DIVING DEEP AND SURFACING

WOMEN WRITERS ON SPIRITUAL QUEST

ROL P. CHRIST

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Carol P. Christ

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Preface

THOUGH THE IDEA for this book was conceived when I first read *The Four-Gated City,* its roots go back to my grandmothers. A summer spent with my Scotch-Irish Catholic grandmother, Mary Rita Inglis Christ, when I was six years old was probably the beginning of my sense of the mystery of life. I remember rising at dawn when it seemed we two were the only ones awake, going with her to early mass, learning to dip my fingers in holy water as we entered a still dark church, and rising and kneeling according to an unfamiliar rhythm. Candles flickering in deep red and blue glass and her pink rosary beads sparkling in shadowy light seemed to hold a secret I longed to understand. I also remember half listening to incredible stories of miraculous cures while playing on the living-room floor of my other grandmother, Lena Searing Bergman, a German-Scotch-English Christian Scientist. But for me her real magic was in her garden, fragrant with scents, alive with colors and textures—gardenias, roses, hibiscus, bluebelles—and, most marvelous of all, stately peacocks which flew over from the nearby arboretum. Hers was also the woman's magic of holiday dinners with the family gathered around tables laden with food and set with delicate china, glittering silver, and shimmering crystal. When she died and our parents sold her home, my brothers, cousins, and I felt we had lost our connection to an essential source of power.

I gained another intuition of great power from the ocean. As a young girl I spent long summer days at the beach, blissfully curling my toes in the sand, licking salt from my lips, attuning my body to the rhythms and currents of the waves, refusing to come out of the water even when my knees turned blue. As a teen-ager floating on my back out beyond the breakers, I remember thinking I was perfectly happy and could die at that moment without regret. Once when I was eighteen my eight-year-old brother and I were playing in the heavy surf on a deserted beach in early September. Unaware of a swift undertow, we were pulled out over our heads. Unable to gain a footing, I scooped my little brother into my arms, threw him with all my power toward shore, and a wave carried him in. As I fought to swim to shore the waves crashed faster and faster over my head; there wasn't time between breakers to catch my breath. Thinking I would die, I said a last prayer, stopped struggling, and felt my body carried to shore. I cannot remember a time when I have not known in my bones that the sea is a great power. And though now I am more cautious, I still feel a sense of elation and peace at the beach.

Though this book is about women's experience, I lived twenty-two years as a woman before I consciously realized that women's experience is a problem. As a girl I read voraciously, and, never having been told what to read (great books being scarcely known in the schools I attended), I naturally sought out books about women. After graduating from Nancy Drew and *Double Date,* I moved on to *Gone with the Wind, Saratoga Trunk,* and a host of romantic stories about women, most of which I cannot remember today. When I arrived at college, I entered a world of books that was quite foreign to me. While my roommates had read Plato and Aristotle in high school, I didn't know whether the Golden Age of Greece was before or after the Middle Ages (which I thought were called the Dark Ages). I had no context for anything I was learning, but I had an enormous desire to enter this new world of books, because I hoped I might fit into it better than I had fit into the world of cheerleaders, football players, and dates. Moreover, these books were about questions of freedom, truth, and value, which had always interested me. I plunged myself into Nietzsche, Shakespeare, Conrad, and Aeschylus, not always fully understanding what they wrote, but entranced by their ideas.

Four years later, when I began graduate study in Religious Studies at Yale, I began to realize that I was an anomaly in a man's world. Certainly my experience was intensified because Religious Studies was populated almost entirely by men and because Yale, while it admitted a few women on the graduate level, was still guarding its centuries-long tradition as a gentleman's school. During my years there, Yale's president was to make the infamous statement that Yale would never admit women as undergraduates because its mission was to educate 1000 male leaders each year. But I had not expected this experience. I had come to study truth, and truth was no respecter of gender, I thought. That I was one of the two women (out of close to 100 students) in my graduate program should make no difference. To my surprise I learned that it made a great deal of difference. My colleagues and professors saw me as charming, and though they were delighted to have a young woman around, few seemed to expect I would complete my studies. My comments in classes were often ignored, and when I talked about my favorite theologian, Martin Buber, I was told he was a "poet," not a theologian. Buber's notion that a person could have an I-Thou relationship with a tree, an idea I used to interpret my experiences in the ocean, was singled out as an example of what was disparagingly called the "confusion" in his thought.

