

MARGARET WOLFF




IN SWEET
Company

CONVERSATIONS WITH EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN
ABOUT LIVING A SPIRITUAL LIFE

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 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

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Cover art: "Joyfull Dance," 2001 by Diana Ong, Diana Ong/Superstock

Book design by Carla Green

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wolff, Margaret.

In sweet company: conversations with extraordinary women about living a spiritual life / Margaret Wolff.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: San Diego, CA: Margaret Wolff Unlimited, 2002.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-8338-3 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7879-8338-1 (alk. paper)

1. Women—Religious life. 2. Spiritual biography. I. Title.

BL625.7.W58 2006

204'.092'2—dc22

2005021212

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

PB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

IN SWEET
Company

This book is dedicated to four who came before me.

Your lives compelled me to unearth my real Self,
to honor my must needs, to speak and stand in Truth
then lay everything else at the feet of God.

I am grateful beyond words.

PREFACE

Many years ago, I came across a quote that to this day continues to claim me, continues to lift my heart to new understanding whenever I am in the presence of something beautiful. I can no longer recall its exact words, but the marrow of the quote is this: A painting has many lives, those lived by everyone who loves the piece and the life the artist lived as the piece was created. This applies, I believe, to other forms of artistic expression, including books, and certainly to the book you hold in your hands.

The life this book lived when I began writing it was primal and parched. It tottered daily—sometimes moment to moment—on the brink of extinction, dependent on my tenuous ability to navigate the lingering hallmarks of an auto accident that did irreparable damage to my brain. Despite its improbable genesis, *In Sweet Company* ripened into maturity. Though it gave my life meaning and purpose, I often wondered whether something that burned as bright in me as any sun would also live in others.

It had never been my intention to self-publish *In Sweet Company*, but in the wake of 9/11—wanting as everyone did to help—I petitioned for guidance, for a way I might ease the pain. My inner directive to self-publish the book took me through a labyrinth of printers and artists until it was finally birthed in fitful batches of e-mails to a small coterie of colleagues and friends.

It was my habit to pray before I undertook any activity related to *In Sweet Company*; to pray before I wrote, before I made a phone call, before I sent an e-mail, and especially before I got on a plane. As the last cluster of e-mails floated into cyberspace, I suddenly realized I had forgotten to precede this launch with a prayer. I gasped in horror and then listened in awe as my inner conciliator declared, “The book never belonged to you in the first place, Margaret. Now it belongs to the whole world.”

Preface

Since that night three years ago, *In Sweet Company* has been loved into the world by thousands of women and men. I have met some of its readers in the retreats I now lead based on the book, at conferences where I speak, and in e-mails I receive telling me how the book has prompted readers to nurture their inner lives and inspired them to face their outer challenges. *In Sweet Company* has been passed down through families, through generations of women and their husbands and sons to show them, in the words of one man, "what real women are about." It has been read by women on death row, women in shelters, women in hospices, and by women who, after 9/11, were left to raise their children alone. It is used as a text in women's studies programs, read in book clubs, and has been the subject of articles and workshops created by writers and trainers other than myself. *In Sweet Company* has had many very good lives.

One morning last February, I awoke with the words "Jossey-Bass" peeling in my head. I contacted Margaret Wheatly, one of the women profiled in these pages, thinking Jossey-Bass was her publisher, and asked if she knew of someone there I could talk with. It turned out that Meg published with another company, but her editor had recently worked with Jossey-Bass and was happy to connect me with Sheryl Fullerton, a colleague for whom she had great regard. I queried Sheryl and sent her a book. Six weeks later, she called to say she wanted to publish it.

Midway through our conversation, Sheryl asked what had prompted me to approach Jossey-Bass. I hesitated for a moment, and then Sheryl said, "It's OK, Margaret. You can tell me." So I did.

"Margaret," she said softly, "One of the women profiled in your book is Miriam Polster. Did you know that our spiritual book division was founded by Sarah Polster, Miriam's daughter?" I did not.

Both Miriam and her daughter passed away before *In Sweet Company* was published. Maybe yes, maybe no, but I like to think that somehow, thanks to them and to you, dear reader, this little book will live many more inspired lives.

