

A Letter from a Teacher of Young Women

By Randy Senzig

In the next room my daughter is preparing to go to sleep with her 2-year-old son—my grandson. As I listen to their nite-nite conversation and the love connections spoken, I float on my memory's soft blanket back to my own mother when I was that small. I grew up in a home where women were cherished. I knew my mother and grandmother to be kind, smart, fun, warm, nurturing and loving. My dad never put down my mom, especially in front of me. I always saw and felt that they were equal in what they did for me and for each other.

My mother nurtured me. She did without many things so that I would have what a child should have. I felt important because she taught me to be strong, caring, and to have fun. My grandmother was physically strong. I watched her work shoulder-to-shoulder with my grandfather in hard manual labor. But I was also witness to her compassion for others, her unselfishness, and her love for me. Both my mother and grandmother taught me a great respect for all life, compassion for others, self-respect, and, most of all, love. They instilled in me a great respect for women.

As I grew into manhood, I saw that many men did not treat women in the way that I was taught. It always bothered me and made for uncomfortable situations. As I finished college, attended a seminary, worked in the corporate world, owned my own business and became a teacher, I saw that the values my mother had given me didn't seem to ring true in this new world of adults. Upon college graduation, most women picked nursing and teaching as careers. There were no women at the seminary and no women in management of the companies for which I worked. There were a lot of female teachers but no female principals. At the time I did not think much about it, as I was busy trying to make it to the top of my career field.

I married a smart, attractive, compassionate and motivated woman. She was put down or reassigned because her male bosses perceived her as a threat or as competition for their jobs. I watched her family's dynamics in which a dominating father subjugated the women to verbal terror to "keep them in their place." I began to see and think about this unfairness to my wife and to women in general. My mother's truths began floating out of the deep places of my being. Then I met Thomas Berry.

Thomas Berry states that, "Among the greatest of terrors that women have encountered as a consequence of androcentrism is when they are considered the result of a genetic deficiency, are thought of as intellectually

deficient." He further writes, "Women have had a minimal presence, except as needed for service positions . . . were exploited by corporations . . . found professional careers in nursing, teaching . . . and brilliant careers in the performance arts." Women have been denied the positions in Western Society that would allow them the power to change how we live and relate to Earth. One would think that with the women's suffrage movement during the earlier part of the 20th century, the women's movement in the 1970's for Equal Rights, and the current reproductive choice issues for women that women would have gained an equal footing with men for the opportunity to work in the decision-making arenas of business and government.

But when one looks at the data, a different picture emerges. According to the tenth anniversary census by Catalyst Women.org, only about a dozen women hold the top jobs at Fortune 500 companies. Women hold only 16.4 percent of top management jobs (the figure in Georgia is half that). With limited access to the upper echelons of business, women have less opportunity to compete for the CEO's job and therefore fewer opportunities to influence the social and environmental decisions of corporations.

For years, the disparity between the number of men and women holding the CEO title was explained by the observation that it would take time for business schools to fill the pipeline with female management candidates. A decade ago, women were already earning nearly half the business degrees awarded in the United States. But in 2005, the number of women moving into top-level executive jobs grew at the slowest rate in ten years, according to Catalyst Women.org. Women are getting the education needed but are being denied the jobs by men in positions of power.

In government, where decisions are made that affect every aspects of our lives, some strides have been made but at the proverbial snail's pace. According to the US Bureau of the Census, women have been elected to 81 seats in the congress, an increase of 12% since 1979. In statewide elective executive offices and state legislatures, this number is up 24.8% and 22.8% respectively. The seats of power where millions of lives can and will be affected are vastly under-represented by women.

Why are so few women in elected office when at least 50% of the population is female? Shouldn't the percentages of elected officials more accurately reflect the population in a democracy? Shouldn't the CEOs of major companies more closely represent the percentages of women customers?

