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Epistemology or Bust: A Maternal Feminist Knowledge of Knowing*

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In a much discussed book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule document women's struggles to find voice in educational contexts dominated by men.¹ Women must traverse serious social hurdles in the development of their minds. Confident at age eleven, confused by sixteen, girls "go underground." In Carol Gilligan's words, "they start saying, 'I don't know. I don't know. I don't know'"; they begin not knowing what they had known in response to a culture that sends the message "keep quiet and notice the absence of women."² Even more critically, women learn to doubt not only what and how they know but even *how they go about knowing*.

At the same time, several women in the Belenky study point to a particular life experience that dramatically transformed their ways of knowing: the process of becoming a mother.³ Does this suggest that there are some qualities particular to a mother's way of knowing? What might it mean to acclaim "maternal thinking," to use Sara Ruddick's term, as a significant

* Special appreciation to the Society for Pastoral Theology, who heard an earlier version of this article at the annual meeting in June 1990, and to the Society's steering committee members, Herb Anderson, Maxine Glaz, Hans van den Blink, and Emma Justes, in particular, for encouraging my reflections. Thanks especially to the generous support of those at Chicago Theological Seminary; they have significantly enabled my conjunction of maternity and epistemology.

¹ Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, eds., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic, 1986).

² Francine Prose, "Confident at 11, Confused at 16," *New York Times Magazine* (January 7, 1990), p. 23, based on a review of Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer, eds., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

³ Belenky et al., eds., pp. 35–36, 142–43.

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source of knowledge?⁴ Do women as mothers have some kind of singular standpoint on matters of knowledge and truth?⁵

While we feminist theologians have a great deal at stake in this discussion, we have kept a safe distance from these questions. We advocate maternal god imagery and language but say little about actual mothers and mothering. Many are mothers, but few explore in any depth what we learn about theology from this pivotal life experience. Yet how can we endorse a method that begins with experience and then skip over the hours that many of us spend birthing, tending, and mentoring? How can we talk about God as mother when so much controversy and misunderstanding about the institution and experience of motherhood abounds? Out of maternal experiencing and thinking, I would argue, emerges a yet-only-minimally articulated way of being and knowing. Select aspects of such knowing have the potential to inform and radically alter our theologizing. Elsewhere I have discussed the latter possibility in terms of revisioning dominant ideals of generativity from the perspective of a feminist theologian and mother.⁶ Here, I will first look briefly at the ramifications of a feminist epistemology within the academy and then demonstrate the viability of the metaphor of mothering as an appropriate epistemological mode for the discipline of theology.

We can hail a ground-breaking exception to the dearth of material on motherhood in theology: a recently published *Concilium* issue edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on "Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology."⁷ The text reflects a certain novice state of affairs: many of the essays remain at the level of critique of the institution and its ideologies; fewer consistently draw on or expound comprehensive

⁴ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989); and "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Summer 1980), reprinted in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), pp. 213–30 (citations below refer to the latter).

⁵ See Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 157–80.

⁶ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Produce or Perish: A Feminist Critique of Generativity," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43, nos. 1–4 (1989): 201–21, "Women Who Work and Love: Caught between Cultures," in *Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care*, ed. Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991), pp. 63–85, "Returning to the Mother's House: A Feminist Look at Orpah," *Christian Century* (April 17, 1991), pp. 428–30, "Produce or Perish: Generativity and New Reproductive Technologies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (Spring 1991): 39–69, "Let the Children Come: A Feminist Maternal Perspective," *Second Opinion* 17 (July 1991): 10–25.

⁷ Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology*, Concilium Series, vol. 206 (December 1989) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989). Another important exception is Christine E. Gudorf's insightful article on "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice," in *Women's Consciousness and Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (San Francisco:

constructions derived from the intimate, immediate experiences of a mother. Perhaps one of the more remarkable contributions of this volume is its suggestion that the paradigm of motherhood has “the capacity not only for overcoming the split between the worlds of women and men but also splits among different cultures, nations, races, classes, and religions.”⁸ Even though I write very much as a white, middle-class mother, the last category, if carefully and critically considered, may offer a common language or at least a starting point for dialogue across differences of sex, age, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and worldview.

By emphasizing gender and the implications of bearing and suckling children, I do not mean to discount these other equally valid factors. At this point I simply want to assign a certain priority to experiences of gender and motherhood. Both mark major categorical distinctions. Whether genes or environment, the phenomenological fact remains that as early as eighteen months and at least by three years of age a child sees herself or himself as a gendered person and not as a generic human. Despite current debate over the biological or social construction of sexuality and parenthood and the wide fluctuation in practice, a person still usually claims a sexual identity as either male or female and, at some point in this process of differentiation, envisions on some level the potential of either motherhood or fatherhood.

