

## INTRODUCTION

### Who Am I?

*I am a woman bound by tradition*

—Crouching Tiger

#### Excerpt from My Journal—

*Tonight I was so angry with my daughter. Addy just wasn't acting right. She whined, wouldn't say "yes, ma'am," "no ma'am." That child would not mind her manners. She was thinking only of herself. Selfish. That's it; she was being selfish. Very embarrassing. I should have more control. My parents certainly had control over me when I was her age. I knew how to act.*

*Upstairs in the bathroom, I turned her around to face me. I dropped down on my knees, gripped her shoulders, and looked her straight in the eyes. I really let her have it. "Addy Evans," I said at the end of my tirade, "you must always put others before yourself. Always!"*

*Then I gasped. This was the message I had spent years trying to overcome, the one I felt was the root of my own problems. I started laughing. And, then I started to cry.*

When I was younger, I often heard I was too loud, too pushy, and too dominant. Hardheaded. I grew up in Mississippi. In the South, pushy was not an esteemed quality in girls. Just look at Scarlett O'Hara...alone, unloved, with only her determination to rebuild her childhood home to sustain her. Desiring approval and love, I reached the conclusion I needed to be different; hardheaded was not a good thing.

I learned to keep my voice soft and my opinions to myself, since my opinions usually conflicted with the ones voiced around me.

I wasn't alone in absorbing this message.

Sela Ward, also from Mississippi, says in her book, *Homesick*, "I was the perfect young Southern woman: quiet, demure, feminine, seen and rarely heard. Polite. Proper. Never raised my voice. Never gave my parents a moment's trouble. Shied away from unpleasantness.

Strove to maintain that teeth-together-lips-apart ideal.” She, too, hid her true self.

In *You Own the Power*, Rosemary Altea explained the message she received while growing up: “Be quiet, wear a mask, stay in the shadows, keep a low profile, pretend to be somebody else.”

Donning my own mask, striving to be polite and proper, quiet and demure, I developed a modus operandi expressed by the following mantra: What will others think? I applied this question to each individual I met. My years of programming taught me to instinctively determine what other people needed or wanted from me. Since I had figured out being me wasn’t good enough, I would be whoever *you* (and you, and you, and you) wanted me to be. I took my programming even a step further. I would be just like you. It seemed to work. People liked me. They wanted to be with me.

Except when my new way of being backfired. With my real self tucked away, I ended up frustrated and angry. Buried anger doesn’t remain buried. In my adolescent years, Little Miss Nice disappeared, and Miss Naughty peeked out. My anger birthed a mean streak. Because I couldn’t articulate my feelings, I buried my true self much, much deeper. I came to hate the person I was. I was disgusted by my out-of-control behavior and figured that everyone else must be, too.

The turmoil took on a physical aspect. I battled stomach ailments and severe acne. During those ‘crazy’ years, I made at least one trip to the hospital due to a most severe spastic colon attack.

The stomach complications or spastic colon, and the acne plagued me into my thirties. And while I was able to clamp down on Miss Naughty as I grew older, I couldn’t quite make Miss Nice fit the same way any more. For the first fifteen years of my adulthood, even with a great husband and lots of opportunities, I was filled with a sadness and longing, and a hunger that pushed me to search without knowing what I was looking for. About all I knew was I didn’t want what I had grown up with. I wanted something different. Without a cultural precedence or role models, it was up to me to discover what that something was. Sue Monk Kidd, author of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, could have been speaking for me when she wrote, “When we start this journey, we discover a couple of things right away. First, the way is largely uncharted, and second, we’re all we’ve got.”

In the beginning of my own exploration, I imagined my discontent stemmed from my failure to find meaningful work. I

continued with my formal education, and began reading widely in the 'selecting the right career' field. My formal education, first psychology and then an MBA, gave me good skills, but none that translated into my right livelihood. I thought my dissatisfaction came from the lack of money and prestige. I couldn't find the job that met my financial needs or acknowledged the value of my abilities. My informal education helped me realize before I knew what I had to offer and what the world had to offer me, I needed to know myself. I had to go back for that self I had buried so many years ago. I had to recognize the messages that compelled me to deny that self, and learn a new language that would invite her to take her rightful place in the light.

Along the way, I had a baby. My daughter Addy presented me with even greater incentives. I needed to help provide for her financially, and I wanted to be with her as much as possible. It took me three years, but I finally made it happen. I became a stay-at-home mother with a part-time job. I was living the life I had *never* wanted to live. I was happier than I had ever been.

For the next two years, I earned my share of our family's income with home-based business ventures. But when Addy was old enough to go to school full-time, I was ready to follow my heart as I made my own way in the world. The trouble was I still didn't know what my heart wanted.

