

INTRODUCTION



As a woman of spirit and faith, you know something important
about this moment in human history.

You know it from your rich experiences in the world,
and you know it from a place of deep wisdom within.

Your unique pattern of knowing is part of a larger pattern
of feminine wisdom
being called forth at this time in service of this Earth
and of humanity.

We invite you to join us on this journey as we explore the creative connections between women, spirituality, and transformative leadership. We invite you to come with curiosity into this living community of spiritual women, listening deeply as they share their personal stories of how their spiritual journeys have shaped and honed them as leaders, stories about breakdowns that were actually breakthroughs, stories of relationships with other women that were both affirming and challenging, and stories about local and global challenges that were faced with integrity and collaboration, candor and compassion. We do not offer answers to all of the complex questions facing us as a human family, but we invite you to join us as we surrender to the mystery of being open, present, and engaged together in these uncertain times.

Many of us are feeling called into this fluid and dynamic community of women guided by an inner knowing that it's time, discovering our shared passion for service to others and to this Earth, and inspired by our diverse spiritual practices and beliefs. We are finding our individual voices and we are weaving communities of connection so that we can listen to and learn

from one another. This self-organizing community—women of spirit and faith—is supported and sustained by a few simple shared understandings:

- We come together as women from diverse faith traditions and spiritual perspectives.
- All forms of spiritual expression are welcomed in this sacred space—prayers and songs, poetry and prose, words and silence, meditation and movement, reflection and action, solitude and community.
- We come with curiosity and deep respect for the values, voices, and beliefs of every woman.
- We are all leaders with valuable gifts that are urgently needed at this time.
- We are all invited to speak from our hearts and listen deeply when others speak.
- We individually make a commitment to self-care—to nurture ourselves with rest, nourishment, silence, movement, music, nature, laughter, or whatever else we need to feel fully present and prepared for the opportunities before us.
- We acknowledge that it may require courage to face our fears and show up fully for our Divine assignments at this crucial time ... and we surrender ourselves to this service.

We invite you to bring your leadership skills and deep spiritual wisdom to this community. We invite you to take a deep breath and simply *be* here as your authentic and full self.

In the Beginning

This book was born out of a deep curiosity about the current pattern of women's spiritual leadership in North America and profound excitement about the possibilities that lie before us as women of faith and spirit. It is our intention to offer a sacred space where the spiritual and faith-informed voices of diverse women can be heard and where the power of women's spiritual leadership can be explored, nurtured, and celebrated.

The four editors of this book—Kathe Schaaf, Kay Lindahl, Kathleen Hurty, and Reverend Guo Cheen—met at the Parliament of the World's

Religions in Melbourne, Australia, in December 2009. This Parliament was buzzing with feminine energy. People everywhere were talking about Earth-based spirituality, the Sacred Feminine, feminine principles, the full inclusion of women, women's leadership, and the critical global issues facing women and their children. Sprinkled liberally among the more than six thousand attendees were little pink buttons with the question, "What happens when women lead?" There was a full page of workshops listed under the program cluster

"Women in Leadership." One woman observed with surprise and delight, "The Sacred Feminine is the rock star of this Parliament!"

We four came from diverse segments of the spiritual community. Kathleen Hurty is the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, the wife of a Lutheran pastor, and a teaching fellow at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. She also worked

with the National Council of Churches and the Parliament of the World's Religions. Reverend Guo Cheen is an ordained Buddhist nun in the Mahayana Chan tradition and the founder of the Compassion Network. She has an interest in delivering inspiration via technology and a background in public administration and civil rights. Kay Lindahl is a pioneer in the interfaith movement and the founder of The Listening Center who describes herself as an "interfaith Christian" and teaches the sacred art of listening. Kathe Schaaf is a woman of spirit not currently affiliated with any religion, a follower of the Sacred Feminine. She has worked with numerous women's organizations using circle process and shared leadership models.

Our global experiences at the Parliament inspired us to learn more about women's spiritual leadership in our part of the world—North America. As we came together, we discovered:

"It seems to me that whereas power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power."

—**Mary Parker Follett**. Follett (1868–1933)

was an American social worker, management consultant, and pioneer in the fields of organizational theory and organizational behavior. She was one of two great female management gurus in the early days of classical management theory.

