arranging the living room chairs in a circle to choosing the music we will write to that evening and baking the

cakes we'll enjoy before the night is out. There is serenity and comfort in knowing that every Wednesday the house will hold a circle of women quietly exploring their inner realms, writing their lives, laughing and sometimes crying together. Comfort for me, as well as for those who come.

I like the ease of bodily movement, the spontaneity and naturalness, the humor and empathy that have come so readily in the workshop. And, over time, this freedom has gained a steadier foothold in my college classes as well. There, too, I began to make that gesture of consciously opening my heart—a gesture that has its own distinct bodily component. Another journal entry:

Last night I remembered to open my heart in my Modern Culture class. It always feels as if invisible ripples of energy are flowing out from my body into the classroom, as if I'm inwardly blessing them. This seems to create a field of energy that contains us all, both individually and collectively, so that we're not just a group of discrete and isolated individuals anymore but a shared body of learners. The difference is palpable. I'm not sure how the class picks up the blessing from my body, but every time I remember to make the gesture, they do. It's as if the muscles around my heart relax and a barrier I didn't even know was there, dissolves and falls away. I think my entire being softens and expands. My sense of self is no longer behind the desk or in front of the class, and there's no more sense of "my space" and "their space." We are all of us everywhere in the room. And the room feels full.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner described a similar process in different terms. "When I teach people, I marry them," she reflected. "To bring them to do what I want them to do they come near me, I draw them near me, in body and in spirit. They don't know it but I do. They become part of me, like a lover" (1963, 210–11). I send myself out to them. She draws them near herself. The end is the same.

My own internal gesture affects every dimension of my teaching. Style and content subtly shift. Lecture turns into discussion, and questions become conversations. Students begin to turn to each other, not only toward me. My vocabulary and syntax become more concrete and immediate, more active and engaged. Abandoning the safety of professorial disembodiment, I am no longer an abstraction to my students. I am present to and with them in this particular moment, in this particular female body. A body kindred with theirs, of the same kind. There is kindness here, a quality for which I have increasing respect. Not with its customary watered-

down connotations of a subtly condescending benevolence, but in the sense that Helen Luke intends when she writes, "The word 'kindness' is so deep because it means, for me, kinship with every person, every animal, every plant—the entire creation. Everything is kin" (1995, 183–84).

EMBODIMENT

If my teaching can be embodied, perhaps my students' learning can be as well. Maybe they will recognize sooner than I did that understanding occurs not only in the deep dark recesses of the brain's left hemisphere, but in every cell of the body, that the body resonates in its own way as it recognizes what is authentic and important.

My most dramatic experience of this occurred when I discovered the work of Marion Woodman some years ago. At first it seemed I had stumbled across a new language and syntax, one which my mind was not sure it understood. My body, on the other hand, prickled with excitement. It reverberated to the tuning fork of her words and recognized them as shockingly true, even familiar. Reading on, I felt comforted and nourished, as if some hidden hunger were at long last being satisfied. More mysteriously, my body felt accepted and loved as I continued, page after page. Here were words that burned through to my soul. Here was my life inscribed on every page, my anguish illuminated with such compassion that I could see past the neurotic subterfuges of my ego to the authentic suffering they attempted to suppress. This was not meaningless suffering, it turned out, but to the extent that I was willing to enter it consciously, an experience that could open my heart with compassion for others in recognition of our vulnerable common humanity. Woodman tells us,

It may help to remind yourself that if you have no experience of the wisdom of the conscious body, you are in unknown territory listening to your mother tongue. Its rhythms beat with the heart, with the emotions that circle and repeat and again repeat with totally new vibrations of feeling. Its vocabulary is simple; its knowing deep. This is not the language of polished English prose. It is heart language calling out to other hearts. (1992, 124)

The French feminists claim that language has long been cut off from its origins in the body and the earth, and that we must make our way back to those roots. "We need languages that regenerate us, warm us, give birth to us," urges Chantal Chawaf. "The word must comfort the body" (1981, 177).

This would be a living word indeed, a word that would arise out of language saturated with love.

"The feeling comes with the thought, and as the thought is spoken, the heart opens and feeling flows to deeper, richer levels" (Woodman 1992, 116). That's how it feels to me these days. An endless love affair between feeling and thinking, each feeding the other and neither attempting to dominate. How can I bring this more vividly into the college classroom?

CROSSING THE MIDLIFE THRESHOLD

Before forty, you live your persona.

After forty, you live your own life.

Halfway through the decade that Victor Hugo referred to as "the old age of youth" (while the fifties are "the youth of old age"), who is this self assumed in my writing? If there is a felt sense, an "internal aura that encompasses everything [I] feel and know" (Gendlin 1978, 32) about my life as a woman crossing the threshold into midlife, what is it? And how can I put it—elusive, nebulous, fluid, holistic, kaleidoscopic—into words?