Then one night I had a lucid dream, a dream more like a vision, a dream so conscious I felt awake while I was dreaming.

*I was standing at the end of a narrow room with no furniture. The walls were covered in dark wood paneling and the floors were hardwood. A man walked in a doorway. He had black hair and a curly mustache. He was holding a book and held it up for me to see. I remember trying really hard to 'see' the title. I saw a plain book cover with nothing on it. The man's name was Bill. Bill then turned around to leave and before the door closed, I asked, "And who will write this book?" Bill turned to me and said, "You will."*

What book? In the beginning, I had no idea. I wanted to look at why I stumbled in the dark for so long, to look at how the messages I received from our culture, combined with my personality traits, created blocks where they should have provided steppingstones. All of my life I had felt alone in my search. I wanted to know if other women

experienced anything similar. Were most of us taught to wear masks, to express only conventional sentiments? Had we been taught to hide ourselves as effectively as women who were hidden beneath veils and sequestered behind palace walls? Were other women as isolated as I was?

Though I was uncertain what I was looking for, I began by returning home. I began to interview women from the culture I had grown up in for what I had begun to call my 'Gender Project.' Later, more than twenty college students assisted me in my interviews. And though women's experiences are varied, many had shared a lack of equilibrium similar to my own. Something was wrong, but I had no name for it. In addition to my interviews, I broadened my reading research. I had to know what taught women to hand over their voice, mind and body to somebody else's agenda.

After three years, through my reading, I discovered other women did have a name for my problem, our problem. They called it patriarchy, the male-dominated cultural rules that have been handed down generation after generation, probably since human beings have evolved. I had one more piece toward solving my puzzle.

But how does patriarchy transmit itself even as cultures rapidly change? Two more pieces were revealed through the voices of the women who came forth to speak to me—conditional love, and what I call 'Southern Rules,' the traditions of my subculture—the unique instructions that glorify Melanie Hamilton, the woman Scarlett viewed as her archrival, the gracious, beloved ideal of womanhood.

Why am I writing this book?

Sue Monk Kidd says, "If women don't tell our stories and utter our truths in order to chart ways into the sacred feminine experience, who will?"

*We are strong and face many hardships and crises. Why can't we figure out what really matters?*

—Lee, 41 years old

After four years, I was close to fulfilling the vision of my dream of a book. I had my own experience, plus the voices of women from ages thirty to a centenarian. Our perspective may have been Southern,

but our voices, our dilemmas, our struggles are echoed through countless books, countless experiences. In the past, perhaps patriarchy made sense. In order to perpetuate the species—and in our species, the young require long, protracted protection—somebody had to stay behind. If women were out hunting with the men, the lions could sneak in and gobble down the babies. But now women are asked to provide financial support, and it is time to look at the changes that have taken place in the world, and find new messages for women.

Sue Monk Kidd introduced me to the writings of Etty Hillesum, the Dutch woman who died at Auschwitz at age 29, but not before she recorded her own experiences, which still inform us today. “I shall have to solve my own problems,” Etty wrote as a young woman. “I always get the feeling that when I solve them for myself I shall have solved them for a thousand other women. For that very reason I must come to grips with myself.”

Many of the woman who were willing to speak out so we could come to grips with ourselves, weren’t willing to speak out in ways that might hurt their mothers or grandmothers, women who supported and nurtured them, women who transmitted cultural messages intended to keep their daughters safe. Therefore, I have invented Olivia, a composite for truths that need to be spoken, for no matter who said them, they are the truths that shape and are shaped by our culture. Only by looking at our collective truth can we see what we need to keep and what we need to change. Who is Olivia? Not me, nor any of the women who shared so generously with me. She is the voice of us all, speaking out from behind the mask we still feel compelled to wear.

As I neared the completion of my ‘Gender Project,’ I had yet another dream, showing me the next step.

I awoke in the middle of the night to a voice saying, “I had a dream. I wanted to be a Queen.”

Queen. Not Scarlett, the woman who was willing to fight to better her life and for her man, only to be rejected for her ambitious drive. Not Melanie, who was as good as she was beautiful, dutiful and demure. Not Cinderella, who, born as princess, sat in the ashes until a man rescued her,

Queen.

