

In The Very Beginning The Girl-Child Loves Herself

Our daughters, granddaughters, and nieces remind us that in the very beginning the girl-child loves herself. She comes into the world with feelings of omnipotence, not inferiority. She loves her body, expresses its needs, and follows its impulses. She recognizes and expresses her feelings. She tells the truth. She is interested in herself and enjoys private time. She is involved with herself and her own pursuits. She celebrates herself and expects acknowledgment for her creativity and accomplishments. She does not expend one ounce of her precious life-giving energy trying to figure out what is wrong with her body, feelings, and thoughts. She just lives. She makes a statement with every thought she shares, every feeling she expresses, and every action she takes on her own behalf.

Sadly, this season of the girl-child's life is short lived. By the time she reaches junior high school, she has forgotten her original delight in herself. Her vision is narrowed; she sees the world as everyone else sees it. She loses her ability to act spontaneously; she acts as expected. Her original trust in herself is shattered; she waits to be told how to live. Her original spunk is exiled; she learns that it is dangerous to venture outside the lines. Her original goodness is twisted and labeled unnatural/unfeminine/too intense by the adults in her life. The girl-child emerges from adolescence with a poor self-image, relatively low expectations from life, and with much less confidence in herself and her abilities than boys have in themselves.

She grows up asking, "What's wrong with me?" This question regularly punctuates women's lives from adolescence on as they search far and wide for someone to give them the answer, for someone to offer them a magical insight, treatment, or cure. Because we women have learned a criticism-based way of perceiving ourselves and relating to the world, our automatic tendencies to feel inadequate and that we're never quite good enough no matter what we do. The question "What's wrong with me?" does not develop within us naturally. On a personal level, the question is shaped over time by critical words, images, experiences, and expectations of childhood. We become convinced something is wrong with us and that our life-task is to discover what it is.

A closer examination of the question, however, reveals the critical words, images, experiences, and expectations of many lifetimes of women convinced that something is wrong with them because of views expressed through theology, psychology, societal scripts, family customs, and intellectual and social history. Clearly, the question's presence within us is not an arbitrary occurrence. The belief that something is fundamentally, inherently wrong with women is woven into the fabric of western civilization.

Many of us assume that our quest to discover what's wrong is particular and unique. Caught in the swirls of everyday living with its demands and challenges, we have no time to wonder about the larger dimensions of the question: Perhaps the very design of society itself does not sanction our full satisfaction and contentment. Perhaps it requires us to "fit in" at the expense of our sanity, health, and pride. Perhaps fitting in requires us to become alienated from ourselves, from all that is naturally and organically ours as children of life. Perhaps the question is much larger and more encompassing than we could have ever imagined: What's wrong with us? What's wrong with women? A mantra passed down from generation to generation...a mantra formulated by others.

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