There are religious and elected officials fighting to take away a woman's right to make her own decisions about her own body and health and return her to second-class citizenship. Women, who deep in their very own DNA understand creation and the need for nurture, have the wisdom to lead us in changing our core values and behavior toward each other and Earth. Yet, they are denied access to positions that could bring about needed changes.

The industries of advertising, music, and pop culture continue to keep women from their equal partnership role in the 21st century. Women continue to be portrayed as objects and mindless works of art. Don't think, don't work, just look good. Be Sexy. All one needs to do is look at any advertising. The most effective way to sell a motorcycle is with a bikini clad young woman. Advertising companies are exploiting women with this. It degrades young women. It steals their potential. It robs them of the creativity that they own and that Earth needs. Popular music, such as rap and heavy metal, belittle, humiliate, insult, and demean all women but especially young women of middle and high school years. It teaches them a cultural message about their worth. The music and advertising industry gives males the wrong ideas about the opposite sex, even giving them license to treat females in dominating ways.

Unfortunately, the pop culture continues to suppress women. It drives all of us further away from the healing of the soul in its connection to the planet and to each other. This keeps male and female and Earth from truly becoming connected in a "mutually enhancing way," as Thomas Berry would say. This suppression drives woman's inner soul wisdom even further away from Earth.

One Truth that I have come to know is this. Those of us who have made the connection to Earth in a small or large way must share in a common responsibility. That responsibility is to tell our stories so others may begin healing those Earth wounds. Hearing our stories of connection can begin to construct bridges that take the human to a deeper relationship with Earth.

I am a science teacher who has used ecological and environmental curricula in public schools for 27 years. There are things I have observed that intrigue me about young women and their innate wisdom of which Thomas Berry speaks. As I have interacted with young women, I have felt their influence in my teaching. One observation I have made is that in every video I have shown over the years, at least one of my female students has expressed emotion at the sight of a baby—any baby, human or nonhuman. I have commented on that to females on the faculty and I have gotten the same responses. The visuals of babies—any animal babies—seem to bring forth the nurturing instinct carried by the very DNA shared by women.

I believe that this behavioral observation supports the belief that women have a deeper sense of connection to the natural world and creation with a need to nurture both. It is not that males do not possess that interconnection with creation or have the necessary nurturing that creation must have. But males have learned power for the hunt, and that power leads to destructive behavior and attitudes. Males must be given opportunities to learn ways to connect with Earth from their female classmates.

In the academic areas of AP Environmental Science and Biology that I teach, I find that young ladies will out-perform the males in content, creativity, thought, organization and work ethics. They tend to be more prepared for class and more cooperative. The one area that persists as a problem for women students, generally, is that they will not compete with an aggressive male in class discussions. For example, during a class discussion on endangered species, a female was stating her position that Earth would be a lonely place without animals and that the animals also had a right to live. When a male joined the discussion, he stated that there have always been dying animals and that meant more food for us. The young lady, who had previously stated her case with conviction, just stopped talking. The discussion was over for her. Nothing shared, nothing learned about connection. I find that females will just not confront males on the issues at this age. Therefore, I must constantly encourage females to speak up and state their positions. And I redirect the male student to listen for new understanding.

There have been many situations where young women have taught me to change the way in which I teach. Many years ago on an Everglades field trip, there were two female students who, after disembarking the bus, refused to leave the sidewalk for a hike along a trail in the Everglades. They were visibly afraid. After encouraging them to walk on the trail, I asked questions trying to find reasons for this behavior. They told me that they had grown up in an apartment complex in Miami where signs proclaimed, "Do not get on the grass" and the playgrounds were covered with asphalt—so they knew that there were dangers in grass and other natural surfaces.

We got through that and were able to go on the hike together. But I had to change the way that I teach. I began putting more emphasis on the outdoors. I developed a new curriculum that emphasized the local environment with field trips to nature centers and the Everglades to immerse us in Earth. Those girls, who were willing to share their deep fears with me, gave me the insight to begin teaching in a different way.