“Once upon a time there lived a king who had a daughter...”  
Thus begins so many fairy tales about women. The king is powerful. The daughter is beautiful. The good and beautiful mother, the late

queen, is usually dead. The stepmother, the current queen, is jealous and cruel. The daughter is endangered. Made to sit in the ashes until..., locked in towers until..., poisoned by apples until..., cursed by evil old women to sleep until...the Prince comes to save her. These stories aren't just relegated to old books with pictures of quaint maidens with flowing tresses picking their way through dark forests or Technicolor Disney™ movies. The Prince-saves-girl theme is the gist of every romantic movie and book ever made. It is our story, the story we are enchanted with as little girls. We know when we grow up, our prince will come, proving we are worthy of love, that we are as good as we are beautiful. And if he doesn't, oh disaster, that means we are the homely stepsisters, mean at heart and destined to live lonely, embittered, impoverished lives that no one is interested in. We know what it is to be princess, or not. But those stories don't provide us with a model for being a real Queen who isn't desperately wicked.

We *are* the stories we tell ourselves. A person who has a brain injury may have cognitive and physical handicaps, but will retain her core personality, unless the damage is done to a particular area in the Wernicke's area of the brain, the region where storytelling originates. Without the ability to tell stories, to fabricate her life, she loses the essence of who she is.

Now my dreams were giving a new story to tell to myself and to other women who were too old to be princesses, too caring to be wicked, and too vital to be dead. We could be Queens.

Queen. Not Scarlett. Not Melanie. And not Sleeping Beauty who, born as Princess, had to dream for a hundred years until a man woke her with a kiss.

But to invent that story, I had to look back first, to look at the stories that gave the King all the power, and placed the vulnerable, waiting-to-be rescued Princess as the heroine in women's lives. Only then could I begin a story that said, "Once upon a time there lived a powerful Queen...."

When I look at my daughter, Addy, I see in her the woman she will become. She will have questions, yes. She will stumble and think she cannot find her way at times. But I want her to grow up without having to hide her true identity. I want her to grow up without a mask.

So, following my vision of so many years ago, I wrote the book. I wrote it for myself, to 'come to grips with myself.' I wrote it for the women who, like me, buried their essence even while they worked the

best they could for the best of others. I wrote it for our mothers and for our grandmothers. I wrote it for Addy, and for the children to come.

I wrote it because it feels good to be a Queen.

Here's to trading your mask for a tiara. May you wear it every day?

*The daughters of your daughters of your daughters are likely to remember you, and most importantly, follow in your tracks.*

—Clarrisa Pinkola Estés

**Chapter One**  
**I Had a Dream...I Wanted to Be A Queen**

**The drama is this. We came as infants “trailing clouds of glory,” arriving from the farthest reaches of the universe, bringing with us appetites well preserved from our mammal inheritance, spontaneities wonderfully preserved from our 150,000 years of tree life, angers well preserved from our 5,000 years of tribal life—in short with our 360 degree radiance—and we offered this gift to our parents. They didn’t want it. They wanted a nice girl or a nice boy. That’s the first act of the drama.**

—Robert Bly

Second grade. Our teacher is telling us about a play. Our parents will come to see it. I love plays! The teacher reads this one to us. She explains each part. I know immediately what part is just right for me. I want to be Queen!

“Mama, I’m gonna be Queen!” I say when I get home.

“You are?” Mama smiles. “That’s wonderful.”

“Don’t we have a Queen dress?” My younger sister had been a palace maiden in her play. Her dress could be made into the perfect Queen dress. If I have a Queen dress, Mrs. Ousley will surely know I should be the Queen.

The day of the audition I wait till it’s my turn. Afterwards, I march up to Mrs. Ousley’s desk. “I should be Queen,” I say. “I’ve been in lots of plays.” I tell her about all of them. I don’t leave one out. “I can memorize the lines. I memorize good.” Then I tell her the most important part. “I’ve got the best Queen dress.”

Mrs. Ousley nods. She tells me to go back to my desk.

I am going to be Queen.

All week at home, I am Queen. I make up lines. I perform for my sister and the dolls. I am Queen. I wear a tiara whenever I can, even to eat and sleep. Yes, I am Queen.

Mrs. Ousley announces the parts on Friday. Each child will have one. We listen for ours. She calls out lots of parts. Finally she gets to mine. “The Queen will be,” she says...“Folly Ann.”

Folly Ann? My best friend? But she is all wrong for Queen.

I almost don't hear Mrs. Ousley call my name. "Allyn will play the fairy godmother," she says.

I nearly cry when I talk to Mrs. Ousley later. "I thought I was Queen. Folly Ann is too quiet and shy to be Queen."

"That's why Folly Ann needs to be Queen." She says. "You've already got enough self-confidence for all of us."

I cry when I get home to Mama. "I want to be Queen. I want to be Queen."

Mama holds me. She can't help me. I want to be Queen, and they won't let me.