In a preliminary way, let me address two questions that forbid simple answers. Do mothers qua mothers encounter a singular knowing unique to their mothering? Can men experience it? Women’s embodiment, specifically the experience of pregnancy and birth, represents a distinct perspective and may evoke particular ways of perceiving and thinking. I say “may evoke” because I do not intend to depict a universal or essential category; not all birthing, nursing women inherently share one distinct mode of knowing. Nor should this common womanly experience dictate limited social roles that, by contrast, remain extremely malleable. And I say “evoke” because, although men do not have the physical equipment per se to experience maternal knowing per se, embodied moments of non-mothers have comparable evocative power to shape and inform our “‘knowledge’ of knowing.”⁹ Becoming a parent, biologically and through adoption, elicits changes—sometimes strikingly unexpected changes. What is learned from biological motherhood has parallels in other persons

Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 175–91. In her chapter on God as mother in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 97–123, Sallie McFague has approached some of these questions, but much more indirectly and, significantly, without considering the problems of modern models of parenthood.

⁸ Carr and Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., “Editorial,” p. 4.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation: Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 71.

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in form, not in exact content. It is with the desire that reflection on such analogues will be triggered that I say we have something to learn from birthing, lactating women. In this way, the richness of knowing is deepened.

Following Donna Haraway's suggestion, then, I present a "view from a body" that is "always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body."¹⁰ I use the term gender primarily to refer to socially constructed sexual identity. Yet gender always has biological linkage just as sexuality never exists in some pure and untainted physical essence apart from social interpretation.¹¹ The capacity for maternal knowing begins as a biological potential, but it never stands alone as an innate, unadulterated fact.¹² While drawing on the particularities of my own biologically shaped encounters with giving birth and nursing, I propose maternal knowing not as an intrinsic norm or ideal but as an unexplored avenue that will, I hope, suggest the limits of current understandings and the possibilities of alternative modes to be explored.

EPISTEMOLOGY OR BUST: WHERE ARE WE REALLY HEADED?

Many rightfully question the viability of conversations about epistemology as Western European philosophy has traditionally construed them. In pursuit of universalizable truths, knowledge has been defined so as to exclude certain select groups of persons "as subjects in its production" and "as critics of its products."¹³ For the most part, women and minorities have remained consumers only. Among women, mothers, regardless of race, class, and worldview, have had less opportunity to participate and have seldom been recognized for their critical, albeit hidden, part in the production of knowledge.

The vital role of gender in knowing has only come to the fore explicitly

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 589. This essay originated as a commentary on Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹¹ I caution against laying the dualistic grid of nature/nurture, biology/environment, and sexuality/gender over maternal knowing. While such categories are strategically useful, they are not helpful when reified in the tradition of Western binary oppositions. See Joan L. Griscom, "On Healing the Nature/History Split in Feminist Thought," in Andolsen et al., eds., pp. 85–98; and Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹² See Martha McClintock's comments on the complex meanings of "innate" in "Considering a Biosocial Perspective on Parenting," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 703–10, written in response to Alice S. Rossi, "A Biosocial Perspective on Parenting," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 106 (Spring 1977): 1–31.

¹³ Morris Taggart, "Epistemological Equality as the Fulfillment of Family Therapy," in *Women in Families: A Framework for Family Therapy*, ed. Monica McGoldrich, Carol M. Anderson, and Froma Walsh (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 100.

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with the advancement of feminist reflection¹⁴ and the achievement of a “critical mass”¹⁵ of women in academe. Initially more attention went to closely related questions of methodology. As feminist conversations moved from critique to constructive proposal, attention to methodological distinctions revealed fundamental epistemological differences. Recent conversations, such as those of the Mud Flower Collective’s *God’s Fierce Whimsey*¹⁶ and Patricia Shechter and respondents’ “A Vision of Feminist Religious Scholarship” in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*,¹⁷ make it clear that feminist theology raises not only issues of method and content. At heart, feminist methodologies present an epistemological challenge to academic and Enlightenment ideologies of reason, science, and knowledge. The question is not simply what and how we think about religion, but who is doing the thinking, and what counts as theological and religious knowing.

What happens when women do the thinking? Feminist scholarship challenges core assumptions of Western claims to objective, universalizable truth. It proclaims the contextual, including gendered, quality of all knowing. Women’s knowing also suggests the epistemological priority of the communal alongside the personal and affirms the significance of multiplicity and diversity, gender and otherwise. Knowing involves a particular, relational, and at times “transdisciplinary” investment.¹⁸ It builds on personal and communal experience, intuition, nonlinear thought, spontaneity, and disclosure. Often a feminist epistemology is not simply or even

¹⁴ See, e.g., such books as Dale Spender, ed., *Men’s Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981), and *For the Record: The Meaning and Making of Feminist Knowledge* (London: Women’s Press, 1985); Belenky et al., eds. (n. 1 above); Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (London: D. Reidel, 1983); Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo, eds., *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Mary E. Hawkesworth, “Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 533–57; comment and reply on Hawkesworth, “Knowers, Knowing, Known,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 417–28; Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁵ A term used by John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene in their demographical study of women in the professions (*Megatrends 2000* [Morrow, 1990]).

¹⁶ The Mud Flower Collective, *God’s Fierce Whimsey: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim, 1985).

¹⁷ Patricia Shechter and respondents, “A Vision of Feminist Religious Scholarship,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (Spring 1987): 91–111.

