

Abstract

“Born From Silence”:

Theory and Strategy for Resistance and Justice Making

Arising from the Birth of Creative Power

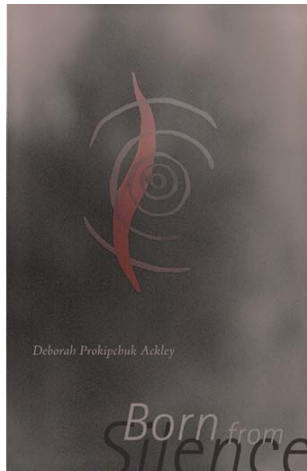
This paper explores the domains of spirituality, feminism, and activism through a feminist poststructuralist lens.

As I reflect on my acts of resistance and justice making in response to violence and injustice against one of my children, I ask these questions:

- How were my actions shaped by a woman-centered spirituality?
- Where does this “story behind the story” fit into the body of knowledge that critiques our culture and offers hopeful alternatives?

A subversive story was born from the spiritual-life process of dying into birth of new life; creative power, midwifed by my spiritual practices. Maternal consciousness, a fidelity to the “womb as first text”, cradled this transformational process. Writing this paper and claiming this “story behind the story” as knowledge, is one more act of resistance to the silence that harmed us all.

Maternal consciousness and creative power, I propose are necessary to animate feminism’s fourth wave dream.



“Born From Silence”:

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Arising from the Birth of Creative Power

Deborah Prokipchuk Ackley

In this paper, I explore the domains of spirituality, feminism, and activism through a feminist, post-structuralist lens of the “story behind the story” of writing a book of poetry and art. Post-structuralism opens up the concept of “text”, seeing all aspects of culture as a “discourse” that can be “read”. It seeks to create a discursive space; then offers up an alternative, subversive story. “*Born from Silence*” is my subversive story; it is my act of resistance to the brutal assault of our son Scott and the ensuing criminal justice system that harmed us all. This exploration reveals the integrative power; the creative power, that comes from a dying into birth of new life that I offer here as an alternative to coercive power or power over, which fuels the cycle of violence. Fidelity to “maternal consciousness” and the “womb as first text” informed my actions. This narrative behind the narrative is deeply feminist, deeply spiritual and deeply needed in our world today.

Fourth wave feminism advocates for both a gathering of the women in service of global issues, cultivating a spiritually based activism and at the same time cultivating a spiritual depth within. (Utne Reader, Mar-April 2005) The article also says “women are becoming increasingly clear and vocal about the need to integrate an emerging set of feminine-based values into the culture”. Integrating a set of values, I have come to learn after thirty years of trying to do just that in the world of work requires a deep transformational process. It therefore requires a

dying and letting be and the emergence of something new through birthing. It requires the death of a world view as well as a personal view. It does not start with political action but if done deeply enough arrives at qualitatively different political action from this deeper place. It is a life process; it is biological, spiritual, feminist, and cultural and if deep enough, it is cosmic or integral and it does result in redemption of power itself. For fourth wave feminism to realize its dream we need a “truly feminist, truly human theory of peacemaking, of justice making, that is based on a profound understanding of creative power.” (Leddy, *Redeeming Power*, 9) This paper outlines how this creative power came to life in me.

I take many meanings for my understanding of spirituality. It is our search for meaning, it is that breath of spirit that animates all life and “it is primarily about *reality*... to penetrate the illusions of the external world and to name its underlying truth”. (Palmer, *Leading from Within*, 4) Liberation theologian, Gutiérrez, calls spirituality “our method”. (McFague, 2001, 25)

Feminist spiritual teacher, Joan Chittister, defines feminism “as a way of seeing. It is a new world view. It is an attitude toward life. It sees the world as whole.” (Chittister, 1998, 5) She also says that “Feminism, in both women and men, implies a change of heart.” (ibid, 4) The foundational expression or rendering of a world view is a story; a story of the cosmos, the nation, the individual. Language has the social function whereby it creates, or recreates a world. In this paper I reveal the power, the “thinking heart” of language to render a new worldview and a new body and soul in me. I weave language from other writers because their words and images shaped the co-creation of what Parker Palmer calls my “truth in the round” (Palmer, 1990, 12) and locates my work in the existing body of knowledge.