- Although there are currently many initiatives focusing on women's leadership, most do not put an emphasis on the spiritual needs and issues that are unique to women and that may indeed represent some of the most significant barriers to activating authentic leadership.
- The community of spiritual women in North America is a complex pattern of overlapping networks, initiatives, and impulses. Individual women are often strongly identified with a particular segment of the larger community: secular feminists, feminist theologians, spiritual activists, subtle activists, religious women, interfaith women, women of spirit not affiliated with religion, Earth-based spirituality, spiritual seekers, and others.
- Many women's organizations and networks are structured in traditional "masculine" ways using hierarchical leadership models and processes that may not invite the deepest feminine wisdom or effectively catalyze social change.
- Although there are many diverse initiatives and networks for spiritual and faith-oriented women, there exists at this moment a powerful opportunity to build a larger field of collaboration, passion, and action by building bridges of understanding to connect these diverse networks in a web of spiritual presence and active leadership toward global transformation.

The four of us created a new organization in 2010—Women of Spirit and Faith—with a commitment to core principles that model a different way of working: shared leadership, collaborative practices, circle processes, deep listening, mindfulness, and compassionate action. The organization exists to invite the many brilliant threads of feminine spiritual leadership into relationship and to support emerging patterns for transformation. Over a four-month period in 2010, we began by listening deeply to the voices of many women representing diverse spiritual perspectives through a series of conversations held as teleconference calls. The calls explored a series of questions, and the resulting conversations guided the emerging organization.

The next step was holding a retreat later that year for twenty-five women spiritual leaders from the United States and Canada. Leaders representing diversity of age, geography, ethnicity, spiritual orientation, and communities

of passion came together for three days of dialogue and inquiry focused on the potential for collaboration among the many organizations and networks represented. Questions were explored: What is it that wants to be birthed now? What are the possibilities that can flow from our shared wisdom?

This conversation expanded in April 2011 with a larger gathering, “The Alchemy of Our Spiritual Leadership: Women Redefining Power.” Our choice of the word *alchemy* was a bold acknowledgment of the mystery inherent in faith. We’ve discovered there are many layers of meaning in this word. The original meaning (a chemical process to turn lead into gold) has expanded and evolved over the course of history. The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung used the concept of alchemy in a psychological framework related to the process of individuation. Some religions use the word to describe a process of transformation and the acquiring of wisdom. Dictionary.com offers this definition: “any magical power or process of transmuting a common substance, usually of little value, into a substance of great value.” There is a sense of mystery wrapped around the word *alchemy*, an invitation to surrender to the unknown together and be changed.

More than 150 women from across the United States and Canada came together in San Francisco to experience many diverse expressions of spiritual leadership. A series of questions explored through circle dialogues invited the wisdom and experience of every woman present. As we inquired into our diversity, we discovered something powerful about our unity. Catholic and Buddhist nuns, indigenous wisdom keepers, Episcopal priests, Jewish and Muslim activists, Pagan priestesses, young feminists, Lutheran theologians, Hindu practitioners, Urantia Readers, Christian Scientists, New Thought ministers, lesbian clergy, Sikh filmmakers, interfaith leaders, and unaffiliated spiritual seekers came together to share their stories and to listen deeply to the stories of their sisters. Some of them were women of faith affiliated with a particular religion; others of them were women of spirit who live their spiritual lives in the spaces between organized religions, often blending spiritual traditions.

Through a series of honest conversations, they began to glimpse their common ground: Many women shared a sense of urgency about being of service to the planet at this time of uncertainty and transition. Many contributed creative ideas of ways to encourage the flourishing of the human

family. Many described feeling marginalized and undervalued as leaders in their workplace, churches, organizations, and communities. Many sought new models for leadership and success that valued the “softer” qualities of collaboration, cooperation, compassion, intuition, and emotional intelligence. The Alchemy gathering offered a lived experience of the Sacred Feminine as the grace and power of our collective feminine wisdom and passion transcended the boundaries of culture, ethnicity, religion, or age. This is a potent moment for women, a portal that has been opened by the turbulence of the world. The author John Shea writes in *Stories of God*, “When order crumbles, mystery rises.”¹ We welcome you, the reader, on a journey into the mystery and potential at the intersection of women, spirituality, and transformative leadership.