¹⁸ Stephen Toulmin, “Theology in the Context of the University,” *Theological Education* 26 (Spring 1990): 62.

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primarily a body of concepts or a philosophy; women know by telling stories,¹⁹ by sharing “small truths,”²⁰ by recovering the incidental.

Among themselves, women often participate in what might be described as “womanly discourse.” On the surface, this discourse may seem indirect while subtly ideas develop and communication occurs. For knowledge depends on care; truth demands intimacy, equality, and a refusal to impose on others. Even in public forums, a frequently operating but often implicit norm for women is that persons ought to engage in the passionate, equilateral buildup of a topic. When a female speaker enters in, she will more likely enlarge on a previous point, suggest related ideas, add a personal anecdote, or make encouraging interjections rather than abruptly change the subject. Neither conversation nor knowledge are plied as attempts to hold the floor. They are reciprocal exchanges often intended to draw in others. Knowledge is seldom singular, “separative,”²¹ universal, or uniform; truth is multiple, complex, connected, sometimes idiosyncratic and unique, concrete, and specific. Knowledge is seldom final; truth is limited and tentative in the best sense of the word, that is, tentativeness and partiality not for their own sake but for the prospect of connections.²²

I mention only a few qualities of a feminist epistemology, many of which have the danger of stereotype and misuse. Of equal importance, I believe, is a slightly different concern: how have or will such qualities of perceiving and verifying truth influence epistemological theory, practice, and experience in the study of theology? In other words, what happens to women and men when, as a woman in a recent editorial on abortion in *Christian Century* requested of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, we ask men “to retreat from public debate for a while”?²³ What happens when we argue that “only women can *know*”?²⁴ What happens when we claim that certain ideas arise primarily from women’s struggle and that others ought to use them with wariness?

If nothing else, for many men women’s knowing remains an intrusion and a hassle. But more, the “sheer audacity,” writes family theorist Morris Taggart, “of introducing a WOMAN as . . . commentator and fellow yearner” calls “everything . . . into question.” “How can I deal with the

¹⁹ See Eleanor Humes Haney, “What Is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8 (1980): 117.

²⁰ Patricia Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip,” *Hudson Review* 35 (1982): 24, quoted in Belenky et al., eds., p. 116.

²¹ See the definition and use of this term by Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), p. 9.

²² Haraway (n. 10 above), p. 584.

²³ Susan Maloney, S.N.J.M., “Catholic Bishops and the Art of Public Moral Discourse,” *Christian Century* (May 9, 1990), p. 486.

²⁴ Taggart (n. 13 above), p. 110.

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anxiety,” he reveals, “that comes from feeling like a guest in (what I had assumed was) my own house?”²⁵ Women and men alike continue to underestimate the immense apprehension that relinquishing power and prestige produces.

Little awareness of these powerful dynamics can lead to abstract criticism or outright attack of the female speaker who claims privileged knowledge—she has failed, it is said, to include women of color, the aging, or some other group or factor. The hidden injury is that she has not included “him” or not honored the familiar rules of academic discourse. Given the deep-seated nature of these reactions, pure rational discussion about the impact of gender is inadequate to the task of intellectual change.

Women’s modes of knowing *are* unsettling; they fly in the face of qualities valued and judged superior within the academy. Perhaps some of the wariness about incorporating feminist knowing in theology is related to the devaluation that the discipline already knows within the university at large in its attention to other kinds of knowledge than knowledge that corresponds to external data. But, as Jane Flax suggests, “If [we feminists] do our work well, ‘reality’ will appear even more unstable, complex, and disorderly than it does now.”²⁶ Commitment to partial perspectives and power-sensitive conversation suggests “a confusion of voice and sight, rather than clear and distinct ideas” as the most adequate model for rational, objective inquiry.²⁷

WORDS PREGNANT WITH MEANING

At times, motherhood is the epitome of disorder and messiness. Retrieving anything related to motherhood has inherent dangers. Feminists have worked hard to counter the damaging consequences of equating women with the biological roles that they fill. For too long men have defined women almost exclusively in terms of their sexual function as wives and mothers, seeing sociological structures as biological and psychological givens. We certainly do not want to perpetuate self-restricting definitions of gender complementarity and oppressive circumstances of injustice.

Nor do I want to equate a biological process—the capacity to bear children—with full normative humanity.²⁸ Rather, I wish to point toward a broader vision that has an important connection with the biolog-

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jane Flax, quoted by Wendy Luttrell, book review, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15 (Spring 1990): 636.

²⁷ Haraway, p. 590.

²⁸ Beverly W. Harrison, “Theology of Pro-Choice: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Abortion: The Moral Issues*, ed. Edward Batchelor, Jr. (New York: Pilgrim, 1982), p. 220.

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ical process of birth but draws on it metaphorically to move toward more general meanings. My remarks are not inclusive in an immediate sense, drawing as they do on singular experience, but they are intended as illustrative of epistemological possibilities. They are not a judgment on the childless.