I am younger than I expected to be at forty-five. We all are, I suspect, but that doesn't diminish my surprise. Physically stronger and healthier than ever, I attribute my overall well-being to regular exercise and vitamins, healthy eating and a comparatively low stress level, and, not least, to my life-long "journal habit" and a loving and stable primary relationship. At forty, a variety of minor but annoying physical symptoms served warning that if I did not change my ways, I could expect more ominous problems before long. To my credit, I paid attention. I changed my diet and gradually lost fifty pounds, resumed jogging, and stopped feeling guilty about not setting the alarm clock.

Here I am, then, frequently delighted and somehow a little surprised that things have worked out as well as they have, so far. The sporadic depressions and fierce fears of eternal aloneness that haunted me during my twenties are gone. There is fulfillment in many directions, and gratitude, too, that I have been able to find a rhythm that accommodates my need for independence, creative freedom, and a meaningful community of women. The fluid balance of teaching, writing, and conducting workshops I've engaged in for the past decade has served me well. Heading off to London at age thirty to take up my British Commonwealth Fellowship, I wondered how I

would ever parlay a Ph.D. in German literature into a viable career when the last thing I wanted to do was teach endless sections of German 100. How strange, now, to see how the various threads of choice and circumstance continue to cross in meaningful patterns that make up the tapestry of my life. Everything I do feeds into everything else.

My adjunct status at the College of Staten Island places me both inside and outside the academy. My responsibility to my students—at least as I conceive it—is the same as that of my full-time tenured colleagues. I generally teach twenty hours a year to their twenty-two, but receive one-third or less of their salary and none of the benefits. Under these conditions, the usual scholarly challenge to both teach well and publish—at least for those adjuncts who hope to secure a tenure-track position in the future—is complicated by the need to generate other income. Given the dangerous and shortsighted trend toward part-time labor (adjuncts outnumber full-time faculty two to one in our department), I am constantly forced to ask myself: What am I prepared to do—beyond giving my best in the classroom and holding unpaid office hours—if I am also to resist participating in the growing institutionalization of exploited academic labor? My answer, never satisfactory, changes from one semester to the next.

On the brighter side, being underemployed has its distinct advantages. A gypsy scholar is exempt from the usual round of administrative duties and committee work, and the pressure to publish is generally self-imposed rather than a condition of employment. I have more control of my time and energy than most people I know. From a work in progress:

October 29th.

I just filled my huge new black café au lait cup with strong Colombian coffee. Albinoni is rippling joyously in the background and sunlight is touching everything in the room with gold. It's my favourite kind of morning, when everything seems possible and nothing is more precious than this freedom I have to get up at leisure and contemplate how to shape the day.

There's something wonderful—and privileged, I know—in waking up without an alarm clock and determining the day's rhythm. Often I'll spend a quiet half hour writing in my journal, followed by three or four hours of work. The house is quiet, or I play music that suits my mood. When I'm grading student papers, I spread out at the dining room table, put a load of laundry in the washer or a pot of soup on the stove, and work away at various tasks at once. In the late afternoon, it's out to the boardwalk for a run, or a walk with Steve. Each day has its own rhythm.

Even after thirteen years with Steve, I'm still often surprised to have found my soul mate. Not a day goes by that I take the sweetness of his presence for granted or fail to realize that our quiet days together are gifts, each one, and that I don't feel the bittersweet joy of our fleshly bond that will one day end. Throughout my twenties and early thirties I vowed that even if I never formed a lasting bond with a man, I would create a rich and meaningful life for myself. And I know I would have. But once my life grew intertwined with Steve's, even with all the uncertainty and conflict of the early years—could I ever get used to New York and his children? would we get married? have a child? relocate to Vancouver?—I began to know the richness of having a companion in life and of gaining a new perspective, at once double and shared. During the thirteen years since we met, I have not experienced that penetrating loneliness of old, that nagging thirst for intimate relationship that builds intensity like the absence of cool water in an unrelenting heat spell. Over the years, I have discovered an elegant simplicity in our shared commitment to create a life encompassing with equal weight of importance the needs and desire of us both.

Meanwhile, on a more prosaic note, after three decades of alternately craving and resenting the male gaze, I am both annoyed and amused now to observe myself hoping I haven't experienced the last of it just yet. How ironic it is that this in recent years frequently described and much celebrated sexual invisibility (see Greer 1992 and Heilbrun 1997, among others) should loom ahead just as I begin to revel in my own appearance. After too many years of assessing my reflection with the coldly objective eye of a real estate agent or an auctioneer, I find myself well pleased, at last, with my own flesh.

The body is the beloved home in which the soul dwells. Perhaps that is what embodiment is: acceptance and love of our own sacred matter. So many of us spend our whole lives struggling to get there. In the sorrow of a midlife miscarriage earlier this year, I was overwhelmed with tenderness and gratitude for this body that tried so hard to give me what I have wanted for so long. Even as it was filled with grief, my body comforted me.

I experience much more tenderness, in general, these days. Tenderness, I think, is not much suited to the frenetic rhythms of youth. It's a slow-growth emotion that feeds on careful observation and painstaking sensitivity toward others, the humbling recognition of one's own flawed nature, and the sense that everything that lives is fragile and yearns for recognition and love. I feel it growing in me. I feel more of everything, in fact, and have far greater respect for what the Jungians call the feminine

feeling-function, so ruthlessly disparaged throughout my twenty-six years of formal education.