The Tomb of Silence: Silence as Poison

At age 18, Scott was kicked unconscious by twelve to fifteen young men. The assailants kicked his head in repetitively. When a friend dragged Scott's body to a garage the beating continued on an unconscious and broken open

body. Scott was silenced; he had no memory of the beating past the first few hits. This silencing would render him an "unreliable witness" in court to his own assault. During the three and one half year journey through the criminal justice system, I witnessed the legal process silence the story systematically, by its particular brand of social construction of reality through the legal languaging and meaning making process that privileges masculine cognition. Only two of the fifteen young men were charged. One of those charged, was drafted by the NHL shortly after the assault. The system also silenced in the way it separates the parties. As former criminal lawyer Jeff Brown says in his book "*Soulshaping*", "[r]ather than a forum for justice, I saw a giant hate party predicated on the illusion of separateness." (Brown, 2007, 79) It silenced by the fact that the "harmed one" has no legal representation in the system. The Crown defends the state and the Defense defends the one charged. There is no one in Ontario law to speak for the harmed one directly (unlike French law that is a three

*And now the front door
has been blasted open
The terrible bloody reality
that struck you down, dear boy,
fills our house
A circle of terror
twelve, maybe fifteen
boys in madman bodies
another perversion of the sacred feminine co-opted
by the broken boys
of our elite.*

*No drug deal gone bad
No taking back a rightful piece of the pie
this time
This time
boys of privilege
turned on one of their own
like autoimmune disease.*

*Patriarchy built its house on
Honour among men
The house falls down on its chicken legs
Not a bad thing that...*

...

*You lay lifeless
and still they pounded.
The fighting machine
they had become
had no stopping device
like the other perversions
of a broken world
when more and more
silences enough is enough.*

(from "The Assault", ©Deborah Prokipchuk Ackley)

party system; and the harmed one is defended). When no one is convicted, there is no reading of an impact statement. No one hears the impact of the crime. Because our criminal justice system is about blame and punishment rather than restitution and reconciliation, truth is hard to come by. And so they got off. And when there is no conviction, the rules change; the parties are not sequestered at the Criminal Injuries Compensation hearing. After years of no relationship, to ask the parties then to face each other, in the absence of a conviction, is harmful.

All of this can be read as the systemic silencing of the feminine, whose value system gathers, brings the opposites together, coheres, relates, shows compassion and most of all sees the world as whole. Silence. It became a toxic poison that we were breathing daily. It held us in a kind of prison: a tomb of silence that made breathing and living a challenge. The incessant sound of silence was both the poison and then the redemptive medium, the sacred womb that would cradle the death and then the rebirth of my own soul, as well as contain and shape the creative power that emerged.

*Witness to the Crown
an empty, abstract term at best
You could not remember anything after that fifth kick
Testimony largely unreliable,
they said
They miss the mark.
To be witness to your own assault
The word cannot hold the reality of your burden
You, the harmed one,
now rendered invisible once more
this time in impudent, vacuous language.*

...

*And the words rise up from
my boot straps
Legalized assault
Evil of systemic injustice
Systemic evil.*

...

*No one turns to claim responsibility
And our system in its
legal posturing
Has forgotten how
to render justice.*

(from "The Trial"
©Deborah Prokipchuk Ackley)

Swallow what kills us

“And by a kind of heavenly homeopathy, we must swallow what killed us in order to come to life.” (Wink, 1998, 94) Wink suggests that we must “step out of one entire world, where violence is always the ultimate solution, into another world, where the spiral of violence is finally broken by those willing to absorb its impact with their own flesh.” (Wink, 1998, 96) Etty Hillesum wrote from a Nazi concentration camp, “Each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others.” (Monk Kidd, 2002, 116) These words took up space in me and renovated my soul. I studied the Third Way of Jesus and Gandhi’s work on non-violent resistance. Meditating on these words brought me from rational understanding to what Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, in her book *“The Wisdom Way of Knowing”*, calls “visionary seeing”. (p. 93)