Margaret Wolff
San Diego, California
January 2006

IN SWEET COMPANY

We sit together and I tell you things,
Silent, unborn, naked things
That only my God has heard me say.
You do not cluck your tongue at me
Or roll your eyes
Or split my heart into a thousand thousand pieces
With words that have little to do with me.
You do not turn away because you cannot bear to see
Your own unclaimed light shining in my eyes.
You stay with me in the dark.
You urge me into being.
You make room in your heart for my voice.
You rejoice in my joy.
And through it all, you stand unbound
By everything but the still, small Voice within you.
I see my future Self in you
Just enough to risk
Moving beyond the familiar,
Just enough to leave
The familiar in the past where it belongs.
I breathe you in and I breathe you out
In one luxurious and contented sigh.
In sweet company
I am home at last.

—Margaret Wolff

INTRODUCTION

For me there is only traveling on the paths that have heart, on any path that may have heart. There I travel, and the only worthwhile challenge is to traverse its full length. And there I travel, looking, looking, breathlessly.

—Carlos Castenada

This book is about what it means to be a spiritual woman in the twenty-first century. It is about connectedness to God by any name, and connectedness to other, including Self. It is about the depth and breadth and height a soul can actually reach even in an age where global technology and Wall Street reign fairly uncontested.

Though *In Sweet Company* is about women's lives, it is not just a book for or about women. Specifically, *In Sweet Company* is an affirmation of what is possible, a demonstration of what individuals and society at large can learn from women, particularly women who are deeply committed to living with meaning and integrity.

Some of the reasons I decided to write *In Sweet Company* were obvious to me from its inception: a fascination with what people think, a desire to learn from other women, and a yearning to know things that would fill my heart with gratitude. I began working on the book sixteen months after a momentary encounter with an oncoming car left me with enough brain damage to definitively blunt the interior processes that had previously ordered my thinking. I lost 80 percent of my peripheral vision and much of my ability to process and communicate information in a linear fashion. When I went out, if I went out, I almost always cupped my hands over my eyes to reduce the input of stimuli into my visual field. I got lost in neighborhoods that I'd once known like the back of my hand. I frequently stuttered. It wasn't pretty. In spite of a diagnosis that I would never again regain my former level of function, I intuitively knew that my healing depended, to a large degree, on my ability to keep my mind focused on something

positive, something that inspired me. So along with the help of some very innovative therapies—and though I couldn't string a paragraph together to save my soul—I also wrote this book as a means to carve new pathways in my brain, to restore function and order and meaning to my life.

What I did not know when I cast my net out on these waters was that writing *In Sweet Company* would be, for me, a life-transforming experience. It was not just the richness of these conversations that re-made me, though each conversation took me deeply within myself. Rather, it was that I felt called to conduct the entire project with “spiritual impeccability,” to *become* my best work as well as *do* my best work. Once this mandate became clear to me, I strove to respond to anyone having anything to do with the book with kindness and respect. I grappled with and affirmed choices that supported my artistic vision and my own personal boundaries, yet made every effort to remain open to the potential in each suggestion that came my way. I asked hard questions—of myself as well as the women I talked with—about things that were unique to each situation and very specific to life because I *really* wanted answers. I sought guidance at every turn, often proceeded on sheer faith—sometimes boldly, sometimes not. The process so nourished and expanded me that I now see no other option for myself than to conduct my entire life in this manner. In some inexplicable and beautiful way, this book became the mentor I had always hoped to find.

In India, it is the custom to *pranam* when greeting another, to gently touch the palms of the hands together at the level of the heart and slowly, reverently bow the head until fingertips touch forehead. In essence, this ancient gesture means “my soul bows to your soul” or “the God in me bows to the God in you.” *In Sweet Company* has also been like a perennial *pranam* for me. Every woman I talked with filled me with awe and confidence at what one individual, no matter what her path or process, can actualize inside herself and accomplish in the world when she connects her life to Something Greater. Even me.

Being with the fourteen women featured in this book—during our initial conversations and then keeping company with them intellectually and emotionally as I edited their words—answered many questions I had about myself, my life, and my own spiritual search. Each woman shared her God with me and, as a result, I moved closer to my own. For that

alone, I am immeasurably grateful. The intimate nature of the subject matter and every woman's facility to authentically share her life, at times, shape-shifted our conversations and turned the interview process into a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. Giving these women a forum to talk about their lives also connected me more deeply with my own voice, with my own ability to speak and act from Truth as I know it—both when I was with them and forever afterward. Everything I learned as a result of being with them became part of me and got used again and again and again. I am far, far better for knowing these women. As you read their words, I trust you will be as well. Therein lies the importance of sharing our stories with each other.

