

Women's Ways of Knowing

By Joanna Haymore

What is the qualitative difference in women's wisdom that is needed to help both men and women fulfill the Ecozoic vision? This vision is that humans, Earth, and all its life can move into a mutually enhancing relatedness capable of carrying us into a future that we could hope to leave for all Earth's children. Germane to the dialogue about mutually enhancing relatedness is the question "Why is it essential that we should pay attention to this wisdom coming from the feminine perspective?"

Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, said in his introduction to the 2007 report on The State of the World's children, "When women are healthy, educated, and free to take the opportunities life affords them, children thrive and countries flourish."¹ This report articulates the issue of establishing gender equality, with numerous world-wide studies detailing what happens when women are given these opportunities and the deleterious consequences for the moral, legal, environmental, and economic fabric of nations when women are subjected to living in silence and repression without expression and choice.

In a recent conversation, my attention was called to a book I had read years ago, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986).² Its authors researched how women's ways of knowing differ from men's ways of knowing regarding truth, reality, and the origins of knowledge.

The first qualitative difference they found was that for women, the "real" or valued lessons in life did not come from academia or work per se, but from relationships involved with work, friends, family, community, and life's crises and successes. They concluded that the prevailing conception of knowledge and truth that are accepted today have been shaped by a masculine construction of truth and reality, which places a premium on rational and objective thought and stereotypes intuitive, emotional, or personal thinking as primitive or suspect.

The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* say that "Drawing on their own perspectives and visions, men have constructed the prevailing theories, written history, and set values that have become the guiding principles for men and women alike" (p.5). It becomes important, then, to look at how women have found value in themselves and how this affects their contribution to social, economic, religious, and political spheres. They found,

after analyzing many interviews with a wide variety of women, that women experience five different relationships to knowledge.

The most basic and conditioned response to knowledge for a woman is to maintain silence, to live in a mindless and voiceless state that leaves her subject to external authority. The 2007 State of the World's Children reports that women and girls have been left behind and remain voiceless and powerless. They are disproportionately affected by poverty, inequality, and violence. They make up the majority of the world's poor and illiterate and account for 80% of the civilian casualties during armed conflicts (p. 10).

Women's second relationship to knowledge is to be receptive, able to receive or reproduce what is given, but not be the source of initiation or creativity. The experience of living with this mindset leaves a woman with confusion, even worrying that developing her own powers would be at the expense of others.³

Third, the relationship is to acknowledge one's own subjective knowing, derived from intuition, and to view it as personal and private. A woman living in this mindset has begun to awaken to her own inner resources, but cannot yet give voice to them in the outer world.

The fourth is using procedural or objective means for obtaining and communicating knowledge. Women in many parts of the world have made great strides in self awareness and in the academic, political, and business worlds by utilizing this skill in the 20th century.

Fifth and finally, there is a kind of knowing that comes from constructed knowledge. This means widening one's perspective to view knowledge as contextual and experience driven, valuing not only the intuitive, creative, and subjective mode but also the objective and rational. Thomas Berry calls this kind of knowing qualitative, embodying all three properties of the universe: identity, difference, and unity.

For the successful unfolding of the Ecozoic Era, it is imperative that the voice of the feminine mode of being be encouraged to make its special contribution. For example, women in Iraq are wearing a necklace fashioned after the geographical shape of Iraq. The necklace represents to them a place they call home, where they make a life of goodness for their families and for themselves. It is their silent protest for what has happened to

their lives and their ability to create, as the religious, military, and economic struggle for control and dominance in the region continues. It is a symbol of their desire to have a voice so that the wisdom of unity may prevail instead of the destructiveness of division. It is their symbol of hope, worn over their hearts for a future that includes healing—an Ecozoic future.

¹ Message from the Secretary General of the UN. *The State of the World's Children*. 2007. *Women and children: The Double Divident of Gender Equality*. Unicef, Unicef House, New York, NC. p. viii.

² *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, 1986 and 1997. Basic Books, New York, NY.

³ Summary of *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Terry Doyle. Ferris State University Center for Teaching, Learning, and Faculty Development, 2007.

(See Joanna's bio following her article, *Transforming the Tower of Babel*, page 36.)



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