A third related problem is that under the sway of patriarchy persons have romanticized motherhood and created the “fantasy of the perfect mother.”²⁹ Joint idealization of disinterested love and self-sacrificing motherhood creates virtues impossible to achieve; worse, it completely distorts relationships between parent and child, mother and father. We would do well to remain wary of the potential misappropriation even of the recent work of some feminists such as Carol Gilligan to reinforce stereotyped views of women as more giving and nurturant.

It is important to counter these misunderstandings by offering a fuller view of the demands of mothering and a more complex definition of care. Can we not uncover an experience of motherhood that lies somewhere between the extremes of oppressive traditional discourse and avant-garde feminist protest that totally rejects this but offers nothing in its place? Although perhaps impossible, as a white woman who experiences motherhood in a Western capitalistic, patriarchal society, I want to stand in the “no-man’s-land” between this either/or and grapple with the potential power of woman’s experience of reproduction and relationality. For I agree with Julia Kristeva that, while a certain brooding feminism protests the fact of motherhood itself, “genuine feminine innovation . . . will not be possible until we have elucidated motherhood, feminine creation, and the relationship between them.”³⁰

So what, as Kristeva asks, “do we know about the inner discourse of a mother?”³¹ Not much. Silence reigns in most public realms. If we have known little about women’s ways of knowing, we know even less about a mother’s. From literature to liturgy, the many Marys keep “all these things, pondering them” in their hearts.³² Hymns sing the thoughts of Father, the Master and Lord. But where do we hear about the ruminations of the Mother-God? Have you ever considered the circumstances of the anxious, withdrawn, and hostile mother said to breed a schizophrenic

²⁹ See Nancy J. Chodorow and Susan Contratto, “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother,” *Social Problems* 23 (1976), reprinted in *Rethinking the Family*, ed. Barrie Thorne with Marilyn Yalom (New York: Longman, 1982), pp. 54–75, and also in Nancy J. Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 79–96.

³⁰ Julia Kristeva, “Un nouveau type d’intellectuel: Le dissident,” *Tel quel* 74 (Winter 1977): 6–7, quoted by Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 360.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 352, 368.

³² Luke 2:19 (Revised Standard Version).

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son in the family systems theories of Gregory Bateson³³ or the inner thoughts of the depressed mothers credited with depriving the child of adequate mirroring by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut?³⁴ Psychoanalytic epistemology gives maternal censorship a certain scientific validity. The rational-cognitive or mathematical law and principle language of most Western moral theory has been that of the father. “The mother’s voice,” says Nel Noddings, “has been silent.”³⁵ Or, have you ever wondered about “Portnoy’s *mother’s* complaint,” in the words of Pauline Bart?³⁶ Few mothers have created enduring literature; those who do seldom look to their mothering as a central source of their work.³⁷ Mother as speaking subject is missing from literary, psychoanalytic, ethical, and religious dramas.

What more might we understand if we could know from the inside out, through the eyes of the mother intricately engaged in the process? As literary scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman asserts, as long as we continue to concentrate on “the-mother-as-she-is-written rather than on the-mother-as-she-writes, we shall continue in our ignorance.” It is high time “to let mothers have their word.”³⁸ Mothers know something important about epistemology in a negative sense from the constrictions that *prevent* knowledge of knowing or, at least, its careful, critical articulation. Second, mothers have accessibility to certain invaluable ways of knowing, particularly bodily knowing. Indeed, a certain superiority of knowledge of human nature and nurture rests on a maternal labor historically defined as inferior to the more “valuable” or “productive” labor of men.

WHAT IS REALLY MORE IMPORTANT? WHAT IS MORE VALUABLE?

Thinking about knowing from a maternal perspective renders clear the secondary nature of the whole question. I wonder if, in actual fact, a

³³ Gregory Bateson sees the mother as key cause in an early paper with Jackson, Haley, and Weakland (1956), pp. 212–13, quoted by Debra Anna Luepnitz, *The Family Interpreted: Feminist Theory in Clinical Practice* (New York: Basic, 1988), p. 153.

³⁴ See selected cases in Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 16–17, 29–30, 126–51, and in “The Two Analyses of Mr. Z,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 60, no. 3 (1979): 3–27, in which Kohut blames the “faultily responsive maternal selfobject” for various emotional pathologies. The mother is sole source of psychic harmony and yet called an “object” at one and the same time. Only the child’s point of view finds representation.

³⁵ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 1–2.

³⁶ Pauline Bart, quoted by Luepnitz, p. 167.

³⁷ Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delta, 1965), pp. 19, 32. For notable exceptions, see Tillie Olsen, *Tell Me A Riddle* (New York: Dell, 1956); Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Mother / Child Papers* (Boston: Beacon, 1980); Robin Morgan, *Lady of the Beasts* (New York: Random House, 1976); Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (New York: Dell, 1977).

³⁸ Suleiman, pp. 358, 360.

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more authentic *knowing* is not that which responds on demand to the immediacy of the cry of the moment. We are most knowing when passionately engaged in life's struggle, not when detached. Conflicts between the desire to live fully now and the need to distance oneself in order to create enduring ideas have banished much of the world's greatest wisdom. The academy does not usually understand this tension; a mother might.