Living a spiritual life may look different on the outside, but on the inside there are communal threads that weave us together in majestic tapestry. Gandhi once said, "God has no religion." Neither does a heart filled with Spirit. Faith is a universal, inner experience that is not dependent on one external doctrine. Though I knew this when I began writing *In Sweet Company*, thanks to these women, I now believe it with every fiber of my being.

Unlike any other species on Earth, human beings can transform the circumstances of our lives in profound and meaningful ways by what we choose to think—and then do. Change our thoughts and we change our lives. Change our inner reality and we change our outer reality. Though it is seldom easy to alter one's thoughts or actions, the primary significance of making such a change—and doing it consciously—is that the process makes you aware that your life is a construct that is, in the final reckoning, determined by you alone.

While we will never be able to change everything that happens to us, we can change how we *respond* to what happens to us, just as the women in this book have done. Each of us must claim the power to do this for ourselves. If we are to be fierce about something in our lives, let it be that we do not let fear keep us from manifesting our own greatness, that we do not let God's will for us lie fallow. Wherever you are in your search for God, whatever path you walk, it is my fervent hope that reading *In Sweet Company* will, in some way, expand your thoughts and help you respond to your life in ways that build your confidence, deepen your peace, and bring you joy.

In Sweet Company Retreats, Workshops, and Keynotes

There is a renaissance going on, a grassroots spiritual revolution spearheaded by women of all ages, faiths, and backgrounds—women who are gathering in coffeehouses and conference rooms to share their stories, to explore their options, and to give and receive support.

Margaret Wolff's programs provide models, skills, and inspiration that help women respond to their innate wisdom and integrate their most deeply held values into their lives, no matter what their spiritual tradition. Personal reflection, interactive exercises, storytelling, and excerpts from *In Sweet Company* are used as stepping-stones to self-exploration.

Programs include

Women in Spirit: The Emerging Face of Women's Spirituality A new vision of power—one that champions diversity, collaboration, and connection—has emerged. Trace the roots of this movement, historically and within your own life, and discover direction for the future.

Listening to Your Inner Voice There is a still, small voice, an internal guide, an intuitive knowing within you that can align you with an inner well-spring beyond logic, beyond "shoulds," beyond strategizing. Connect to that unfailing source of decision making and transform the anxiety of not knowing into self-trust.

Spirit at Work: Making Your Work and Your Life Be About What You Value Most Take stock of your knowledge, skills, achievements, resources, and dreams, and reframe the direction of your work and life in ways that feed your soul.

Women as Peacemakers Move beyond the compelling images of global wounding and experience what the mystics of all religions tell us: we are wedded to each other—undeniably bound—as the varied expressions of a singular and loving consciousness. Nurture your inner peacemaker and explore options for global peacemaking.

To schedule a program or speaking engagement, learn where Margaret Wolff is speaking, or sign up for the *In Sweet Company Newsletter*, visit www.insweetcompany.com.

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING

"I laughed, I cried, I was silent, I cheered. Most of all, I loved."

"I had the intense experience that I had finally found someone who could speak to what I have been experiencing for my entire life."

"Margaret Wolff's eloquence was a highlight of our program."

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One
Sister Helen Prejean



Some day, after we have mastered the wind, the waves, the tide, and gravity, we shall harness the energies of love. Then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

ON A COLD day in January of 1982, Sister Helen Prejean had a brief conversation with a colleague from the Louisiana State Prison Coalition about becoming a pen pal to a man on death row, a convicted murderer named Patrick Sonnier. She was teaching high school dropouts at an inner city housing project in New Orleans at the time, with no experience working in

prisons and little familiarity with the judicial and political systems that govern the life and death of the inmates. But she took Sonnier's address and sent him a letter. Little did she know that this simple act of kindness would eventually give rise to a personal and spiritual metamorphosis that, along the way, would include a Pulitzer Prize-nominated book, an Academy Award-winning movie, speaking engagements throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan, and the unleashing in her of a passion that is nothing short of inspired.

The root word for inspiration in Greek, *inspiro*, means "to breathe into." Being Sonnier's spiritual advisor and walking with him to his execution, meeting his family and the families of his victims, interacting with the prison officials and politicians who orchestrated his death, all breathed a fire into her that now defines her every thought and action. When her book, *Dead Man Walking*, was released, it hit the *New York Times* best-seller list almost immediately and remained there for eight months. It also catalyzed advocates on both sides of America's system of capital punishment and became an extraordinary example of the power of unconditional love.

