



CIEL BERGMAN

The Alchemical

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Despite major advances made by the women's and men's movements, gender disbarmony continues to afflict most human societies across the globe. The West is no exception, and unexamined gender dynamics undermine the integrity of many of our social structures, including some of the most conscious organizations and spiritual communities. The time has come for men and women to join together in collaboration to transform gender injustice, and to explore together both the bidden shadows and sacred mysteries of feminine and masculine.

Over the past decade, we at the Satyana Institute have organized or co-convened nearly forty events in “Gender Reconciliation,” held in the United States, India, South Africa, Australia, and Croatia. These gatherings are charting inspiring new ground as women and men gather to jointly plumb the depths of feminine and masculine, unmasking the invisible knots of cultural conditioning around gender and sexuality. Together we explore the “undiscussables” of gender and unravel conditioned patterns of behavior. The process follows an alchemical wisdom as we unveil our personal histories, move beyond habitual ways of relating, and discover a higher, universal realm of love and communion between masculine and feminine—within ourselves and in our relationships.

THE HEART OF RECONCILIATION

A detailed explanation of gender reconciliation work is beyond the scope of this article, but we can give an example of where the process often leads.

On the last day of a five-day intensive workshop held in Southern California in May 2002, the time came for the women and men to create rituals of honoring and blessing for each other. At this point, the group of twenty had already spent four intensive days

masculine and feminine. Such rituals create a special “time out of time,” in which deep learning often takes place that carries lessons for life beyond the ritual itself. The power and beauty of these rituals is directly proportional to the authenticity and depth of healing work and truth-telling that has preceded them. As the men and women choreographed ritual offerings for each other, they entered into a rarified environment of tenderness and sincerity. Because their hearts were so open, they were willing to risk in ways that might have seemed unthinkable only days before.

The men began the process by ushering the women, one by one, into a beautiful, sanctuary-like setting, and seating them in a semicircle facing the men. Then, one at a time, each man stepped forward before the women, and spoke to the injustices that he himself felt culpable for in his relationships with women, and with other men. Each man named a behavior or characteristic that he no longer found acceptable in himself, and committed to changing it. The men had written these behaviors on paper beforehand, and after speaking them, burned these written words in a ceremonial fire pot—dramatically ritualizing their commitment to move beyond what they felt to be their former unconsciousness or misdeeds.

After their words were burned, the men made personal vows of their new alliance with the women. These vows,

New Frontiers in Gender Healing Communion

grappling with several highly charged gender issues, including rape and sexual abuse. Most had never addressed these issues so poignantly in mixed company before, and a deep experience of powerful revelations and empathic insight had been awakened.

The task at this point was for the women and men to create rituals for one another. These are participatory ceremonies designed and conducted by the participants to acknowledge the healing work that has transpired, to express gratitude, and to honor the communion of

like the misdeeds, were unique to each man, and were made together with a symbolic offering of summer blossoms the men had gathered. Each man spoke his vow, bowed deeply before the women, and then floated his blossom in a basin of scented water. When all the blossoms were in the basin, each placed with a particular blessing, the men took the water and anointed each woman—speaking her name and offering specific reflections of her soul’s depth and beauty. The men then stood together before the women, bowed, and prostrated themselves on the ground. ➔



Many of the women wept. Nothing had prepared them for the power of this offering, which the men had freely created; it was not the result of facilitators' planning or the program agenda. The women understood that the men were acknowledging the ways in which cultural conditioning creates a difficult maze of gender dynamics that women are forced to grapple with, often on a daily basis. The men had expressed personal awareness of these realities in a ritualized manner that was not just an acknowledgment or apology, but rather an expression of determination to transform their own complicity in creating and upholding these damaging patterns.

Deeply moved, the women then escorted the men, one at a time, into the community room, which they had decorated with flowers and candles. They seated the men in a circle and gave them flowers to hold. Then the women began chanting a song of compassion and love that they continued throughout the ritual. As they chanted, they moved around the circle. Each woman stopped before each man and thanked him individually by naming the man's virtues, gifts, and beauty. Each woman made her offerings to the men in whatever

way felt appropriate: softly whispering appreciation, grasping hands, giving a warm hug or a sisterly kiss, bowing, massaging the man's feet with her hands, or simply looking fully and silently into each man's eyes—offering each man her respect, affection, and honor. Tears flowed freely on both sides.

As one man put it, these rituals were “without a doubt” the pinnacle of the workshop:

The ritual in which the women honored us men was sublime. I felt like each woman, thanking me in her own way, was a unique incarnation of the goddess. It was a magnificent, intensely beautiful evocation of the many facets of the divine feminine. It was truly a transcendental experience.

And as one woman described:

I felt all those unresolved issues within myself, and then saw all the contradictions break apart, and our hearts break open, when in ritual on the last day the men prostrated themselves in front of us. I saw tears in their eyes as the women circled in honor of them. Out of the ashes of our disagreements and confrontations rose the sacred masculine and the sacred feminine again.

