

# **Women of the Millenium**

**How Do the Changes in Women's Lives over the Last  
Generation Affect the Needs of Women in Spiritual  
Direction?**

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## **Women of the Millenium: How Do the Changes in Women's Lives over the Last Generation Affect the Needs of Women in Spiritual Direction?**

To seek answers to this question I surveyed thirty four women, with two questionnaires, one for younger women and one for older women. These two groups were equally divided, with the older women being a generation older than the younger women.<sup>1</sup> Apart from adjustments due to the differing age groups the questionnaires were identical and included questions on the spiritual and secular aspects of the entity of their lives. For clarity I have designated these groups *Mothers* and *Daughters*. I also held a workshop with each group to discuss the questionnaire.

### **View of God**

*Daughters* were evenly divided in seeing God as Creator or Father and Jesus as Husband, Friend, Provider. In both groups a significant number named the Trinity. These were amplified by such descriptions as guide/teacher, source(s) of wisdom, life, knowledge and joy. One woman thought of him as higher power, another as thread of the universe. Yardstick (of my life) and Breath (in whom I live and have my being) were two distinctive views. While most *Daughters* were well established in their spiritual journey a few were just setting out.

*Mothers* used terms that were biblical in the widest sense ranging from reverence through to intimacy. They were evenly divided between God, Creator, Father and/or Jesus as Saviour. Two mentioned Jesus as husband, friend and provider. Feeling words used to amplify such names were loving, bountiful, merciful, understanding and accepting, helper/healer, refuge and strength. Other descriptions were fair/just, protector, deliverer, omnipresent, omnipotent, righteous, all encompassing. These were women who had been Christians for many years, were well grounded in the bible and had had the experience to test their beliefs.

### **Relationship with God**

When asked how they felt about their relationship with God, four in *Daughters* and two in *Mothers* said grateful. Otherwise there were as many feelings as people. In both groups almost all were positive. One in *Mothers* said she could be closer and one said she was a bit shaken but he would "never leave her nor forsake her." In *Daughters*, five said the relationship was a growing one. One said it could be better, three others used such words as ambivalent, inconsistent and fearful.

The overwhelming majority in both groups experienced God's love for them in both their heads and their hearts. One from each group said in their head more than their hearts. Three from *Daughters* experienced it in their hearts predominantly. One from *Daughters* felt it in her gut and one from *Mothers* said neither but she 'knew' God's love for her.

Asked what they valued most in their spiritual lives, 50% of group *Daughters* replied "Peace." Apart from that the answers in both groups were as varied as the individuals. Three in *Daughters* spoke of God's love, four valued their relationship with God, two God's presence

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<sup>1</sup> The younger group were aged in their 20s, 30s to mid 40s approximately and were drawn from a group at one church. The older group were mostly drawn from what had previously been a young women's group at the same church but had moved on in many directions. They were in their 50s and early 60s. This church caters to a wide age group and has traditional, contemporary and contemplative services to meet different preferences. It is not overtly charismatic though there is a charismatic influence. Some of the women in both groups came from other churches

with them, otherwise eternal life, guidance, empowerment and self discovery were all appreciated.

For *Mothers* the most valued thing about their spiritual life was God's faithfulness (3), God's love (2) God's presence (2) and eternal life (2). Other aspects that were valued were the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, peace and connection to God. Their relationship with God gives meaning to life, takes away striving and envy, offers service to others, joy, salvation, peace, comfort, God's promises, God's availability and that he is the one unshakeable thing in a very shaky world.

### **Prayer**

Asked where and when they were most conscious of God's presence, both groups were fairly evenly divided between creation/nature's beauty, in church (worshipping or alone), in quiet times, (prayer, bible reading). In *Daughters* one mentioned peace amidst turmoil, one being with family, one in fellowship and two having fun. In *Mothers* two mentioned serving others especially with communion.

The prayer life of *Daughters* group was less defined. Only three mentioned regular prayer times, and another three prayed throughout the day. Being free of clutter, silence, taking reflective moments at the clothesline or the sink, being conscious of his presence, speaking to God as Father, were all mentioned as part of their prayer life. Praying for other people was a part too. Although one or two felt critical of their own efforts overall one had the impression that prayer was not only an important part of their lives but a much valued time of quiet and peace amidst busy lives.