This whole exercise of mine ultimately rests on the back of my sitter and in part, as it should, on my husband, who both practice the knowing that I preach. I am still unsure about the trade-offs. I cannot begin to describe the multiple costs of putting these words on paper. I lost many precious moments playing with my two sons. The waste of a mother's creative energies in this daily conflict between work and love, Suleiman argues, "cannot be overestimated."³⁹ Nothing has ever subverted my peace of mind as my small sons, and yet nothing has ever taught me as much about myself, my place in the world, culture, patience, people, life. Would many a man weigh these tensions? I doubt it. Or at least not overtly, or not until recently.

While motherhood heightens these relational tensions, by no means are they restricted to mothers. To theorize about knowing maternally comes at the expense of moments with babies. To theorize about knowing in theology in general has its price and rests on the backs of those others who practice the insights and carry on the tasks of living. It rests on those on the front line. Which comes first and, when out of time, what gives? One's gender just may tip the scale.

All this points to a second constriction especially understood by mothers: to consider how we know and our grounds for knowing comes only with freedom and with time for reflection. To consider epistemology then is a kind of luxury, previously granted only to those with power. Bodily, monthly, women know life's limits. Two times pregnant and pregnant again, I face the conflicts of "conceiving" in scholarly and familial ways at the same time; constant, so-called morning sickness, indescribable fatigue, and what one study called the "diminished cognitive acuity" in the first and third trimester⁴⁰ take their toll.

But these are trivial beside the heavier physical, emotional, and spiritual demands of maintaining daily life. Women know the strain of "holding up half the sky" or, often, more than their share. Virginia Woolf,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁴⁰ N. Murai, "A Study of Moods in Pregnant Women," *Tohoku Psychological Folia* 34 (1975): 10–16; and A. Jarrahi-Jadeh et al., "Emotional and Cognitive Changes in Pregnancy and Early Puerperium," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 115 (1969): 797–805, cited by Sheri Fenster, Suzanne B. Phillips, and Estelle R. G. Rapoport, *The Therapist's Pregnancy: Intrusion in the Analytic Space* (Hinsdale, N.J., 1986), p. 1.

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fictitiously reprimanding women for their lesser accomplishments, demands their excuse: Her women reply, “We have borne and bred and washed and taught perhaps to the age of six or seven years, the one thousand six hundred and twenty-three million human beings who are, according to statistics, at present in existence, and that, allowing that some had help, takes time.”⁴¹ To articulate how we know what we know requires provisions many women and most mothers lack: space, time, energy, money, permission, circumstances, choice, education, travel, varied experience, and two other critical ingredients indispensable to full creativity—what Tillie Olsen calls “unconfined solitude” and “the *essential angel*”—the woman whose name appears on dedication pages—who assures a “daily life made easy and noiseless . . . by a silent, watchful, tireless affection.”⁴²

Beyond these restrictions, serious connection to another being involves a constraint—what Kristeva calls a pain that “comes from the inside” and “never remains apart”: “you may close your eyes, . . . teach courses, run errands, . . . think about objects, subjects.” But a mother is “branded by pain” that begins at conception and never goes away.⁴³ Right at this pregnant moment, I am one but two—a publicly, academically subversive state, “a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh,” says Kristeva. My self is multiple, divided between a part of me—“what was mine”—for which I care but which my two sons, little knowing, carry forth into the world “henceforth irreparable alien.” As long as the woman has the womb that carries “this internal graft and fold”⁴⁴—the seed that divides, grows, and then is severed at the umbilical cord—we should only talk cautiously about an emotional and cognitive equity between mothers and fathers as “easily attainable.” At this point, we cannot ignore, asserts Alice Rossi, a “biologically based potential for heightened maternal investment.”⁴⁵ Biology or not, we cannot deny what Ruddick calls the “passions of maternity” that are “so sudden, intense, and confusing that we often remain ignorant of the . . . *thought* that has developed from mothering.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of Her Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1957), p. 116.

⁴² Joseph Conrad quoted by Olsen, *Silences*, pp. 12, 34.

⁴³ Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 166.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–79. See also Iris M. Young, “Pregnant Subjectivity and the Limits of Existential Phenomenology,” in *Descriptions*, ed. Don Ihde and Hugh J. Silverman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 25–26, 27–31, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (1984): 47–54; and Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1977), pp. 47–48, 161.

⁴⁵ Rossi (n. 12 above), p. 24.

⁴⁶ Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking” (n. 4 above), p. 213.

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EPISTEMOLOGY and BUST: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LACTATE?