THE UNFATHOMABLE POWER OF LOVE

We have discovered through this work of gender reconciliation that there are crucial gaps in women's awareness of men, and men's awareness of women, and of one another's inner experience and social realities. These gaps are kept in place by all manner of taboos and proscribed topics of conversation or inquiry in our culture—especially in mixed company, but also within each gender. Yet it is precisely through jointly exploring these challenging arenas that true healing and transformation can take place. The process is driven by the unfathomable power of love, which sets a mysterious alchemy into motion that operates in ways beyond what the rational mind can comprehend. (To support the growth of this work, the Satyana Institute has begun training facilitators in gender reconciliation, and completed the first certification training in May 2005).

Gender reconciliation work has broad potential for application in other arenas of human conflict. For example, during the 1990s the late peace activist Danaan Parry was facilitating intensive peacebuilding work with a group of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. One day, when the process had reached an impasse, he surprised everyone by giving them a new task. "We've all heard the challenging

issues on both sides of this conflict for a long time now," he said. "So today we're not going to focus on that. What I want to know today is: What is it like to be a woman in Northern Ireland? What is it like to be a man in Northern Ireland?"

Parry then partitioned the group, placing all the women on one side of the room, and all the men on the other. As the Catholic and Protestant women looked at themselves—and listened to each other's stories—they soon discovered that they were all living the exact same nightmare. They empathically identified with one another's fears for their children's lives, and sadness for their lost husbands and brothers. Before long, they were in tears and holding each other, commiserating in mutual grief and compassion. The men had a parallel healing experience as they, too, discovered their shared reality as men, across the religious divide. Through the doorway of gender, the community of women came together, as did the men, and in so doing a profound healing bridge was created. Both sides came to realize that they had taken their first major step toward mutual understanding and peace.

This example illustrates a fundamental principle of gender reconciliation work: A critical turning point is reached when individuals perceive the truth of the "other" as their own experience. Through the doorway of empathic identification, people are led to discover a deeper underlying unity . . . namely, that there is no other. Gender reconciliation provides a practical and universal doorway for this experience, regardless of religious faith or spiritual orientation.

GENDER RECONCILIATION IN OTHER CULTURES

We have discovered that our approach to gender reconciliation is transferable to diverse cultural contexts, for several reasons. First, the dynamics of gender injustice bear key similarities across virtually all societies, despite cultural differences in manifestation and intensity. Second, our methodology focuses directly on specific issues or conflicts activated within the community at hand. Third, this approach to gender healing work is grounded in the spiritual foundations of the collective heart, which invokes a power or grace that ultimately transcends not only gender difference, but cultural difference as well. The alchemy seems inevitably to produce its gold, regardless of the cultural setting. ➤

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*Without the God,
There is no Goddess,
Without the Goddess,
There is no God.
How sweet is their love!*

*Embracing each other,
They merge into One,
As darkness merges with the light
As the breaking of dawn.*

*When we discover their Unity
All words and all thoughts
Dissolve into silence . . .*

—FROM THE MYSTICAL POET JNANESWAR

In 2002, Satyana Institute introduced its gender reconciliation in India to a group of forty-two Indian Catholic priests and nuns. The eight-day event was held outside Bombay at the Sadhana Institute, a pastoral retreat center founded by Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello. Painful experiences of sexual abuse by priests were brought forward, coupled with denial and enabling complicity in the Church leadership, reflecting patterns similar to recent revelations in the Catholic Church in the United States. A backlash followed, led by a few priests against the nuns and other priests who brought these revelations to light. After a poignant confrontation, we worked through the ensuing difficulties and eventually reached a respectful and joyous resolution that brought deep learning for all. The power of gender to humble a community to its knees and then uplift it in grace was exquisitely demonstrated.

In autumn of 2005, the Satyana Institute will present a five-day intensive retreat on gender reconciliation in South Africa for an invited group of Members of Parliament and other senior government officials. Since

apartheid ended, the numbers of women in Parliament have radically increased, but the gender dynamics haven't changed, and women's voices and influence are still not well represented. Satyana's program is intended as part of a new initiative to support the implementation of gender equality in South African society. The country's new Constitution is remarkable in its guarantee of gender equality and justice to all citizens in its Bill of Rights, but gender awareness still lags far behind racial awareness. This work has grown out of our first South African program in 2003, in which we introduced gender reconciliation to a diverse group of thirty-two professionals in collaboration with the Quaker Peace Center in Cape Town. The racial mix in this group was two-thirds people of color and one-third whites, and the process unfolded in broadly familiar patterns.

A BLOSSOMING FLOWER

The gender crisis is ultimately a collective spiritual crisis, and thus a "higher" or "spiritual" dimension of consciousness is essential to transforming gender dynamics. Only on this level can the duality of opposites be resolved in a higher unity. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has said that the next Buddha will emerge not in the form of an individual, but in the form of a community of people living in loving-kindness and mindful awareness. Many contemporary spiritual leaders and mystics are making similar observations, and gender reconciliation is one of many strands of such community-level spiritual work that are now beginning to flower.



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