I knew three things that anchored me in this time when killer rage ate my guts. I knew that I would face this with a commitment to nonviolence, or more precisely, peace. As Gandhi said, “there is no way to peace, peace is the way”. The other assumption that held me was that “choosing life is an act of resistance”. (Brennan and Leddy, class 2000) The third image that held me was *“Dancing with Sam”*; my image for what Maureen Murdock in her book *“The Heroine’s Journey”*, calls the “wounded masculine”, and the partnership with the masculine (rather than projection, blame, or assuming female advantage).

*It is not soft
this place
No black velvet
womb.*

*No, it is a
void
with
knife like edges
Daggers rip my throat
on the inside
Sabers slice my midlife uterus
Rivets pierce
my lips
sealed.*

*No words
no words
from me.*

...

*That silence
like frozen tears
stopped dead
in the lint trap
of a throat
I can
no longer warm
although it is summer.*

(from “Silence”
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Silence as Womb: Sacred Enclosure To Contain The Process Of Dying Into Birth

The multiple faces of silence as poison killed me. Female development involves: enclosure, magnification (or metamorphosis) and emergence. (Flinders, 1998, 156) This “silence as poison” sent me into the enclosure of a self-declared Sabbath, the deepest meaning of which is “release from bondage”. (Wink, 1998, 70) I left all my public work. I sat still in my chair in my office that overlooks my shade garden. I danced

sacred circle dances in a community of dancers. I joined an eco-spiritual faith community. I wrote in my journal. I cared for Scott’s emotional needs and the further crises that arose. I cared for my husband who had gone into heart failure after the police called to tell us that only two of the fifteen boys had been charged. I longed to, in the words of feminist theologian, Ivone Gebara “rest the earth I live on and the earth I am so that other things can be born”. (Gebara in Pilar Aquino & Fiorenza, 2000, 41) I knew I had to finally stop and let life find me again. Naively, I had never thought violence would come so close to me. I had learned to face death, indeed befriend death, but this deliberate act of inhumanity was something entirely different. I was having great trouble swallowing “this reality”.

My body, heart, and soul were broken open. My dreams stopped, but my body had its own story to tell. I trusted (after fifteen years of feminine reclamation work), what Canadian feminist and dancer Rachel Vigier calls “going to the body as the material and structure of knowledge [which] brings to the surface a maternal consciousness which is also developed through care of the body”. (Vigier, 1994, 27) Noah Richler claims that the land is the “first text”. I was “reading” the “body of mother” and specifically *the womb as the first text*, offering its wisdom back to my broken family and the culture. In this way it can be said that I began to re-inhabit my body. I began to accord

my own body with the wisdom that the birth of children had taught me, that bodies are sacred. Re-inhabiting my body meant to “sacrilize” my body and it is this embodied kind of spirituality that moved me into a particular kind of resistance to violence and evil. This sacred womb of silence gave place to what had to die. Dying is not new to the spiritual quest. What had to die in me was not just my psychological self, but my political and cultural self; what Walter Wink calls “dying to the Powers”. It involves dying to the “web of internalized social conventions, a tale spun by the Domination System that we take in as self definition. ...The unquestionably authentic religious experience of ‘rebirth’ often fails to issue in fundamentally changed lives because this social dimension of egocentricity is not addressed. Many South African Christians died to their privatized egos, but not to apartheid. Many North American Christians die to their privatized egos, but not to the arrogance of American imperialism. The dying to one’s ego can be just another false spirituality unless it involves dying to the Powers.” (Wink, 1998, 96)

This dying to the Powers for me held some real issues particular to women. Women are new entrants to the privilege of the “Powers”. It might seem too soon for women to die to power. “Dying to the powers” involved leaving my change management consulting practice, leaving the security of my financial independence and leaving the security of thinking I knew anything about how to work, to affect change in the world.