Despite or partly because of these passions, a particular discipline of knowing does develop. Having children forever changes a woman's knowledge of knowing. Parting the passions to articulate in what ways comes less easily. From quickening to birth to giving suck to today's daily throes, I have come to appreciate the integrity of bodily knowing. Holding infant and child at the intersection of nature and symbolic order, I as woman and mother have what Suleiman calls "privileged" access to the order of culture and language and to the power of nurture.⁴⁷

How might we systematically conceptualize this maternal knowing that in novelist Mary Gordon's words is more physical and certainly more erotic "than anybody admits"?⁴⁸ By no sheer coincidence, the scriptural use of the verb "to know" refers to the intimate act of sexual intercourse. Yet even in our supposedly sexually liberated era, Western theology and philosophy still speak "like a Greek man,"⁴⁹ inserting a wedge between sex and maternity and ignoring differences in epistemology that arise from different kinds of sexual experiences and bodies, the most obvious of which are male and female. Disembodied, dispassionate reason still seems more trustworthy and valid.

But as a mother, I find that this is simply not true at some very crucial points. Like Beverly Harrison's remark about Christian ethics, a maternal feminist epistemology is "profoundly worldly, a spirituality of sensuality." It reminds us that all knowledge is body-mediated.⁵⁰ As point of proof, what does it mean to lactate—to have a body that, sensing another's thirst, "lets-down,"⁵¹ drenching me with sweet-smelling milk?⁵² Does it alter knowing? I know physically through a muscular ache; apart from the ache, I can scarcely know. In this knowing, few abstractions come between

⁴⁷ Suleiman (n. 30 above), p. 367.

⁴⁸ Interview with fiction author Mary Gordon, *Chicago Tribune* (December 3, 1989), sec. 6, p. 3. See also Rossi, pp. 16–17.

⁴⁹ J. Giles Milhaven, "A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 355.

⁵⁰ See Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1981): 45, 48.

⁵¹ The hormone "oxytocin acts upon the basket cells around the alveoli, causing them to contract, and . . . to squeeze out the milk in the phenomenon known as 'milk let-down'" (Rossi, p. 17; see R. Berde, *Recent Progress in Oxytocin Research* [Springfield, Ill., 1959]).

⁵² I chose pregnancy and lactation because of the powerful physical and metaphorical implications and because of their primary meaning at this time in my life. Other phenomena could serve as sources of reflection here. See the attention to menstruation, menarche, and/or menopause in Genia Pauli Haddon, *Body Metaphors: Releasing God-feminine in Us All* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); Penelope Washbourn, *Becoming Woman: The Quest for Wholeness in Female Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), and "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual," in *Womanspirit Rising* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 247; and Christine Downing, *Journey through Menopause: A Personal Rite of Passage* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

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myself and the other, mouth to nipple—no bottle, no instrument to measure birth size or fetal movement. As with pregnancy, lactation subverts artificial boundaries between self and other, inside and outside. Both undermine the integrity of my body and root me fluidly, solidly to the earth. I know by knowing the feelings of the other physically because they are paradoxically both mine and not mine, a continuity in difference rather than a polar opposition *or* an enmeshed symbiosis. I know by an affective connection that moves toward differentiation, not by comparison, contrast, and critique *or* by some idealized oneness or union with the child. I know immediately, tactilely, erotically—the “lowest and least worthy of all human senses” according to Aquinas.⁵³ To a great degree, however untrustworthy or dangerous, at least in the Western history of sexuality, I must rely on a bodily passion, a knowing driven by a welcomed lust or need that seeks satisfaction. In this state of awareness, I have actually left a train car in which a child cried because of the stir it created in me; in general, just the sight of a baby can evoke a milk let-down response in lactating mothers. In this state I learn, change, and develop; if I do not, the child will not. Yet most theories see the process toward individuation as only the child’s.

Maternal thinking begins to suggest a way to understand the problem of integrating praxis and theory better than almost anything I have seen in the current literature of practical theology. It challenges false dichotomies: theory does not involve, as much as many have wished, “verbalizable knowledge” and insight;⁵⁴ practice does not mean unmediated action. Both involve qualities more nebulous, fleeting, relative, and momentary. Authentic reflective praxis requires a knowing in which “what one learns cannot be applied exactly, often not even by analogy, to a new situation.”⁵⁵ In the movement between knowing and acting, I use a mode of circular bodily reasoning that interweaves physical sensation, momentary cognition, behavioral reaction, and a physical sensing and intellectual reading of the results—a trial and error, hit-and-miss strategy that in its bodily ethos surpasses that described under the rubric of Catholic moral casuistry.⁵⁶ When it works, I relax; when it fails, I repeat it ceaselessly because I must; when it fails one too many times, I must master a physical desire to retaliate in stormy, mindless abuse.

⁵³ Milhaven, “A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing,” p. 358. For his documentation on this, see J. Giles Milhaven, “Thomas Aquinas on Sexual Pleasure,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 5 (1977): 157–81.

⁵⁴ A term used by Kohut in his critique of Freud’s “moralistic obsession” with “objective truth” (Kohut [n. 34 above], pp. 54–56; see also pp. 59–60).

⁵⁵ Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” p. 219.

⁵⁶ For a similar example of the relational casuistry between a mother and infant, see Noddings (n. 35 above), pp. 31–35.