Words Matter

As we begin this journey, we acknowledge that this book is created with words. Most words used to describe leadership, power, and even the Divine are distorted by the patriarchal, dominator culture. We know that as women, we have a distinct way of relating in the world that is different from the way men relate. Current definitions of these concepts are often based on

male relationship models. As women, we have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to fit into—or even to master—that male model. But this has ultimately not served us as women, nor has it served the greater good. It has not helped us to bring forth our deepest feminine wisdom, and it has failed to create lasting change in the hierarchal systems and structures that threaten our future on this planet.

Words are powerful indeed, and it is important for women

“If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.”

—**Sojourner Truth.** This was the self-given name of Isabella Baumfree, an African American abolitionist and women’s rights activist. She was born into slavery, escaped, and became known for her extemporaneous speech on racial inequalities, “Ain’t I a Woman?” The speech was delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in Akron.

to reclaim the language of spiritual power, once again breathing balance, mutuality, and a respect for all of life into our human vocabulary. Let's begin with some fresh definitions of these terms.

Leadership. One of our favorite definitions of leadership comes from contemporary management philosopher Meg Wheatley: "A leader is anyone who is willing to help."² Women have been leaders in their families and communities throughout human history as they have done the often unpaid work of raising children, taking care of the elderly and sick, hospicing the dying, and sustaining their communities. Though their leadership skills have seldom been recognized, rewarded, or perceived as valuable by the dominator culture, these are precisely the skills the world needs today. Frances Hesselbein, president of the Leader to Leader Institute, defines leadership in her own terms and from her own experience: "Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do it."³ Women's ways of being in the world are honored as authentic approaches to leadership for transformation.

Power. We have observed that women are acutely uncomfortable with the word *power*, which has come to mean "power over" others, to subjugate, to manipulate, and to control. As we move into a new paradigm of "power with," imagine what might be different in the world if we could each become truly powerful on behalf of the greater good for all, if we understood the power to create change through cooperative action with others in partnership with Spirit, if we experienced power as the capacity to get the job done, in collaboration with others, for mutual benefit and the common good.

Success. The *Wall Street Journal* recently featured an article exposing the lack of "success" for women-owned businesses.⁴ The piece, titled "What's Holding Back Women Entrepreneurs?" defined success based only on fiscal measurements of growth and profit, even though the article quoted research showing that men and women have very different ideas of what it means to be successful. Men start businesses so they can be the "boss" and grow as big as possible, while women start their own businesses

so they can have a better balance of time with family and personal challenge in their work. A recent *New York Times* article found similar differences in the reasons why men and women run for public office; men want to win and see politics as a career move, while women are motivated to serve and make a difference on the issues.⁵ The bottom line: Women have a completely different bottom line. We argue that this is not a lack of success—just a different definition of it, one that may actually point us toward a more sustainable paradigm for the human family than the old “profit at all costs” definition.

Collaboration. Right now we are poised at an exciting moment of opportunity for discovering new models of collaboration and collective action—even though we may not yet know

exactly what these words mean. Along the way we have learned some things about what collaboration is *not*. It is *not* consensus—which often takes the passionate, brilliant ideas of the individuals in the group and runs them through some kind of homogenizing process to achieve an outcome that is not offensive to anyone (and no longer passionately alive for anyone either). Collaboration is *not* an exercise in subtle domination, wearing down the resistance of one’s peers with a stubborn refusal to

“My memory runs easily back to the time when, in all the modern world, there was not one well-equipped college or university open to women students, and when, in all the modern world, no woman had been ordained, or even acknowledged, as a preacher outside the denomination of Friends.”

—**Augusta Jane Chapin.** She was the second woman to be ordained as a Universalist minister, the first woman to serve on the Council of the Universalist General Convention, and the first woman ever to receive an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. She was an organizer of the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago and the only woman to present a session at the Parliament.

adjust one’s ideas or agenda. Rather, collaboration is a fluid process, open to synchronicity, collective wisdom, and divine guidance with no attachment to outcomes. Somehow collabo-

ration needs to keep all the brilliance and passion alive, to value the unique function of each cell of the organism, and to experiment with new ways the cells can function together more effectively, gracefully, and joyfully. Jeanie DeRousseau, founder of the Women's Learning Exchange, poses this excellent question in her collaborative newsletter *Allies for the Greater Good*: If we are one humanity evolving, how can we adjust our thinking and our projects just a little to be more precisely together?