And then, surprisingly there was another layer of dying. This death was a dying to my anthropomorphic assumptions about life. “How big is your we?” I once read. My

Dis-associated protoplasm

I said I was

Nothing

no-thing

made sense

My past was broth.

I left every safe mooring

of my man made life

Apollonian foundations crumbled

like old Greek ruins.

(from “Born from Silence”

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feminine bias for inclusion was now growing into “we-consciousness” that included the entire cosmos and planet. This dying pierced the limits of my psychological and political sense of self; my autobiographical “narrative” if you will. And as Jean Houston says if, “You continue the story long enough, what happens? It becomes integral and spiritual. The treasure that you have found becomes a source of illumination. You have arrived and are accessible to all Story.” (Houston, 1997, 94) She continues to say “The shifting of perspective is critical, but it is more than a mere reframing of your story. It is a way of accessing an innate transforming metaphor that seems to rise from the entelechy of yourself, giving you the finest storyline available from the cauldron of possible stories. The gaining of the deeper story is a kind of grace when it comes up, and it can only be evoked, not fabricated.” (ibid, 109)

*You bring me hope.
Maybe
Maybe
the earth is a rose
and in her brokenness
her back breaking sorrow
from my neglect and defilement
Maybe
Maybe
if I kiss her at her centre
she will stand up tall
in love again.*

(from “Forgiveness: A True Story”
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Birth

While death is well established in spiritual and theological life, birth is relatively new to the discourse on spirituality. American feminist and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was one of the first to write about birth based and death based religions. She said they came from two fundamentally different attitudes: one arising out of the crises of male experience, one out of the crises of female experience. For man, historically as hunter and warrior, the pivotal experience is death, both as killer of animals and other humans and as one threatened by violent death himself. In contrast, she points out, the pivotal experience for woman is birth, and the basic concern is nurturing ongoing life.

She concluded that the main question for death based religion was “what is going to happen to me after I am dead?” A birth-based spirituality asks “what is to be done for the child who is born?” (Gilman, <http://www.library...>) Hannah Arendt also wrote that “with the birth of each new person, a whole new world comes into being.” (Leddy, *Redeeming Power*, p113) But generally, the field is sparse with wisdom arising from the experience of birth. This either-or approach died for me with the birthing of my first child who was born, lived and died in ten days. Birth, life and death; one continuum, not separate understandings. It is not one or the other; it is not even balance, as spiritual teacher Maria Harris suggests. It is about integration. The integrating force that comes out of death and birth taken together is creativity; in fact, it could be called *creative power*. It is this creative power that is the spiritual force that is required to meet the demand of our broken world and earth right now.



Creative Power: A Subversive Story Is Born

The image of a womb of silence as the sacred enclosure that allowed me to die safely to my old self and be born again held the still point where creative power could emerge. Rosemary Radford Ruether, referring biblically to the feminine images of God, tells us

“the root for the idea of compassion or mercy in Hebrew is *rechem*, or womb.”

(Monk Kidd, 2002, 146). My midlife womb was physically non productive but was giving birth to symbolic newness. Maternal consciousness was changing form and

*To choose life
to choose peace
when all around me
is a death wish
a world gone supernova
spiraling into a vast black hole
before it dies into that void
sparks of wisdom fly toward freedom.*

(from “The Dance of Becoming”
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function. Midlife seems to be a time of facing my failures with an open heart. It seems to be both a falling down and cracking open so that the heart is pierced. In this way, I have been *cultivating* failure; my complete inability to positively affect the process that my son had to live through, even though I had spent thirty years working for institutional reform, trying to bring humanist values to the work place. My powerlessness felt absolute. I died to all I had known. I lived in fear of what Scott's rage might turn him into. In this womb of silence, powerlessness and even surplus powerlessness became creative power; the redemption of power itself. The poetic words that were finally born through me liberated my soul. They fulfilled their creative potential in me and rose up to touch Scott; bearing witness to his reality. My hope is that the words will ripple out into the world to cradle the souls of others, the soul of our culture to fall down, crack open, die and be reborn. Creative power is ultimately an act of love.