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Fleshly knowing then has inherent value as well as immense power for misuse. But, I believe, it is better to try to understand it than to repress it and suffer the negative consequences of abuse that our society has begun to recognize. Partially justified fears of the dangers of bodily sensuality have turned us away from distinguishing its possible resources. In contrast to the hierarchy of knowledge that ranks rational above other forms, we know much in and through our bodies that is intrinsically valuable and precious.

Let me dare to go one step further: female anatomy in general provides its own ground for metaphor that theories of knowledge have preferred to ignore. All knowing is not phallic. That is, if men think phallicly, to borrow Freud's compelling and sometimes ill-used analogy, women think and know vaginally. Or, in actuality it is not a matter of naming a replacement organ, as I discover when I explain female genitalia to my four-year old son. Women's organs have an intrinsic multiplicity that cannot be easily explained. What might this greater multiplicity in sexual form and function mean for women's knowing in general? The hymen and the "two-lipped vulva," as noted by Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray, suggest fluid, diffuse, multiple, embracing language in place of the linear, unified, and visible language of the phallus.⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, we find Nel Noddings and the women interviewed by Belenky and her colleagues describing a knowing that does not involve projection but a receiving into oneself.⁵⁸ Note, however, this is *not* necessarily a passive receptive knowing but an active engagement on a different basis than we have thus far understood. For, the receptive vagina is also the "birth-pushing womb,"⁵⁹ the nurturing breast an industrious milk-making organ. Nor, might I add, is the penis always assertively erect, and behind it lies the much ignored, more vulnerable scrotum.

Biology is not destiny, but it does shape how we know. With child at breast, women have particular knowledge rooted in their bodies. Ultimately, to lactate when another thirsts teaches a certain empathic, connected knowing. Beverly Wildung Harrison claims that this womanly knowledge of nurture and the arts of human survival, grounded in the biological constant of childbearing and nursing, far surpasses any technological power in its ability not only to create solid bonds between people but also to create personhood and community, to create or thwart life itself.⁶⁰

The activity of birthing, giving suck, and rearing hones this distinctly

⁵⁷ Nelson Garner et al., eds. (n. 30 above), pp. 23–24.

⁵⁸ Noddings, p. 30; Belenky et al., eds. (n. 1 above), p. 122.

⁵⁹ Haddon, pp. 11–12.

⁶⁰ Harrison, "The Power of Anger" (n. 50 above), pp. 44, 47–48.

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human power. Through long hours of arduous practice, mothers acquire an entire moral and metaphysical discipline of thought to assure the preservation, growth, and acceptability of their children.⁶¹ As identified by Ruddick, genuine care of a small being demands finely tuned attitudes and virtues of holding, humility, resilient cheerfulness, good humor, and ultimately the capacity for what she calls “attentive love.” The exercise of “keeping over acquiring, of conserving the fragile, of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary to the child’s life,” of loving without seizing or using—all this requires deep reserves of energy, extended periods of patient waiting, and a heightened intellectual activity.⁶² This “caring labor” leads to a “rationality of care” that exemplifies many of the alternative ideals of reason and morality recently formulated by feminists.⁶³

AN AGENDA FOR THEOLOGY: A MATERNAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The concept of maternal knowing, rooted in the physical realities of mothering, offers important criteria for an alternative epistemology. Difference in embodiment necessarily implies difference in thinking. Heretofore this difference has meant dramatic disadvantages for women. The time has come to allow difference to empower rather than divide and oppress. Maternal knowing has immense possibilities for informing social, ethical, economic, and political stances.⁶⁴ A normative and political imperative for theology resides in this epistemological stance. Indeed, the test of one’s philosophical epistemology becomes “clear at the level of action” in Harrison’s words.⁶⁵

Maternal knowing refers to thinking particular to women who have known another inhabiting themselves and have maintained this very interior link by suckling, carrying, sharing bed, body, and soul, and, finally, letting loose to live. At the same time, motherhood and its corresponding knowing has ramifications for those besides biological mothers, even in a culture such as ours that has increasingly moved away from communal responsibility for children and that, in its fascination with new technolo-

⁶¹ Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking” (n. 4 above), pp. 214–16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 217, 223–24.

⁶³ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (n. 4 above), p. 46. She cites Hilary Rose, “Hand, Brain and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9 (1983): 73–90; Carolyn Whitbeck, “A Different Reality: Feminist Ontology,” in *Beyond Domination*, ed. Carol Gould (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); Noddings; and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁶⁴ Others make a similar case. See Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” pp. 224–27, and *Maternal Thinking*, pt. 3; Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), pt. 4; Kristeva (n. 43 above), p. 185.

⁶⁵ Harrison, “The Power of Anger,” p. 54.