### **The Wrong Lesson**

Mrs. Ousley promised when I was older, I would understand why Folly Ann needed to be Queen instead of me. Now, as an adult, I do understand. But I'm afraid when I was seven I learned a lesson Mrs. Ousley never intended. I learned quiet little girls got noticed. I learned noisy, bossy, confident little girls got second best. Somehow, I figured if you let people know how badly you wanted something, they would give it to someone else. I learned the Bible was wrong. My lesson was, "Ask and you sure won't receive." I learned the way for a girl to get ahead in the world was to squelch her confidence, push away her assertiveness, and manipulate others. I decided if being quiet was what they wanted, then I would try my darndest to give them quiet. I couldn't be Queen, so I picked up my mask.

### **Before the Mask**

*I had a happy childhood and then you face problems later on and you wonder why...you think, "I had a happy childhood, why is this happening?"*

—Martha, 58 years old

Very early in my life, I didn't see much difference in being a boy or a girl. I loved Barbies. I had dolls and dress-up clothes, and of course, my very own tiara, but I liked playing with boys, too. I held my own in neighborhood athletics. The boys never out-matched me, and always included me in any rough and tumble play.

Under five, young boys and girls in many families bathed together. Mine was no exception, and one of my bath buddies was a boy cousin about my age. I knew he was a little different, and realized adults were, too. I didn't give it much thought until my mother explained the 'difference' to me when I was four.

At that age I loved wrestling. The little boy from next door and I would wrestle every day in the front yard. Even though we had never heard about the Worldwide Wrestling Foundation, we knew a lot about fighting, no holds barred. We barreled around the yard kicking, grabbing, and rolling. Momma was *not* pleased, and often intervened. More than once she told me I shouldn't kick little boys *down there*, but it was too effective a technique when I was in a tight spot and a boy had no intention of giving me any quarter.

Except for that little 'difference,' which was to my advantage, I didn't see any big disparity between the boys and me until first grade. One kid insisted we all play army, and was bully enough to get almost everybody to join in. In his little world, boys were soldiers and girls were nurses. Even at the ripe old age of six those rules irritated me, so I never played. It probably was a good thing, because the temptation to kick him you-know-where was mighty strong.

Even though gender divisions had begun by first grade, I stayed one of the guys until the boyfriend issue emerged. After that my girl/boy interactions deteriorated into awkwardness and confusion.

*We saw a lot of our cousins. The one closest to my age was a boy, and he was my best friend. We played all the time with each other. I figured when we got too old to play, we would get married. One year another cousin our age from up North came for his yearly visit. I usually liked him. The guys asked me to get something from the house, and when I came out they were on one side of a bush. Every time I tried to join them, they went to the other side. They kept pointing at me and saying, "Opposite sex. Opposite sex." I didn't know what that was, so I yelled, "Insects. Insects." The cousin from up North threw leaves in my face, then took my best friend with him and left me behind.*

—Donna, 55 years old

## **Portents and Warnings**

Picture me at five-years-old. Towheaded, with black, round eyes that barely open. Happy. If you had come by my house, you would have seen me giggling and bouncy, playing Barbies in the house, or giving 'what-for' to the boys in the yard outside. I felt as special as my parents told me I was. That's how I remember me by day; but even at five, dreams terrified me, three reoccurring ones I can describe in detail thirty-five years later: The Worm, Go-Fish, The Hallway.

### **Night Terrors**

"I'm cold," I say. I hug my stuffed koala bear, and pull my comfy blanket tight.

"I'm cold." Shivering, I burrow deeper in the covers. It makes no difference. The night will soon find me.

I grab My Koala Bear and tell her my plan. "I'll keep my eyes open. If my eyes are open, the 'mares can't come."

They find me anyway. Some nights it's all three. Tonight it's only the Worms.

I am placed in a room with other people. The door is locked. The room is sterile and white. I watch. People begin rolling on the floor. They roll and rock, and slowly they turn into worms. I know if they touch me, I will turn into a worm. I stay far away from them, but as each person turns into a worm the space gets smaller. Smaller and smaller and smaller until a worm bumps me. I fall down and begin rolling on the floor with all the others. I am a worm.

"Mama, mama." I am screaming. I can't move. I scream and scream and scream.

"Mama is here." I finally hear her voice. "Allyn. Mama is here." Mama crawls in my bed. I am sweating. My screams taper off into crying, then whimpering. Mama strokes my face. She is still there, holding me, when I fall asleep.

In the Hallway dream, I am in the middle of a narrow hallway, which shrinks while I stay my normal size. I try to reach a far door as the hall squeezes down around me. In Go-Fish, I play a card game with three burly men. Men I did not know. Men like Brutus from *Popeye*. The men have raven black bristly hair, scraggly beards, and tattoos. They drink beer and smoke fat cigars. They snarl and laugh. The laugh sounds as awful as the snarl, loud and cruel. They will win the *game*;

they always do, and take great pleasure while doing it. And when I lose—always I lose—they pick me up, bustle me to the entrance of a long, winding slide. It's dark. I can't see where it goes. They are laughing like they are still winning when they push me. I plunge down the slide into the dark. I am screaming.