On one occasion, I was teaching the class about the various forms of pollution. I talked of air, water, soil and noise pollution. I was giving the lecture that every envi-

ronmental science teacher gives. Trying to motivate the class to action, I was speaking in an animated way to stimulate interest and excitement. As I looked around the room trying to make eye contact, I saw a zoned out look from many in the class. I stopped. Didn't they care, I asked? Why weren't they getting excited about the need to work on these conditions? A young lady in the third row on the left side of the room spoke up and said, "Mr. Senzig, it is all too overwhelming." That statement hit me like a blast of arctic air. I lost my breath and could not speak. She taught me something very important that day. Something from the deep parts of her wisdom spoke to me to change the message for young people. I had to find a way to give my students hope and a love for Earth. That young woman, who had the courage to speak her wisdom, taught me an important lesson that has changed my professional life.

For example, for years I have had the students form teams that pick different biomes and do the standard oral report. Borrowing from John Seed, we now have a Council of all Beings where the students give their reports but from the perspective of one being that lives in that biome. We begin each day with the room darkened, soft nature music playing, eyes closed, breathing in the oxygen from the trees and giving back CO₂. I move through the class waving a large bird's wings overhead to create a gentle movement of air on which they imagine being carried far away to a land where the animals speak in the ways of Earth. The students become the animal that they choose by making and wearing an animal mask during the presentation. They learn about the animal so that they can become the animal and speak of the biome from its needs and observations. They are awakened to a new sense of being a part of life.

Another observation that has shown me the role of women in the 21st century is the hard physical work of many girls during campus beautification days. They perform tree plantings in the outdoor classroom, while monitoring our bluebird trail and the local stream, and carrying out the heavy and dirty work of our recycling programs. Girls have made these activities successful at our school because of their participation and hard work. They have dug holes for trees in the hard clay. They have moved trailer loads of mulch with shovels. They have been on their hands and knees planting flowers in our courtyard on a Saturday morning. They have cleaned out nests and poop, painted, nailed and driven posts and fastened nesting boxes. They have taken water samples while in the stream where the temperature was so cold that water froze on the instruments. They have collected the plastic bottles and cans covered with syrup and yellow jackets from the recycling barrels. They have sweated, been soaked with water and syrups as they cleaned those barrels. They have carried tons of paper from our building for recycling.

All the while these young women have been dependable, motivated, and cooperative while performing these activities. These observations lead me to believe that young women, even without consciously knowing it, are drawn to Earth. In their most inner being, locked away, there is ancient wisdom. This ancient wisdom is what we need to begin a new relationship with the Universe. This is knowledge carried by the very DNA that creates our form, waiting to be tapped, to flow forth and present the human with the means to discover a new way. Women carry this vessel for us. Isn't it time that we honor women for this and allow them to share the contents of the vessel?

I believe it is our collective responsibility as teachers and as caring adults to nurture young women while they find their wisdom. And it is equally important that we provide the climate for them to grow in their courage, self worth, and determination. Their wisdom has changed the way I teach. That new voice has taught me to be more sensitive to others. I listen more. I am more open with my students, teaching them by sharing my stories. I have found a new sense of wonder in all that is around me. I have dedicated myself to finding ways to give hope back to my students in their searching for Earth connections.

The wisdom in my mother and grandmother that first taught me about life and relationships seems to now reappear in the lives of my female students. Have I witnessed a Truth of the Universe? Have I been given a glimpse into the future? Have I been privileged to see into the very deep places—the very DNA where the wisdom of the Universe resides? Have I become a better teacher, husband, father, grandfather and man? I believe that my answers are affirmative. But my journey has only started, and those people around me will be able to give better answers to those questions. I believe that when men accept women as truly equal, trickling wisdom will come in through the cracked door and turn into a flowing wisdom through a wide open door. This ancient wisdom of yesterday's opportunities will help guide us, as Thomas Berry puts it, to reinvent the human for the beginning of the Ecozoic Era.

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