

## Women's Ways, Creative Balance

By Nancy Rickard

What is Earth asking of women? While the world faces crisis after crisis (cultural, political, military, economic, meteorological), how does the inherent power and wisdom of half of the planet's humans affect decisions about its future? Thomas Berry muses that the wisdom of women is available to guide us into the future: "The human emerges from the larger universe and discovers itself in this universe...In the wisdom of women it (human emergence) is found in the description of the universe as a mutually nourishing presence of all things with each other...After being excluded from so much of the human world over the centuries, women are revealing the disaster of androcentrism (male-centeredness) to our society for the first time in Western History."<sup>1</sup>

*The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines wisdom as "the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment." What is it that women experience that is not fully appreciated in our world today? The wisdom of women, more correctly—the wisdom of the feminine principle—is presencing itself right now. The feminine principle, found in both men and women, reveals itself in part as compassion, tenderness, deep listening, and mutual support. These essential attributes are beginning to balance the competitiveness and desire for control so prevalent today. Women's way is to listen, look for alternatives, negotiate, and find common goals to work toward. Feminine wisdom is more capable of appreciating the complexity of a situation and the consequent long-term implications of aggressive actions.

Ken Wilber in *Integral Spirituality*<sup>2</sup> explains his use of developmental types by following Carol Gilligan's description of the differences in moral understanding between men and women. Wilber compares women's moral stages with men's developmental stages. Both male and female stages progress from what is called stage one, the "me" or egocentric stage; to stage two, the "us" or ethnocentric stage; to stage three, "all of us" or the worldcentric stage. However, in the gradual expansion of moral identity, males and females have different experiences of their voices as they develop.

Male logic, or a man's voice, tends to be based on terms of autonomy, justice, and rights, whereas women's logic or voice tends to be based on terms of relationships, care and responsibility. . . At the 4th and highest stage of moral development, according to Gilligan, the masculine and feminine voices in each of us tend to become integrated. This does not mean that a

person at this stage starts to lose the distinctions between masculine and feminine, and hence become a bland, androgynous, asexual being. In fact, masculine and feminine dimensions might become more intensified. But it does mean the individuals start to befriend both the masculine and feminine modes in themselves, even if they characteristically act predominantly from one or the other.<sup>3</sup>

Evaluating one's masculine and feminine attributes at both the personal (stage one) and cultural levels (stage two) is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the development of appropriate responses.

In modern business practice, the results of evaluating male and female voices are now being recognized. According to *Utne Reader*, "Business gurus are now touting feminine leadership styles, as they often result in lowering employee turnover and improving creativity and innovation while benefiting the financial bottom line. Of course, one paradox is that some female leaders have simply mimicked 'masculine' leadership styles and so perpetuate the status quo. At its best, feminine leadership, which is available to men and women alike, often includes placing a greater value on process. It involves heightened recognition of the value of people's relationships and contributions. It assigns a high priority to relationships, learning, beauty, flexibility, celebration, collective intelligence, vulnerability, transparency, intuition, and humility."<sup>4</sup>

A female manager of a major international chemical company noted that she operates in a male-dominated business; however, that company is now acknowledging what is needed for people to work well on teams. She has noticed that those who are promoted from the technical level to management and the managers who are retained after downsizing have the following characteristics: 1) They exhibit more effective listening skills. 2) They keep discussions open longer rather than simply adopting what the leader wants. 3) They tend toward inclusiveness by drawing the quiet team member into a discussion. 4) They have a greater willingness to let others on the team share the limelight. 5) They nourish attitudes valued in that job.

The female manager sees that, in the drive to succeed, the essential sense of competitiveness must be balanced with the ability to listen, clarify, check back with team members in meetings, include all in the discussion, be aware of individual strengths and weaknesses, and assign tasks accordingly. A nurturing presence, the ability

to say “I don’t know,” getting help, and being cooperative means that the goal of developing a superior product is kept instead of allowing the goal to be subverted by posturing and egotism. This manager’s observation is that it has taken women in business some time to develop the networks that support their presence at the managerial level, but that is now happening. Women connect with one another and demonstrate a natural empathy, whereas men generally do not easily demonstrate that ability. It’s important to note that the ingrained ability of women to assist and support one another can be practiced without losing the competitive edge needed for success.

At one point in my career, I served as director of a psychiatric outpatient clinic at an inner-city university hospital. I cherished the relationships with my clients (mostly poor children, adolescents and their families), staff, and clinical students. I was also responsible for maintaining a managerial relationship with the hospital administration. Over the years, the administration became more and more focused on the bottom line—how much money our clinic was producing. I was torn between the satisfaction of aiding the mental health of families and children and the need to simply make more money for the hospital. While recognizing the need for financial solvency, I ultimately resigned in order to work in a situation where the priority was service, not profit. This balance, combining the masculine (profitability) and feminine (care) principles in a healthy way, is at the core of many of the solutions to today’s global problems.

A good example of the masculine and feminine balance is demonstrated by this story about Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York City:

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. “It’s a bad neighborhood, your Honor,” the man told the mayor. “She’s got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson.”

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, “I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail.” But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying: “Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

The following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.<sup>5</sup>

Using the male approach to decision-making, La Guardia followed the rules, applied the law and sentenced her. Then he used his feminine understanding to pay the \$10 fine. His next move was to collect \$47.50 from all the people in the court. As illustrated by La Guardia, the wisdom of women is the willingness to combine knowledge and experience to serve complex ends through the use of judgment that recognizes the practical contributions of both the feminine and masculine principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York, Random House, Inc., 1999) p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality* (Boston: Integral Books, 2006) p. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Utne Reader* Nov-Dec 2005 “Tea with Nina Simons & Nina Utne”

<sup>5</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1990) p. 91-92.