Dreams are personal, and can only be accurately interpreted by the dreamer. Most dreams involve symbolism—sometimes symbols we don't consciously understand. When, as an adult, I began my search for the right livelihood, which ultimately became a search for myself, I remembered these early dreams in minute detail, and the symbolism seemed very clear to me. These dreams were the harbingers of a momentous change that, at five, I would soon have to face. Very soon, who I was would no longer match with what I was expected to be. Even at that early age, I could hear the message. The dreams were the messengers.

I don't know who sent the messengers. My parents did everything they knew to provide us with a safe and loving childhood. My father worked hard to make sure we felt no lack, and still found time to let me know how special I was in his eyes. He was proud of us and we were proud of him. My mother gave us much time to play independently. She also engaged us in activities for enrichment and learning, while making sure we had lots of fun. We painted, crafted, cooked, and played. We sang together. I loved singing.

Our family did not seem to have the conflicts some other families experienced. My parents disciplined us firmly, but they never overstepped. Our family included loving grandmothers, boisterous and interested aunts, uncles and cousins who gathered whenever they could. Mother and Daddy felt a commitment to the greater community. They enjoyed participation in the neighborhood, and church and civic organizations, so our extended family included not only blood relatives, but also, everywhere we went, supportive people who knew us by name. We belonged. We fit.

Still, the messengers came. Dar Williams captures this process in her song, *When I Was a Boy*. The adult of the song remembers the exuberant bravery of herself in the Never Never land of childhood. As a child she was fearless, rough and tumble, grass-stained. She rode her bike without a shirt, climbed trees, could almost fly. She could do all the things boys could do. The trappings she added to be attractive as a

woman seemed like a loss to her, and she tells the man she's with he has won, and she has lost. The man portrayed in the lyrics counters by telling her no, when he was young he could talk with his mom, love flowers, cry... 'when I was a girl.'

So we begin this life as children with a difference, which might only be noticed when we're naked together in a tub. And hormones happen, yes, estrogen and testosterone, so we are girls and boys. But society has to teach us how to be the men and women it wants us to be. Unfortunately for women, the same confidence and exuberance that made us good boys is also necessary to make us good queens—the very qualities that make us not so very acceptable princesses. It's no wonder by the time we are good and grown, we also feel bad and lost.

How does society transmit its messages my dreams tried to interpret for me? What are we told, why do we accept it? What did I absorb that made me trade my exuberance in on a bid for approval? When did I bury my tiara in the back of the closet and forget it?

## Chapter Two The Half Unconscious Queen

**The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act.**

—Stanley Milgram

Stanley Milgram, author of *Obedience to Authority*, conducted one of the most well-known and controversial experiments exploring the power of authority. He originally postulated that a flaw in German psychology caused the general population in Germany to support Hitler, allowing so many ordinary people to help implement the Holocaust. To prove this effect he conducted 'obedience experiments' at Yale from 1961 to 1962.

Individuals were recruited for \$4.50 an hour to spend time taking part in a fake psychology experiment concerning learning. A 'scientist' instructed the individual, who was designated as the 'teacher,' to read lists of two word pairs to a 'learner,' who was supposed to recite them back. Each time the 'learner' answered incorrectly, the 'teacher' was to administer shocks to a 'learner.' The shocks were increased in 15-volt increments, ranging from mild to dangerously severe, with the last two settings merely labeled a menacing XXX. The teachers were told to ignore the learner's response or reactions to pain.

There were many factors in the experiment. Yale was prestigious. The scientist was formidable and dressed in sterile white. The role of teacher and learner was supposedly drawn by lots. The learner was friendly and pleasant.

It was all rigged, of course, and such experiments would not be permitted today. The scientist and the learner were actors, albeit good ones. The shocks were bogus.

Milgram was surprised to discover even though 'teachers,' ordinary people who represented the working, managerial and professional classes, were often tense or worried, none of them, men and the one woman, stopped before reaching 300 volts, and 65% used up to 450 volts to punish the learners. Some teachers worried about who was responsible, but, once assured the scientist accepted full responsibility, continued to administer shocks.

Follow-up experiments by Milgram and others replicated the results, though Milgram found 'teachers' were less obedient when the instructions were transmitted by telephone rather than in person. Women, who were included in greater numbers in the following experiments, often were more empathetic, nervous and concerned, but they proved to be just as efficient as men in following the instructions.