Gradually I began to wonder whether I had a different perspective on theology because I was a woman. When I talked about the spiritual experiences that gave rise to my interest in theology—my connection to nature, the oneness with the universe I had experienced while swimming in the ocean or hiking in the woods—I was told that such experiences were "aesthetic," "poetic," "emotional," or "confused" and not worthy of theological consideration. It began to seem crucially relevant to my situation that theologians had been men. If theology were written from a male perspective and my perspective was female, that might explain why my professors and student colleagues—all but one of them male—often failed to understand my perspective on theological issues.

I began to search the libraries for religious and theological texts written by women that would verify my spiritual experience. Though I found the works of Simone Weil, Teresa of Avila, and a few others, I was not satisfied. I needed to find the story of a woman of my own time whose experience was more like my own. And I also began to wonder whether the minds of the few women who had written on religious subjects in the past had been constricted by prevailing theological or philosophical ideologies. Had they been able to express the full dimensions of their spiritual experience, or only those elements that fit into categories created by men? I wanted to know what women's religious experience would be like when it was articulated in women's own language, not forced into the structures of male theology.

When I first read *The Four-Gated City* in the winter of 1969, I knew I had found the text I was looking for. Ideas and feelings I was struggling to put into words were expressed in Lessing's story of Martha Quest. My connection to *The Four-Gated City* was so deep that I dreamed about it for weeks. I recommended it to my friend Judith Plaskow, who by then was sharing my search for a theology reflecting women's experience. She confirmed my feeling that Lessing had powerfully articulated women's spiritual quest. *The Four-Gated City* became a kind of touchstone for us over the next five years. It was uncanny how ideas and relationships we had not noticed in earlier readings would suddenly take on meaning as we reached new stages in our quests. Whatever we were learning in our own lives, Lessing had already put into words.

Though I sensed that *The Four-Gated City* was an articulation of a woman's spiritual quest, I did not then have the vocabulary to articulate my intuitions. Receiving no encouragement from my professors when I mentioned doing a thesis on Doris Lessing using a religion and literature approach, I decided to write on Elie Wiesel instead. Knowing that I could not pursue my interests in women's religious experience without support from other women, I decided to organize a women's caucus at the 1971 meetings of the American Academy of Religion. Whereas in 1969 and 1970 I had seen no more than two or three other women at the annual meetings in my field, in 1971 there were at least forty of us, and we were visible. We nominated and elected Christine Downing to become president of the A.A.R., and, in order to share research, we established a "working group" on Women and Religion, which later was granted status as a regular section.

In 1973, at the second meeting of the Women and Religion working group, I presented my first paper on women's spiritual quest, "Explorations with Doris Lessing in Quest of the Four-Gated City," which is the basis of chapter five of this book. Writing that essay was difficult. Little had been published in the area of women and religion at that time, and there was no vocabulary for discussing women's spiritual quest. Luckily Judith Plaskow was just across town working on a similar project. In countless conversations, we checked and challenged each other's readings of Lessing and developed a vocabulary with which to name Lessing's articulation of women's experience.

Later that year, when I taught my first course on Women and Religion at Columbia, my students responded strongly to works by Lessing, Adrienne Rich, and Denise Levertov. They too sensed that in these works their own spiritual struggles were being depicted, not just talked about. Over the past several years I have taught courses on Women's Spiritual Quest at Pacific School of Religion, Columbia University, and San Jose State University. And I have found that whenever women read Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Ntozake Shange, Lessing, Rich, and other women writers, a special feeling develops. Friendships are formed which extend beyond the classroom, and the women sense that something which will affect them deeply for years to come has begun to happen through our discussions.

During the years that I have been thinking about this book, themes and images from the novels and poems have reflected and validated my own spiritual quest. Martha Quest's mystical experiences in nature validated my own experiences and gave me strength to pursue my own insights. Kate Chopin's evocation of the power of the sea and Margaret Atwood's heroine's experiences in nature and the woods were also especially important to me.

Later, when I began to write about Lessing, I found that my best writing time was between midnight and dawn. Awake when the rest of the city slept, I created a space where I was free of all distractions and could begin to enter more deeply into Martha Quest's world and the world of my own insights. One night when I was thinking about how Martha "connected" to "currents and forces of energy," waited and let them "collect," I tuned into a powerful energy source. I found myself able to do push-ups, sit-ups, and other exercises that I had never been able to do. Staying up late, I often felt I reached that "clear lit space" of vision and insight Martha talked about.