By contrast *Mothers* has a more defined prayer life. Most started the day with a regular quiet time and often sent up arrow prayers or prayed at intervals throughout the day. Two said their prayer life was wanting. One said her prayer life was an act of obedience. A couple spoke about talking to him through the day – an aspect of companionship. Prayer seemed to permeate their lives.

In both groups about a third felt God spoke to them through his word. Another third of *Daughters* said circumstances were an indicator. Conviction, feelings, thoughts, clarity on issues, impressions, quickening of the spirit, ideas might be grouped together. Some felt a sense of peace. The input of others was valued by a few and a small number referred to past experience or on occasion, dreams.

For *Mothers* the input of fellow Christians was important to about a third. One mentioned circumstances but feelings, thoughts popping up after prayer, a small inner voice or prompting, specific bible verses, pictures, had their place. One mentioned songs/music.

### **Spiritual Journey**

Both groups felt that more time (one woman in *Daughters* specified controlling busyness), more prayer, and more bible reading were important in deepening their relationship with God. Some felt more attentive listening to teaching would be helpful. A couple felt their spiritual journey was enhanced by listening to others, and by helping and praying for them. A spiritual mentor, time spent with God in retreats etc, seeking his guidance and being obedient, were individual suggestions.

When asked what they might fear about drawing closer to God three from *Daughters* and half of *Mothers* replied, “Nothing,” but about a third of both groups feared being asked to do something too difficult or something that they did not want to do. Another two from each group feared losing control. From *Mothers*, one feared displeasing God, one feared being in his presence and one feared more refining. The fears of *Daughters* were more numerous and varied. These included the cost, the difficulty of maintaining balance, the demands of obedience, confronting one’s failings, confronting one’s fears, seeing oneself through God’s eyes, spiritual attack. One feared that if she tried to draw closer to God that she might find he did not exist.

Ten out of seventeen from *Daughters* were open to the idea of someone to accompany them on their spiritual journey but three had reservations, one said not yet and three didn’t like the idea. From *Mothers* eight liked the idea of having some one to accompany them. Three didn’t like the idea and four said they shared with their husbands, friends or a group.

### **Comparison of Spiritual Life: *Daughters-Mothers***

This was very interesting because the viewpoints of the two groups diverged considerably. *Daughters* believed the church of their mothers to be controlling, full of formality and restrictions, regimented, black and white, with behavioural expectations, rigid roles and rules. Christians often seemed to have double standards. One woman said the church was more of a social expectation than a spiritual experience. It left women with a view of God the Judge – remote not compassionate so that some of their mothers had turned away. Another woman from *Daughters* said, “We put the emphasis on relationship with God and sharing the gospel. They (the previous generation) kept it for themselves.” This woman appreciated being able to participate, being free to develop her own faith and having the resources to do so.

*Mothers* had a very different point of view. While two or three said there was little or no difference and one suggested that all our spiritual journeys are unique, others felt empathetic to the next generation. They felt they had had good scriptural grounding and pointed out the expectations of how to live today diverge from Christian moral values. Also there are many different approaches to spirituality available now. (New Age, crystals, black/white magic). One woman felt it was a lot harder for young people today in a world that is strongly competitive, with high demands to succeed and pressures on their time. Another said there is emphasis on subjective rather than objective truth. Two had been led by their daughters into a deeper relationship with God. “I find they are freer and not as ‘religious’,” was perhaps the encapsulating thought.

What was easier in their spiritual lives? To be able to get together to talk about their faith, share their lives, and pray about their situations. Both groups agreed there are more resources available, books, tapes, videos. (More rubbish too was one comment from *Mothers*.) There is less denominationalism. One woman (*Daughters*) said she found it easier to express her feelings about her faith and another *Daughters* valued having more space to discover God in her own way.