I first became aware of Sister Helen's work with death row inmates in 1995, when Tim Robbins's film based on her book was released. I was glad to know she was doing this work. It was important and necessary, I believed. But I kept my distance from the film, even after it won an Academy Award. Though I did not know it then, I came to understand that my reticence was not all that uncommon, that many people keep her work at arm's length for one reason or another. My reserve did not, however, prevent her name from entering my consciousness like a meteor descending to Earth as I sat at my desk one morning four years later musing about women to talk with for this book. Once her name came to me, I intuitively knew she would contribute to the project. I was, however, still eight months away from realizing exactly how she would contribute to my life.

Finding her was relatively easy; as was making a connection with Sister Margaret, her assistant and the guardian of her schedule. I would come to look forward to the sound of Sister Margaret's syrupy Louisiana drawl and self-effacing humor in the months and phone calls ahead. But on the day I first talked with her, she told me only how busy Sister Helen was—and not to get my hopes up.

I faxed Sister Margaret some information about this book as soon as we got off the phone, but it took several months until she could present it to Sister Helen, and several more months until Sister Helen was even able to read it. Once she agreed to talk with me, her presence infused everything I did to prepare for our conversation.



ON A SUNNY January morning, I drive to Newport Beach, California, an affluent community about fifty miles north of my home outside of San Diego, to meet with Sister Helen. She has flown to California early that morning and will fly out early the next, criss-crossing the country at an unrelenting pace to talk with church groups, college students, politicians, and so forth—audiences of varying sizes, backgrounds, and degrees of receptivity. I will meet her at the convent where she is staying, resting I am told, during the few precious hours she has before she will address the parishioners at Our Lady Queen of Angels Roman Catholic Church. I arrive in Newport Beach early, grab a quick lunch, then make my way through the cordons of elegant communities to the address I have been given.

I have not seen the film yet, but I have read her book. I know that she is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, a community of Catholic women living and working in her native Louisiana. I know that in 1965, after Vatican II, she exchanged her habit and a semi-cloistered life for street clothes and active participation in the social justice movement, and that she worked in the St. Thomas Housing Projects in Baton Rouge for four years before meeting Sonnier. But nothing I've read prepares me for the real thing, for the vital, dynamic woman in her mid-sixties who opens the door and enfolds me in her arms in greeting. She is short and compact; solid like granite. Her embrace opens me, like the man in the parable about the north wind and the sun who bares himself in response to the sun's warmth.

She is easy to be around from the get-go. "Well come on in, Mah-grut," she drawls in her Bayou-laden voice, and escorts me into the living room. "I'll be with you in a minute. I'm on the phone with some folks back East, and as soon as I finish up with them, I'm all yours." From these

few moments of greeting, I know that she will be all mine—that every moment she is with you, no matter who you are, she is always all yours.

I sit on a long beige couch, my back to a large picture window that looks out into the front yard, set up my recording equipment, and wait for her to join me. By the end of the day, I will discover that it's easy to forget she's a nun but never that she is a woman who loves God. She laughs easily and frequently throughout our time together and enjoys it when I laugh with her. She's a Southern storyteller—informal, funny, and unpretentious. Gradually, lovingly, she accompanies me, and all her listeners, toward the heart of her message: "What if each of us were judged solely by the worst thing we ever did in our lives?" she asks. "While I do not condone violence, I do advocate compassion. While I cannot imagine the grief of losing a loved one to violent crime, I also could not bear the pain of living with revenge in my heart. And while it is important to feel safe—as a society and as an individual—each of us must decide for ourselves how to translate outrage into mercy."

Sister Helen finishes her phone call and strides into the room. She sits down opposite me on the couch near the microphone. "Let's do it!" she says. I start our conversation by asking her to tell me about her Order. She talks about its beginning in 1650 in France, then tells me about the tenets on which it was founded.

"Our charism is very broad and has to do with connecting people with people and people with God. Inevitably, as part of this process, we come face to face with all sorts of human wounds, all the painful experiences that separate human beings from each other and from God. Reconciliation and healing need to happen in order for people to move beyond their suffering, so this too, is part of our charism.

"Community also plays an important role in our work. Individualism implies that it's up to one person to get the job done. Community means we stand present together. We recognize that none of us have all the gifts necessary to bring about reconciliation on our own."

Is there a Golden Rule that guides you?

"Our Sisters are rooted in the Gospels, but there are two maxims that mean a great deal to us. The first is 'Never leap ahead of grace, but wait for grace and quietly follow with the gentleness of the spirit of God.' This means that I don't ever have to get cerebral and lay out an elaborate blue-