I began to trust my own insights more and more as others responded positively to my teaching, lecturing, and writing about Lessing. I learned, as Martha also had learned, that when I expressed what I thought and felt when I was most deeply in touch with my inner self and most open to the world around me, I was not alone—others were thinking and feeling the same things.

Lessing's celebration of Martha's solitude as a place where insight can be gained was also an important image for me during the years I lived as a single woman in New Haven and New York. I began to view myself as a woman like Martha, whose strength came from her solitude, from confronting the darkness within and without and then coming through to the other side.

Adrienne Rich's poems in *Diving into the Wreck* also reflected my struggle. Like Rich, I had sensed that men's ability to remain "strong" and emotionally distant in relationships was part of the same warped patriarchal mentality that allowed them to retain emotional distance while discussing poverty in the ghetto or bombing in Vietnam. And, like Rich, I felt that far from being a sign of irrationality, women's emotionality and personal involvement is a positive, life-affirming value. I also sensed a spiritual import in Rich's metaphor of diving beneath the wreck of patriarchal civilization in search of a hidden treasure.

When I first read Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing,* I was struggling with images of myself as powerless and powerful. Because I had only negative patriarchal images of power, I was wary of power altogether. *Surfacing,* however, clarified my relationship to power. The heroine's understanding that her power stemmed from her clear understanding of her rooting in nature and in her own personal past provided me with an alternative notion of power as insight and grounding. Her protagonist's words, "this above all, to refuse to be a victim . . . to give up the old belief that I am powerless," seemed directed to me. For years I would quote them to myself as I struggled to accept the power that comes from being oneself and expressing one's perceptions of the world.

Ntozake Shange's depiction of women's self-destructive dependence on men was also important to me. When Naomi Goldenberg and I first saw Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered* *suicide/when the rainbow is enuf,* we both felt that we had been reborn in a small way as we witnessed the tall Black woman in red rise from the floor of the stage to affirm the source of power within and without her. Shange's boldness in naming "god in myself" seemed right to us, since we recently had begun together to speak the name "Goddess" and had felt this new naming as a powerful antidote to the self-abasing dependence on men that both of us, like Shange, had known too well.

I had wildly mixed feelings when I first read Adrienne Rich's new poems in *The Dream of a Common Language.* Her naming of the power of female vision and creativity in the "humdrum acts / of attention to this house / transplanting lilac stickers . . . sweeping stairs, brushing the thread / of the spider aside" reminded me of the woman's mystery I had sensed in my grandmother's home and garden. I loved Rich's celebration of a solitude that can be chosen without loneliness. And I found her depiction of "a passivity we mistake / –in the desperation of our search– / for gentleness" an all-too-accurate description of the quality that had drawn me to a man I had loved too much. But I had trouble with Rich's vision of relationships. Perhaps because I have known solitude and living alone so deeply in my life, I found it hard to accept her view that "two people together is a work / heroic in its ordinariness." I find heroine-ism more in the years I and my women friends have lived alone than in relationships with women or men. And though I agree with Rich that learning to love women/ourselves could transform cultural values, I do not share her lesbian vision.

This book is the product of many years of thinking and struggle. To name everyone who has influenced it would be impossible. But I would especially like to thank Judith Plaskow, who has been a close friend and colleague for over a decade and with whom I have discussed every idea in this book and many others many times, and Naomi Goldenberg, a newer but equally good friend and sister who has shared so many of my academic and personal struggles over the past five years. Marcia Keller, Carolyn Forrey, and Caroline Whitbeck also deserve special mention as colleagues, critics, and friends. Celia Behrman Weisman came from New York during the summer of 1979 to work with me and her enthusiasm, insight, and hard work made it much