Mentoring. An old model of mentoring is a one-way flow of experience and guidance from one more experienced person (the mentor) to another less-experienced person (the mentee). The new paradigm of mentoring recognizes that we all possess wisdom and unique life experiences, and we can all grow as leaders when we are in authentic relationships where there is mutuality and a two-way exchange of wisdom. Mentoring, as we see it, therefore is a reciprocal process of listening to and learning from each other. Mentoring happens in one-on-one relationships, but it also happens in women's circles and at potluck suppers and around the kitchen table whenever two or more are gathered. We all need support, validation, mirroring, and reflective listening to build confidence and stretch our leadership muscles; mentoring is any opportunity to offer and receive that nurturing.

Faith. Nothing is more important in these turbulent times than faith, we believe, and yet the current divisive public discourse seems to have hijacked this word too. The meaning of *faith* has been narrowed and given sharp edges, often used as a wedge to divide those who have the "right" kind of faith from those who do not. We have a more inclusive view, however. It is both traditional and progressive. Many women consider faith to be centered in community—a congregation, synagogue, mosque, or temple where people share a vision of the way God works in the world. Some women focus their religious practice within a specific faith community that is defined in part by creeds or sets of beliefs—that is, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist—and within each of these communities, there is diversity as well. For example, within Christianity there are Roman Catholics,

Lutherans, Methodists Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and others. But shared faith in God's divine presence, along with common rituals and practices, are at the core of communities of faith. We see faith as an amazing inclusive resource, available to everyone and absolutely essential for the tasks ahead. Faith is our assurance that there is a Divine plan of infinite love at work even in the most challenging moments, and that we are a part of that plan. Faith gives us the confidence to move ahead with vast visions in the face of enormous odds; it is an invitation to work in active partnership with the Divine in service of a better world.

Interfaith. At one time it was a radical idea to sit in dialogue with other people of diverse faiths, to learn about their spiritual traditions, and to develop personal relationships that transcended religious boundaries. In some parts of the world, it is still forbidden by law to do such a thing. This important work has unfolded over the past century and has yet to fully realize its enormous potential to transform the world. Since the Parliament gathering, we have witnessed an expansion of the concept of *interfaith*, as we intentionally began inviting women who don't define their beliefs by the word *faith* into the interfaith conversation. These women are deeply spiritual, although they may no longer be affiliated with a specific religion. The arms of the interfaith community have been opened wider, and the conversation is both richer and deeper as a result.

Names for the Divine. At the center of almost all spiritual paradigms is the concept of the Divine—whether it is called God, Creator, Allah, Jesus, Source, Holy Spirit, or any number of other names. We acknowledge that the dominant culture has defined God as masculine for centuries; many generations of our female ancestors have lived and died in a world where God is described entirely with masculine nouns and pronouns—Father, Son, He, His, and Him. How has this masculine language impacted women individually and collectively? Has it contributed to the subjugation and marginalization of women

around the world? Feminist theorist Mary Daly said, “If God is male, then the male is God.”⁶ Educator and author Jeanette Clancy has challenged this language directly with a slim volume titled *God Is Not Three Guys in the Sky*.⁷ Some of the women in this community challenge us to balance our language to make room in our spiritual paradigms for Mother, Daughter, She, and Her.

Grace. We have saved the definition of “grace” until last because it is both important and challenging. In a secular way, grace is often associated with certain qualities of the feminine; it communicates attributes of flowing movement, delicate features, and fragile beauty. In this context, “grace” has sometimes been used to confine women to stereotypically weak roles with an emphasis on physical attractiveness and less access to legitimate power and authority. When we explore “grace” in a spiritual dimension, it becomes a very strong word describing a direct personal experience with the power and love of the Divine. For some traditions, grace has always been there—within, without, and all about us—waiting for us to recover it in life’s simple, delightful moments. For others, grace means God’s love given generously with wild and wondrous abandon—to all. It isn’t earned; we may not feel it is always deserved. It is in the mystery of God’s amazing grace that strength and power are generated for justice. Openness to receiving that grace empowers women’s leadership. Divine grace can be the powerful spiritual wind beneath one’s wings. We are intrigued and excited by the intersection of these nuances of meaning: What leadership and service might women be inspired to bring to the world when they feel fully supported and connected with divine grace?

“When you have come to the edge of the light you know and are about to set off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen—there will be something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.”