Milgram's experiments indicated people, even with grave misgivings, are programmed to follow the dictates of authority though the benefits of those dictates are not evident and may even appear harmful.

Who has more authority over a small child than the child's parents? Children soak up the pronouncements their parents deliver, instructions designed to influence the rest of their lives. The instructions parents transmit are received from their parents, who received them from their parents, and thus the basic tenets of a culture are passed from generation to generation. Cultural expectations create the 'situation' from which we determine our 'actions.' Cultural authority rather than 'the kind of person' we are determines what we choose to do. These messages, in essence our culture, are often so pervasive it is difficult to isolate particular beliefs in order to examine them to see if they are beneficial or harmful.

Some cultural imperatives are fairly silly and appear to be harmless. Never wear white before Memorial Day or after Labor Day. The only correct dressing for chicken or turkey is cornbread. And it's dressing, not stuffing. For a young woman's engagement photo, she should wear something dark and a single strand of pearls, and her fiancé

should *not* appear in the picture. Age before beauty. Don't put your elbows on the table or talk with your mouth full. These rules have a distinctly Southern flavor. Some of them have fallen out of favor. But I guarantee if you know the rule, you will be aware of it even if you don't follow it. When you quit following it, you might feel uneasy for years, for you've left the familiar path. In times of stress, you might feel guilty for not adhering to a childhood rule, even though you disagreed with it when you were a child, and still disagree with it as an adult.

By first grade we are well on our way to incorporating all three roles from Milgram's obedience experiment: We become the scientist with a prescribed list of instructions, adding more as we become aware of them. We are the learner, constantly testing ourselves against the scientist's infallible list. And we assume the role of teacher, and administer moral shocks to ourselves when we feel we are lacking. The difference is our shocks really do hurt. Even if our messages instruct us to act in a way harmful to our essential nature, we administer the shock—tense, worried, nervous, but still we administer the shock. In such cases we can't win. If we don't accept the 'correct' answer, we punish ourselves. If we do give the answer that doesn't require punishment, we betray ourselves. Either way we will exhibit the signs of conflict: sorrow, anger, worry, depression.

When we leave the realm of table manners and appropriate dress, we enter the darker, more confusing area of identity. What does it mean to be a woman in our culture?

Who doesn't know the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, the young Princess who, having been cursed by an aggrieved fairy, pricked her finger on a spindle and fell asleep for one hundred years, until her prince awakened her with a kiss? Why do so many young girls, full of the enthusiastic piracy of Never Land and with enough verve to declare themselves queen, suddenly fall asleep, and even when kissed by a prince, remain sorrowful and lost? Are our cultural messages the spindle we prick ourselves on? Where do those messages come from, and what is the curse that makes us fall asleep to our essential uniqueness?

### **The King's Unambiguous Wife**

**Like the sandman from the nursery tale who stole into children's rooms and put them to sleep by sprinkling sleep dust over them, our culture...has helped anesthetize the feminine spirit.**

—Sue Monk Kidd

In my studies during my own ‘lost’ years, I came across a term that I had heard before, but meant nothing to me until I was ready to recognize it. At that moment, literally, a light came on and I realized what it meant to live as a woman in a male-dominated culture, a cultural bias that had been in effect for thousands and thousands of years. In Anthropology circles you might hear it labeled as an Andrarchy—rulership by men. Current self-help and feminist writings label it patriarchy.

Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* states that many people confuse the limited, traditional meaning of patriarchy—a law giving male heads of household absolute legal and economic power over male and female dependents—with a broader definition, but one that still fails to accurately describe reality. Gerda says, for her, patriarchy “implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources.”

Author Michele Barrett says, “Patriarchy referred to a particular form of household organization in which the father dominated other members of an extended kinship network and controlled the economic production of the household.”

For my purposes and for lack of a better term, I will also use the term ‘patriarchy’ to make my point. In the purest sense and to make my point, *patriarchy* is defined as a system of social organization in which descent and succession are traced through the male line. To more clearly state the meaning I am intending, *patriarchy* describes our social chain of command—a system that puts men at the top of the hierarchy and women in a secondary position.

### **Dream Excerpted from My Journal**

*I was at an arena. I recognized neither place nor players. Men and women comprised the competing teams. At the start of the competition each team disrobed. Women got down on all fours. The men mounted the women as if they were horses. The women ran laps around the track with the men on their backs.*

For a long time I thought of myself as an independent woman—one who didn't fit the traditional role played by women. I did what I wanted when I wanted to do it. I never asked my husband's permission for anything. I wasn't 'that' kind of woman. I called the shots.