easier for me to finish this book. In the years to come she too will be writing on women's quest. The brave and pioneering work of Valerie Saiving, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Ruether made this book and much else possible. The women in the New York Feminist Scholars in Religion, especially Anne Barstow, Karen Brown, Ellen Umansky, Beverly Harrison, Sheila Collins, Alice Carse, and Nelle Morton, and the Women's Caucus–Religious Studies, especially Christine Downing, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rita Gross, have helped to create a context in which we all could think new thoughts. Ellen Boneparth, Selma Burkom, Sybil Weir, Fanny Rinn, Billie Jensen, Margaret Williams, Bettina Aptheker, Jo Stuart, and the other women in Women's Studies at San Jose State University have shown me that it is possible for academic women to support each other both in the university and outside it. Starhawk, Hallie Iglehart, and Z. Budapest taught courses that encouraged me to think more freely about women, nature, and Goddesses. Elizabeth Fishel's writing course helped me write more boldly. The students in my classes at Columbia, Pacific School of Religion, and San Jose State have provoked me to develop and sharpen my thinking about women's spiritual quest. Ellen Morgan, Catherine Stimpson, and Carolyn Heilbrun provided helpful comments and needed encouragement on early drafts of my essays on Lessing and Atwood. Patricia Parks, Gail Kong, Kit Havice, and Beverly Steckel have also shared my quest to understand women's experience. Janice Campisi, Ann Younger, and Dianne Lindsey typed the manuscript. Joanne Wyckoff at Beacon provided helpful editorial advice. Without these women and many others, this book would not have been written. Several men also deserve mention. Michael Novak, Stephen Crites, James E. Dittes, Julian N. Hartt, Wayne Proudfoot, Tom Driver, and Joseph L. Blau have encouraged my work through the years, often when others did not. Roger Robinson helped me create a home space in which the final draft of this book could be completed. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided a summer stipend in 1978, for which I am grateful.

Contents

1. Women's Stories, Women's Quest

WOMEN'S STORIES have not been told.* And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.

Stories give shape to lives. As people grow up, reach plateaus, or face crises, they often turn to stories to show them how to take the next step. Women often live out inauthentic stories provided by a culture they did not create. The story most commonly told to young girls is the romantic story of falling in love and living happily ever after. As they grow older some women seek to replace that story with one of free and independent womanhood. Doris Lessing's character Martha Quest was such a woman. When she wanted to know what to do with her life, Martha examined the lives of the two women she knew best, Mrs. Quest, her repressed and bitter mother, and Mrs. Van Rensberg, a fat Dutch farmwoman. Rejecting their lives as narrow and

*I will be using "story" in a broad sense to refer to all articulations of experience that have a narrative element, including fiction, poetry, song, autobiography, biography, and talking with friends.

constricting, Martha turned to fiction, hoping to find, "if not in literature, which evaded these problems, then in life, that woman . . . [who was] a 'person.' "[1] Martha felt her life opening before her, but she couldn't shape it out of nothing: she needed a story of another woman whose life was rich and full to provide her with an image of what her own life might be. Like many other women, Martha failed to find the image of a free woman in the literature she read. Instead of creating a new story for herself, Martha found herself half-consciously drifting into roles in the conventional stories of her time. She became the attractive young woman who dances with suitors until dawn, the war bride, the pregnant wife, the young mother. Without her willing it, her story began to resemble that of the mother she had rejected.[2]

Martha's experience calls attention to the importance of stories in lives, something most people intuitively know. When meeting new friends or lovers people reenact the ritual of telling stories. Why? Because they sense that the meaning of their lives is revealed in the stories they tell, in their perception of the forces they contended with, in the choices they made, in their feelings about what they did or did not do. In telling their stories people speak of parents, friends, lovers, ecstasy, and death—of moments when life's meaning seemed clear, or unfathomable. People reveal themselves in telling stories.

But stories also reveal the powers that provide orientation in people's lives. When people talk about books or movies that touched them, about people they have loved or wanted to emulate, they speak of that elusive sense of meaning, power, and value that roots their mundane stories in something deeper. This depth dimension of stories is crucial, for without it lives would seem empty, meaningless.

The theories about story and religion developed by Michael Novak, Stephen Crites, and others help to elucidate the depth dimension of stories. Both Crites and Novak have noted that stories are more than a simple recounting of experience. According to Crites every story has a "sacred" dimension, "not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because [a woman's] sense of self and world is created through them . . . For these are stories that orient the life of a people through time, their life-time, their individual and corporate experience and their sense of style, to the great powers that establish the reality of their world."[3] Michael Novak expressed the same idea when he wrote, "Not to have any story to live out is to experience nothingness: the primal formlessness of human life below the threshold of narrative structuring. Why become anything at all? Does anything make any difference? Why not simply die?"[4] Crites and Novak state that stories create a sense of self and world. Crites's notion that stories provide "orientation" to "great powers" is crucial. Stories with a sacred dimension point to a source of meaning that gives purpose to people's lives.