I knew I did not want to write using professional language; psychological, legal, or bureaucratic. That, too, was part of my dying. Each of these linguistic domains would have constrained the story and colluded in the maintenance of the system. I was longing to find the expression that would break open the boundaries and render this story in its full spiritual and human dimension. As Renée Bondy writes, "When we set the cases of abuse...in the context and language of law, medicine or theology, the result is the same. In doing so, we are complicit in the preservation of longstanding patriarchal institution's power and privilege and whether intentionally or unintentionally, we contribute to the continuation of the abuse and oppression of women and children." (Catholic New Times,

*A voice no longer rooted in anger and rage
A voice that had
found the spaciousness
the freedom born from the dance
A voice of justice
A voice to uphold
the fidelity to the
demand of right relationship
A voice that could say
NO
and
Enough is Enough

And finally be heard.*

(from "Dancing Into Justice"
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In writing the subversive story, I used a language consistent with the intent. This is art and poetry's gift. As Alberto Manguel said in his recent Massey Lecture, "In ancient Anglo-Saxon, the word for poet was maker, a term that blends the meaning of weaving words with that of building the material world." (Manguel, 2007, 10) The book is written in the form of a collage. Collage is the French word that means "tray". The form of the book is essentially feminine in its representational style. The tray or collage holds a space for words, images, myths and poems laid out as a spiralling poetic dance. The chapter dividers are paradigm or worldview titles that create the boundaries of the "discursive space", in which the subversive story is placed. The book is rendered in shades of black, gray, ivory white and red; the alchemical colours of fairy tales. Fairy tales have served the cultural purpose of being the discourse at the edge of the dominant discourse. In this way "*Born from Silence*" shares with the genre of the fairy tale, this spatial placement to the culture: at the edge. This is the hope that this poetic, subversive story will reconstitute not just individuals, but the culture at large.

Poetry is meant to be spoken word; the told story. I invited family, friends, colleagues, people from the justice system and from restorative justice to gather and bear witness as I read in community and ritually gave the story back to Scott and the other young people harmed. My next act of resistance was to say "yes" to the offer to publish the book as an audio book. To my delight and surprise when I recorded the story, I found that my voice sounded a bit like a lullaby. Buddhist writer Gail Sher says that a "story cradles the psyche. Listening becomes a form of embrace. The French word *recit* ("the told story") carries a sense of the narrator's soothing voice." (Sher, 1999, 131) This delighted me, because I no longer want to fight for life and justice; I want to sing it into existence.

Writing poetry to share the story reshaped my cells, soul and birthed a new me. Its particular language birthed a body of work available to others and it birthed a poet. It also effectively killed off the old me and left me without any path into my old work, my connection to the paid work world. It was terrifying and yet liberating. Author Patricia Hampl says that poetry's power is its ability to reveal and that "in... lyric poetry... the real subject is consciousness in the light of history....to be witness, rather than story-teller". (Hampl, 1999, 100) As consummate witness Etty Hillesum wrote, "let me be the thinking heart of these barracks" (source unknown). This work of witnessing with a thinking-heart was my gift to Scott and the other young people harmed. I could not change what happened or affect the sorry state of our criminal justice system that harmed them and all of us but I could bear witness through this writing; to give back the reality of the lived experience as wholly as I could. Writing this paper and claiming this "story behind the story" as knowledge, is one more act of resistance to the silence that harmed us. This "sacred story" (ed. Beavis, Guillemin, Pell, 2008, 17) longs to find its "place" to take root; for its growth to be nurtured in the company of others.

The creative power born from a dying into birth of new life in the sacred womb of silence and a fidelity to maternal consciousness reconstituted my body, soul, mind, and heart and reshaped my work. This creative power can contribute in animating fourth wave feminism's dream into reality.

Life becoming new again on the looms of dreams,

Dare to dream little one.

That is the work of the real hero.

(from "Dream Ditty")

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Artwork rendered by Irek Sroka · All poems excerpted from the book "Born from Silence"