While reading Sue Monk Kidd's *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, I realized I wasn't seeing clearly—in fact, I did cater to male authority. But the most important revelation was realizing I had not recognized this source of my confusion and pain. I had not known I was testing myself against the rules established by patriarchal thinking, and always punishing myself for choosing the wrong 'answer.' When Kidd revealed she "behaved in seemingly independent ways, but inside...was still caught in the daughterhood," I realized she was describing me. Meaning, I always second-guessed myself and constantly criticized my actions and words. I altered myself to play a part—the good, strong girl. Without the ability to rely on myself or to stop the onslaught of self-doubt, I was afraid to move, afraid to ponder, afraid to live. My desire to please shaped all my actions. I was proud of myself for not acting like a woman—whatever I thought that meant. I was pleased that although not a woman's woman, I was also not a tyrannical, angry bitch. I had meshed the soft, demure feminine side with some respectable masculine traits, and what I had created was an *unambiguous* woman cowering to a patriarchal society.

The idea of the unambiguous woman was first introduced by Deborah Cameron, and further explored by such writers as Carolyn Heilbrun and Sue Monk Kidd. In Heilbrun's interpretation, the unambiguous woman places the needs of others, particularly her husband's, before herself. In *Writing a Woman's Life* she asks, "What does it mean to be unambiguously a woman?" Then she answers, "It means to put a man at the center of one's life and to allow to occur what honors his prime position. One's desires and quests are always secondary." She is the woman who has accepted her secondary status in the patriarchal society. Emily Dickinson in *Love's Baptism* calls such a woman a half unconscious queen. Kidd defines *husband* as "male authority itself, the cultural father or the collective rule of men in general." In my case, it was the collective rule, or rather, the notion of male authority dictated by the culture I had grown up in. The ambiguous woman, on the other hand, feels she has as much an authority in her own life as man has in his. People, including the woman herself, don't know

how to react to an ambiguous woman. There are no cultural precedents for a woman who does not stay within the familiar boundaries.

When I examine the aspects of patriarchy that formed our culture for centuries, refined by the particular culture that indoctrinated me—the South of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century—I am reminded of the story of how mighty circus elephants are trained: shackled as infants, they cannot break their chains. By the time they are adults, chains only strong enough to restrain infants will keep them in captivity, because they no longer believe they can escape. My experiences and those of other women might make some of the more common actions of patriarchy seem harmless and easily dismissed, but remember, these are merely symptoms of an underlying thought process, which formed all the rules of our behavior. We can ignore those rules if we wish, but if we are not conscious of them as rules, we will always feel as though we have given the wrong answer, remember Milgram? Then before we know it we feel the jolt of mental punishment.

Among the women I interviewed, most of those over the age of sixty-five remembered being made to wear dresses for all activities—even while playing. Many claimed they played “just like the boys, but in a dress.” One woman said, “We played domestic games, so the fact that I couldn’t wear shorts or pants didn’t hinder my play.” Women born ten years later grew up allowed to wear shorts, jeans, pants and t-shirts, but for playing only. Wearing shorts or pants while shopping was construed as ill mannered and provocative. As late as 1968 women could not wear pants to classes at Delta State University. “If it snowed, we had to call the Dean of Women to see if she thought it was cold enough to give women permission to wear slacks,” one woman said. “The next year the rules changed.”

She also said women couldn’t smoke in public, but men could. And men had no dorm curfew, but women did.

Even though dress codes have drastically changed and smoking in public is almost universally prohibited for everyone, forty years is not that long ago. The mind-set that established these particular rules excusing men while applying restrictions to women has *not* disappeared, even if some of the superficial trimmings have changed.

And not all of the trimmings have changed. One subject said, “The television confirmed what I suspected all along. Women were supposed to clean and serve. Men were supposed to have fun.”

In my interviews with various women, the question about domestic responsibilities provided dramatic answers concerning a patriarchal informed society. Most of the women interviewed claimed as children they were responsible for household chores, while their brothers did the 'farm' work or no chores at all. Many of the women in the over-sixty-age group toiled long hours—to help gather the cotton, work the fields or manage the house. Only in those circumstances, when the family's livelihood depended on it, did the women venture out into the world of men. A native of Arkansas explained, "The girls had to do the inside chores like laundry, cooking and housecleaning. The boys did anything outside the house such as yard work. But, we all worked in the fields—chopping and picking cotton."

A fifty-three-year-old woman said, "We did the inside chores. My brother's job was to take out the trash. He only had to do one job—take out the trash." Another told me, "I was encouraged to spend time in the kitchen, but I really didn't like it. I knew how to clean up real well. I sure didn't care about doing that on a regular basis." A forty-seven-year-old woman explained, "We all had to share in the household chores before we could go outside and play. When my little brother got older, though, he was only required to take out the garbage." A fifty-five-year-old subject said, "I was assigned the cooking and the cleaning. My brothers didn't have to do anything." A woman born in 1928 said, "My chores were inside the house. My brothers had to feed the pigs, cows and horses. I had to wash dishes, help mother in the kitchen and take care of my father and brothers."