Certain religious stories provide orientation to sources of meaning. For the religious Jew, the story of God's giving of the law on Sinai gives a depth dimension to the simplest act, from preparing a kosher chicken to lighting the Sabbath candles. A depth dimension is given to everyday activities because the Jew understands her position as one of God's chosen people. Similarly, the Christian orients her life around the life and death of Jesus. If her firstborn daughter dies in infancy, she will mourn, but her sense of loss will be tempered by her faith that the death of her child is somehow taken up and given meaning by the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which for her expresses the universe's secret meaning.

What is less obvious, especially to those who identify religion or sacrality primarily with the stories in the Bible, is that many stories have a sacred dimension. All stories do not orient a person to the God revealed at Sinai or Golgotha, but many stories provide orientation to what Crites calls the "great powers that establish the reality of their world."[5] These powers may not be named divinities and they need not speak out of whirlwinds for their presence to be felt. They may be identified by their function of providing orientation. They are the boundaries against which life is played out, the forces against which a person must contend, or the currents in whose rhythms she must learn to swim. They sometimes provide revelation when the self is at a loss—when she doesn't know where to turn. They may provide a sense of meaning and value which is more potent than that offered by conventional stories. They may ground a person in powers of being that enable her to challenge conventional values or expected roles.

Common to all stories with this "sacred" dimension is the importance given to the story by teller or hearer. It might seem that all sacred stories would have to be realistic and serious, but this is not so. The story might be of adventure if the teller thinks adventure is what life is all about, a love story if love makes life meaningful, a fantasy if fantasy is the only way to achieve transcendence. What is common to all these stories is not their genre but their function in providing orientation to life's flow. Indeed the same story may be sacred to one person but not to another. Classic myths that were revelatory to the ancient Greeks became simple adventure stories for Christians, while Biblical stories are not revelatory for post-Christians.

Through recognizing the crucial importance of stories to selves, the dilemma of women is revealed. Women live in a world where women's stories rarely have been told from their own perspectives. The stories celebrated in culture are told by men. Thus men have actively shaped their experiences of self and world, and their most profound stories orient them to what they perceive as the great powers of the universe. But since women have not told their own stories, they have not actively shaped their experiences of self and world nor named the great powers from their own perspectives.[6]

Of course women appear in the stories of men, but only in roles defined by men – usually mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, nurses, assistants, or whores. Stories of mothers and daughters, of women's friendship, of women working with women, of women's love for each other are rarely told. "Chloe liked Olivia," a simple statement about a woman's feeling for another woman, is, Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, a sentence that has rarely appeared in literature. Readers have known Chloe only in relation to Roger and Percival. They have never heard how Chloe felt about her mother, whether she liked her sister, what she thought about when she was alone, whether she ever contemplated her position in the universe. When women tell their stories, Woolf suggested, "Chloe liked Olivia" will become commonplace. Readers will know how Chloe felt when she got up in the morning, what she did when Roger and Percival were not around, how she felt about the world.[7]

In a very real sense, there is no experience without stories. There is a dialectic between stories and experience. Stories give shape to experience, experience gives rise to stories. At least this is how it is for those who have had the freedom to tell their own stories, to shape their lives in accord with their experience. But this has not usually been the case for women. Indeed there is a very real sense in which the seemingly paradoxical statement "Women have not experienced their own experience" is true.

Women have lived in the interstices between their own vaguely understood experience and the shapings given to experience by the stories of men. The dialectic between experience and shaping experience through storytelling has not been in women's hands. Instead of recognizing their own experiences, giving names to their feelings, and celebrating their perceptions of the world, women have often suppressed and denied them. When the stories a woman reads or hears do not validate what she feels or thinks, she is confused. She may wonder if her feelings are wrong. She may even deny to herself that she feels what she feels.

For example, a young woman may think that she does not want children because she would like to have a career. If she hears stories about women who have not had children and are happy with the lives they have chosen, as well as stories of women who have combined career and family, then her feelings about her career and her questions about whether she can combine career and children will have been validated. She will be able to recognize and articulate her experience and make decisions on the basis of it. If, on the other hand, there is no validation for her experience, no shared articulation, she will have a dilemma. She will ask herself whether there is something wrong with her if she doesn't want children. She may learn to suppress and deny—even to herself—that she has ever thought of not having children.

And what of her thoughts about career? If there are no stories of women who work outside the home, what will she do? She may with some incredible effort "slide herself sidewise"[8] into the stories of men. A young woman who wants to do something significant may decide to be like a male figure she has admired. This identification may work for a while, but if she starts thinking about home and family, she is left without an image that fits her experience. The male figure