AUTHORITY AND AUTHORSHIP

Obtaining my Ph.D. at the University of London a decade ago granted me a certain measure of formal authority within the academy. But writing my book—one that, like a love child, was created out of desire, passion, and a lifelong love affair with women's journals—provided me with a sense of personal authority far more authentic and potent. Here, at last, was something I had created not to satisfy an external requirement or stake out my intellectual turf, but simply because it was replete with personal meaning. Gradually—and the publication of the book caused a quantum leap in this process—my tenuous sense of official entitlement to the role of college professor has been replaced with the growing confidence of my own experience and authorship, providing an authority that no diploma could afford.

In women's studies and creative writing classes where students read my book, the effects have been eye-opening. Because it is such a personal book and includes excerpts of my own journal, there is nowhere to hide. Once my students know that I have struggled with self-doubt, depression, and body image just like themselves, adopting a conventional professorial pose would be inappropriate, if not impossible. Women students in particular tell me time and again that they never before felt such intimacy with a professor's life. And although they have the right to staple off-limits in their own class journals anything they deem too personal for my eyes, I find very few staples when I sit down to read at the semester's end. My own self-disclosure invites theirs, I suspect.

I wrote *A Voice of Her Own: Women and the Journal Writing Journey* to celebrate the power and beauty of women's journals and to reclaim the quiet voices that speak within them—including my own, too long stripped of its subjectivity, its many registers and feeling-tones, by the streamlined, impatient demands of academic discourse. That women would write to tell me they recognize themselves in my words has been an unexpected gift.

MOTHER / VIRGIN / CRONE

In my Jungian Women workshop series, we have been focusing on the three dimensions of the mature or "Conscious Feminine": the archetypes of

Mother, Virgin, and Crone (Woodman 1990). They manifest recurrently in our lives, and overlap one another as they do, rather than appearing in linear succession. In my personal life over the past half dozen years or so, it is this archetypal material that resonates most powerfully. The women in the workshop, too, respond with fierce interest.

Our quest in the second half of life is to bring all three archetypes within ourselves into conscious relationship with each other. The maternal impulse to nurture is powerful in me; it always has been. The Virgin, too, has been there all along, urging me to refuse the safety of a comfortable pre-fabricated life, whether that of the German Baptist immigrant community in which I was raised and which promised a traditional marriage, children, a stalwart community, and heaven itself, or more recently, that of a high-level achiever with a prestigious and well-paid nine-to-five career. The challenge to grow into the loving energy of the Crone—who stands at the crossroads of the transitory and the eternal and speaks the truth with love because she has nothing to gain and nothing to lose—is one I gladly accept for the years to come. I want to know the Crone in myself.

So here I am, in the middle of my life. I never expected to get here so soon. In a year and a half, Steve will take early retirement and we will relocate to Vancouver; meanwhile, I still want a child. I thought I'd be wiser and have more answers to my questions by now. I'm very grateful for the invitation to put these words on paper. Awake, I'm still not sure exactly what it would mean to saturate language with love, but I still have time. Perhaps I'll have another dream.

I would like to dedicate this essay to the women in my Women's Journal Workshop, with loving gratitude for everything you have shared with me over the years. For his sensitive editorial eye, my thanks, as always, to Steve.

The Time of Our Lives

The Public Life of Teaching

PATRICIA C. PHILLIPS

FIRST, HOW LONG IS EPHEMERAL? TWO WEEKS, TWO YEARS, FIFTY YEARS, OR TWO THOUSAND YEARS? BEYOND THAT, WHAT DO WE HAVE? . . . AND WHAT TIME/SPACE RELATIONSHIP ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO ART? ALL WORKS SHOULD ATTEMPT TO BE EPHEMERAL. THIS SHOULD BE THEIR AMBITION. IN THIS SENSE, EPHEMERAL MEANS NOT TO HAVE PRODUCED SOMETHING WHICH IS OF INTEREST TO ANYBODY WHATSOEVER TODAY. . . . IT MEANS TO ACCEPT OUR LIMITATIONS, OUR SPARSE KNOWLEDGE, OUR TIMES, OUR MISERY. . . . IT'S TO ACCEPT THAT A BOLT OF LIGHTNING CAN BE IMPRESSED UPON OUR MEMORY JUST AS STRONGLY AS A PYRAMID.

Daniel Buren

It is fascinating how apparently insignificant incidents maintain a vivid resonance. Having arrived in my mid-forties with an expectant, sometimes stormy combination of relief and anticipation, I am frequently—virtually daily—perplexed by the unruly intricacies of memory. Perpetually surprised by experiences that remain indelibly inscribed over time, I find it disturbing to fathom those passages that have darkly receded, only to be unpredictably, partially, and momentarily retrieved through conversations, sights, smells, or other sensations.

For still inexplicable reasons, I periodically flash back with stunning recall to a moment in eighth grade. One of my most memorable, challenging, and engaging teachers (who I would have again as we both advanced into high school and continue, to this day, to remember with fondness)