"When girls got old enough they helped put the food out and clean up at big family gatherings," one woman said. "The boys sat around with the men or played. One year we staged a revolt and hauled boys into the kitchen to help wash, but everybody knew it was a game, and it didn't last. In the privacy of our homes, men sometimes helped with dishes, babies, even housework—never in public, though."

Another woman said after about an hour of cleaning the kitchen after the big holiday meal at her in-laws, her young brother-in-law came in for a drink. "'At least let us finish this round,' she said. 'At least I didn't ask you to bring it to me,' he told me. The sad part is that he really thought he was being helpful."

As I was growing up whenever groups of people got together for celebrations or fun, it seemed that the men always enjoyed themselves more than the women. Men watched the big game, ate hors d'oeuvres,

and drank beer while women cooked, cleaned and served. As often as possible, I angled ways to escape the kitchen, which meant joining the men in the den as long as I dared. No matter, doing so left me angry and frustrated because being good meant missing out on the fun, but not helping made me feel bad.

A twenty something subject shared another perspective, “I didn’t find a place in either world. To me, hanging out with the men wasn’t fun, either. Because being a girl, I wasn’t as schooled in football lore, politics, or economics. I ended up feeling stupid. I didn’t like the stereotypical expectations for me, but I didn’t have the tools to cut it with ‘the men’. Culturally speaking, girls weren’t taught how to talk about these things.”

*I tried to be different than my mother.*

—Jan, 54 years old

*We would go to see my aunt and her family in Louisiana. We were horrified. We had chores, but my male cousin would go off and play ball and his sisters would have to cook his meals and clean up his plate afterward. That would make me so mad for them. I felt like it wasn’t fair.*

—Kathryn, 52 years old

As a child I thought there was one place for men and another for women. Women stayed home with the kids. They were housewives, and were primarily responsible for anything related to household and the children. If a woman worked, it seemed she was a teacher, a nurse, or a secretary, job reserved strictly for women that paid women’s salaries. The man, the husband, was the breadwinner. He also had more apparent leisure time, and more fun things to do in it.

To me, men’s voices were more powerful. What they had to say was more interesting. Many women seemed to be as frustrated and angry as I felt. According to the way I viewed life, they had put all their eggs in one basket. If this marriage didn’t work out, what the hell were they going to do? I envied the men who benefited from the domestic heroics of women, but I was mad at them, too. In my youthful arrogance, I thought I had diagnosed what was wrong with the world around me, and I wanted no part of it.

*That's where I feel shortsighted. My parents never said, "Girls can be anything they want to be when they grow up." They never encouraged me. There was always this expectation that you grow up and get married.*

—Olivia, 55 years old

*Getting married and having children was what was expected. It was not what I would say I wanted. It was expected. That was what life was like growing up in the south.*

—Diane, 56 years old

Many women not much older than I could not imagine a destiny other than marriage. I, also, understood women needed to master home management so men and children could thrive. But both of my parents encouraged me to shoot for the stars, and they provided me with many opportunities to ensure I had the skills to do so. By the time I was ready to begin my adult life, the social milieu had drastically changed. By then most women I knew were planning on careers in addition to families, and not necessarily in traditionally women's fields.

**On an historical level, we were part of what some social scientists have called the 'sandwich generation', caught between the traditional families in which we were incubated and the equal-opportunity world into which we hatched, wide-eyed and expectant.**

—Susan Maushart

There I was, wide eyed and expectant, sure the stars were mine, and well aware of what I was *not* going to be. What I failed to take into account was the power of authority that had imbued the culture I had grown up in. If there was a man between the stars and me, even if I was right and he was wrong, I was still wrong. Zap. Turn up the voltage. While intellectually I understood men did not rule the world, emotionally I was still trapped in the kingdom of my birth. So deep down, no matter how much I spoke out or postured otherwise, according to my interpretation of my cultural code, if men weren't the authority, who was? Nobody ever acknowledged my authority. Self-confident little girls will never be Queen.

My childhood nightmare of Go-Fish finally made sense. I wanted to have all the fun and sense of a huge presence in the world I thought men had, but believed if I dared join the game, their exaggerated masculinity and overwhelming power ensured I would always lose. I had accepted the chains of my belief as well as any little performing circus elephant.

To succeed meant the foundations that nurtured me, sustained me, and infuriated me had to crumble. And without foundations, no matter what I did, how successful I might seem, I was actually spiraling downward in a free fall with nothing to hold on to.