*Mothers* felt there was more acceptance of spiritual values in the community a generation ago. There was a quieter slower pace, which allowed more time for other needs and interests spiritual or otherwise. Now there is more help available in the form of seminars, courses etc.

*Daughters* - Today life is more complex, the pace of change is faster and there is more knowledge. It isn’t easy to share one’s faith with others.

*Mothers* - There's a lot of confusion where a lack of confidence in the bible results in opinions being presented as truth. One woman spoke about how hard she found it getting rid of 'pat' answers and 'breaking through' well known bible stories thus allowing the Holy Spirit to teach her what he wants her to know.

### **Comparison of Secular Life**

There is greater freedom to choose careers (irrespective of gender) live independently and travel. Women have more rights with less pressure to conform. They are able to make more conscious decisions about their own lives. Women are out working, have more money and are better educated. It's more open and honest. They're more involved in their community and have a wider range of interests. Their relationships with their children are more informal. For solo parents it's difficult.

*Daughter's* view of *Mother's* generation was that they were less free to express feelings and opinions and less able to talk about their own problems. They had less education and resources. They were more isolated and controlled.

*Mothers* felt they had less external pressures to perform economically so that they were able to stay home with their children and serve others. Their lives were prescribed. They were expected to train, work, marry and become homemakers. There was less emphasis on material possessions. There were fewer outside influences and temptations and more time.

*Mother's* view of *Daughters* felt there was now more pressure to work and rear a family. The standard of living is higher with an increased pace of life and less time spent at home, also less security of jobs and marriages.

### **Spiritual Influences on Their Lives**

*Daughters* was fairly evenly divided between negative and positive spiritual input in their childhoods. One had no spiritual input from her parents at all and two received instruction on biblical truths and morals. They had been most influenced through friends (6) and family, mothers (2), grandmothers (2), aunt (1), godmother (1), also other Christians (2), church leaders (3) and reading (Bible, Revelations, other Christian books)

*Mothers* felt they had conveyed positive teaching about God to their children. One acknowledged she hadn't, her own faith being in the doldrums at the time. For themselves influences included family, mothers (2), grandparents (2) parents (6) husband (1) friends (3), charismatic renewal (2) church (2) Christian example (2) Teaching (bible, mentor, study, Sunday school, groups, courses, reading, TV evangelists, secular education, para church organisations) were all listed.

### **Differences in Society's Attitudes.**

Both groups agreed there was the freedom of choice, including the choice not to go to church and to express oneself. There is greater independence, fewer restrictions and more equality. The 'pill' has enabled women to take more control of their lives. Women are expected to work. They're less content to make the family the centre of their lives but it's a struggle to juggle work, home, selves and husband leaving little time to spare. They're expected to be all things, making life hectic but there is more flexibility between male/female roles, that is helpful. It is harder for solo mothers despite the DPB. The role of housewife/mother has been downgraded. Women can earn good salaries throughout their lives. The voice and role of women is respected

and less submissive. Women can take roles of leadership even in the church. Women are still bonded to the superficial (eg. appearance & image) resulting in unnecessary baggage to carry.

### **Conclusion**

While there were a number of factors involved in the differences between *Daughters & Mothers* groups, the ones that are relevant are those which are brought about by societal change. Psychological/spiritual development,<sup>2</sup> the stages of faith<sup>3</sup> and personality types<sup>4</sup> are peripheral here.

Perhaps the most far reaching change has been in the area of education. Between the schooling of the two generations the emphasis in the schoolroom has shifted from children being taught by the teacher to children learning through discovery. This means that children are taught to question in a way they had not previously done. *Mother's* view of God was very biblically based but, while many among *Daughters* had a biblical view, there was a greater diversity. This partly depended on their spiritual growth but the bible is no longer universally accepted as the "Word of God" and we cannot always appeal to it as the unquestioned authority. Its validity needs to be tested out by experience.