—Barbara J. Winter

Where We Are Headed

This book is divided into four main explorations—questions that have made us pause and reflect, which have led us forward into new discoveries about women, spirituality, and transformative leadership. Each exploration has a short introduction followed by reflections from five or six women from diverse backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, religions, spiritual practices, and geographic locations. After each exploration is a “Living Our Leadership” section, which offers additional ways to continue your discovery:

Questions. We have generated a few questions that you might wish to use in conversations with other women, whether one-on-one, with two or three friends, or within a circle group or larger gathering. They are designed to support you in exploring new territory in all of your relationships.

Circle practices. We offer information about how to start a circle, what works, various types of circles, and some personal stories from women who participate in circles.

Blessings. This may be a poem, a prayer, a ceremony, or a simple quotation. We know the value of tuning in to the Divine, and these are some offerings for you to use and explore.

How women are leading. In these sections we offer examples of organizations where women have taken the initiative and are creating new ways of being leaders in their communities and in the world. This is a highly personal list and is not intended to be comprehensive in any way. We know there are many others also doing exemplary work. We invite you to send descriptions of them to us at womenofspiritandfaith@gmail.com to be posted on the resource list on our website, www.womenofspiritandfaith.org.

Leadership tools. Here is where we provide practices to support your leadership, ideas from women in leadership, as well as sources for further growth and development.



Between the four explorations are longer essays, drawn from keynote presentations at the Alchemy conference. Each one digs deeper into these questions and provides food for thought. There is also a rich resource sec-

tion at the end of the book, including a selected bibliography and lists of networks, organizations, and websites. We invite you to view this book as part of an ongoing conversation, where each of us is encouraged to contribute. Imagine that we are all in the same room, sitting in a circle, listening to each other's stories. There is a welcoming and sacred feeling to this space. We are excited about what we will hear from each other, and what we will learn about ourselves. We know we are already connected. Be prepared to be surprised, and let us know what you discover!

SOME THINGS I KNOW TO BE TRUE

There is something here
that feels like
a lovely gravity,
And it is pulling me.

Into alignment,
into resonance,
into a pattern,
whose complexity
I cannot begin to grasp
except in moments,
in lovely
holographic
bits.

And there are others
who have been pulled
into this stream of grace,
swimming with me.
Sweet arms,
strong against the current.
Some of them such familiar souls
from the ancient future sisterhood,
that my soul relaxes at the sight of them
and sings in Her earthy voice
“Oh my darling,
finally I have found you.”

The rules here are as complex
and as simple
as the pattern.

We must not merely survive,
but learn to celebrate,
the paradox,

the Both
and the And,
as it shows up moment to moment.

We come to serve, yet each to shine brilliantly.
We come to lead, yet no one of us leads.
We come to lead
by following.

(The clues have been left everywhere
for Her children
by the most compelling,
intelligent,
compassionate
Mother.)

This is what I know to be true:

We solve the mysteries
as we remember the code
as we laugh and stay in gratitude
as we surrender to the relationship
with the other
whose piece of the puzzle
perfectly fits
snuggled
against our own.

We must remember.
I must remember.

It has already been accomplished.

Though it will not
become visible
in a lived dimension
on this round planet
until the last seed has been planted,
until the final drops fill the wine sac,
until some magic number has been reached.

Until some magic number
of us
remember.
(We do not remember that number
exactly
but we know it in our bones.)

Our bones know
it has already been accomplished
in beauty.

Another paradox:
Each of us is profoundly important
yet I have no meaning
outside the context of the Whole.
Each of us is called to be
big
bold
beautiful
bountiful
bodacious
as smart as we can be
and only when we rise up
our fullest Self
can we fully surrender to the Whole.

And then there's life:
the children and the births,

the deaths,
the loved one ill,
the community fractured.
I must risk
leaving home,
to venture into a new land.

We must understand this:
There will be conversations.

There will be many conversations.
There will be resonant conversations,
fully wired with joy and recognition,
and there will be challenging conversations.
There will be times
when fear jumps into the electrical flow
and shorts out the entire system
for a moment.

I know this to be true:
It is all about the conversation.

And finally, there will be grace
wide rivers of it
flowing silver and turquoise,
glistening in the light.

The trick is
to trust the rivers.
I have to trust my bones,
and the story written there
and all the stories.

—Kathe Schaaf⁸