A comparison of spiritual life produced the greatest divergence between the two groups. One of the differences would have to do with the environments of individual participants. The society of a generation ago experienced by Group *Mothers* was a more structured society. Group *Daughters* is less conforming, more independent. As a result of the changes in education discussed above, *Daughters* is a much more questioning generation. Where the church fails to understand this fundamental change and insists on remaining controlling there is deep resistance and resentment. The bible is no longer universally considered as the "Word of God," and therefore the unquestioned authority. Alan Jamieson's analogy beginning with swimming and then the desiring to explore further other water activities was very helpful.<sup>5</sup> The women in *Daughters* had a good opportunity to explore in their group. It is important for us as directors to understand these issues so we can support our directees as they work through them.

There was deep aversion to being controlled by the church, an aspect of feminism. The church can still be seen as patriarchal and hierarchal. All of the women in *Daughters* responded with a negative view of the church of the previous generation. (Several gave specific affirmation to their present church.) The women in *Mothers* had quite different views, which may well have reflected the differences between individual churches of the time. None of them saw the church of their youth as controlling and dictatorial apparently though one or two used words such as traditional and conservative. Their answers were more focused on an individual spiritual journey than on the church.

Societal changes, which were apparent, included greater freedom of choice, and therefore the risk of making unwise choices. Greater material expectations and feminist and union claims for equal pay for equal work has led to more need for women to work, more financial constraints, and less time for needs beyond the immediate including time for themselves and for others in

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<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Gratton – *The Art of Spiritual Direction* quoted in Spiritual Direction Training Programme Notes: Module 5, P13 sets out the stages of psychological/spiritual development.

<sup>3</sup> James Fowler – *Stages of Faith* quoted in Spiritual Direction Training Programme Notes Module 6, P10-11, outlines the stages of faith.

<sup>4</sup> MBTI, Enneagram etc.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Jamieson – *A Churchless Faith* Chap 8, P117. He also discusses the changes in the way people view the bible.

the community. Inevitably it creates a more self centred generation. There was a greater understanding of the commandment to love others as we love ourselves. The separation between spiritual values and those of the wider community creates difficult choices for Christians. Pluralism brings the need to know what we really believe. The advances made in Science and Technology has also had a big impact and has greatly speeded up the pace of change. While the benefits are welcomed the flip side is ever greater stress.

There are a few very deep changes. We are no longer taught, we discover, (learn). The freedom that feminism has brought is prized. The advances in science and technology are ever more rapid. Pluralism means there are many different philosophies challenging beliefs. Finding the way may be difficult. There are other changes consequent on these. In the context that “Spiritual direction is not ‘spiritual,’ in the sense that it focuses on one compartment of life divorced from everyday concerns,”<sup>6</sup> all of these changes will affect the needs of women in Spiritual Direction.

### **Implications for Spiritual Direction.**

Since the bible may not be the unquestioned authority for some of our directees, one of our tasks may be to foster a knowledge of and interest in the bible, helping them to experience its relevance. We may also need to be aware of other books (e.g. The New Lion Handbook of the Bible) which could be helpful in such a situation for our concern is to address the immediate needs of the directee.

Another area is where churches have failed to recognize the need now for people to discover the truth for themselves. Churches, which remain hierarchical and controlling, can cause deep pain and resentment. Spiritual Directors can have a pivotal role to play with their directees in such circumstances so that they may experience healing and integration.

Pluralism also presents problems in that many people regard one belief as good as another and that it is just a matter of choosing whatever is preferred from the smorgasbord that is offering and indeed may hold a mixture of beliefs (concurrently.) It falls on us to explore the validity of these beliefs and encourage our directees to reflect on where the truth lies.

We cannot assume in today’s world that when our directees say they are too busy that this is just resistance. We do however need to help them in finding ways to alleviate the stress so that they can spend more time with God and to appreciate the value of that for their daily lives. In this respect I found “Life in the Fast Lane,” by Joyce Huggett most helpful.

It seems to me that these are the most fundamental aspects of change for us as Spiritual Directors although not necessarily exhaustive. However, one of the striking things about this survey was that while external life has changed greatly the approach to God has not. Indeed the women of *Mothers* agreed at their workshop that each of our spiritual journeys is unique but “Jesus remains the same yesterday, today and forever.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Fischer – *Women at the Well*. P3

<sup>7</sup> Wherever possible I have used the women’s own words.

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