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gies, is obsessed with reproducing biological progeny.⁶⁶ Other traditions correct ours here. Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye remarks “I have no biological children . . . but I have children.” In a definition derived from Akan culture, mothering is “a religious duty” that all persons in a healthy society should embody if persons “are to be fully human, nurtured to care for, and take care of themselves, one another, and of their environments.”⁶⁷

Those then who have bodies capable of bearing fruit and who have imaged, if not in actuality experienced, the idea of bodily sustenance of another have a working familiarity with maternal knowing. And men, who do not need to, begin to listen and imagine. In the end, men cannot fathom what is rooted in very definitive bodily experiences. But even if men cannot fathom maternal knowing in its physicality, those who have “slept like spoons”⁶⁸ around pregnant women through long nights of childbearing and then, ultimately, spooned on through the throes of birthing and the trials of rearing know something of its depth and potential. Not only do I not exclude men, I would ask more of men and fathers. For to excuse them from the regime of tending life or to deprive them of their own versions of maternal or parental practice is to lose a precious resource and to negate a viable avenue of full humanhood. This is not to say that men or, for that matter, women must replicate the bodily knowing involved in an act like lactating. Nor can men participate in many of the primary cognitive and emotional activities of maternity. Rather this is to urge that persons begin to listen to and consider the existential and even physiological analogues in their own lives that carry a kindred power of perception, connection, and insight into themselves and into the processes of sustaining another.

Let me clarify further: it is not possible for nonmothers to accomplish by empathy or analogy *exactly the same* intellectual and moral feats that for mothers are rooted in select bodily experiences. But a mother’s public expression of epistemological insights should be given authority to evoke *parallel but distinct* insights for nonmothers that pertain to the intimate care of another being. The physicality of childbearing and rearing is critical. But it is not exhaustive of the possibilities. There are other avenues to some of the important insights that maternal knowing suggests. And there are other significant bodily knowings to which we should begin to attend. Maternity is not the norm from which all other kinds of knowing and loving are judged. Rather maternity is a singular and seldom-explored voice

⁶⁶ See Miller-McLemore, “Generativity and New Reproductive Technologies” (n. 6 above).

⁶⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Poverty and Motherhood,” in Carr and Schüssler Fiorenza, eds. (n. 7 above), pp. 23–24.

⁶⁸ See John Giles Milhaven, “Sleeping Like Spoons: A Question of Embodiment,” *Commonweal* (April 7, 1989), pp. 205–7.

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to which others, particularly men, should harken as a new source of critique and renewal of current models of relationality, love, care, and work and of current approaches to ethics, theology, and epistemology.

The physical acts of giving birth and nursing are transformative modes that point to the many other ways of being parental. Not only do human beings have a potential or even a natural “parental instinct” for giving and securing life, according to Sallie McFague, but persons also have a normative imperative to extend this instinct of life preservation beyond their lives to the lives of others and to the life of the world.⁶⁹ This means actual hands-on involvement in parental exercises and in its teachings. As Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and others have argued, until men become more involved in child rearing, psychic dynamics that subtly support the narrow parameters of current models of preservation and care will go unchallenged and human possibilities for fuller development will remain limited.⁷⁰

But, for all their attention to the mother, Chodorow and Dinnerstein neglect biological phenomena involved in childbearing and remain mostly negative about the mother’s role. They demand an equality that ignores fundamental physiological differences between men and women and the related epistemological distinctions that I have suggested. I want to avoid their covert disdain of the privileged perspective that women have known as mothers. Deep cultural ambivalence about connection and care tempts us to discount a mother’s works of love as “mundane, and undramatic, too distracting from the business of world-rule.”⁷¹ When persons remark that the “*only* difference between males and females is simply that females bear young and nurse,” that “*only*” stands as a major reproductive and endocrine difference that we have yet to grasp fully for fear of returning to unfair categorizations and stereotypes.⁷² The power to reproduce the species that is biologically unique to women and historically the chief source of our oppression must be reclaimed for the power it holds.

Mothers know much about generativity that we ought not disregard. Recovering maternal knowing leads us to consider a more adequate public ideal of generativity. Just as childbearing was never intended by nature as a trade-off for neglecting all other forms of satisfaction and achievement,⁷³ neither were men in the public work world intended to neglect

⁶⁹ McFague (n. 7 above), pp. 105, 119–20.

⁷⁰ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

⁷¹ Harrison, “The Power of Anger” (n. 50 above), p. 47.

⁷² See Rossi (n. 12 above), p. 9.

⁷³ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (St. Albans: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1971), p. 248, cited by Washbourn, *Becoming Woman* (n. 52 above), p. 104.

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the lessons of human relationality. Women's ways of understanding generativity and guiding the next generation have applicability to many other kinds of working and caring. Ideally, maternal knowing involves a careful reading of the other, oneself, and human nature; it can teach a mode of ethical reasoning that heightens empathy and reflexivity; it can foster a deeper grasp of self and yet push one to transcend oneself in a renewed consideration for children at large and those in need of care.

Children give a new view of people in general, leading to an identification with plights and causes previously unknown and bringing a fresh commitment to the broader community.⁷⁴ Somehow, through the mutual understanding learned and practiced over and over in the intense moments of attachment with a little, developing person, one who has truly cared for a child gains new modes of relating and new empathy for others—parents, other children, one's spouse, the oppressed. The capacities and values of maternal knowing are tasks and qualities worthy of recapitulation beyond the narrow confines of the mother-child dyad. Only recognition and recovery by both women and men of qualities and ways of knowing heretofore devalued and privatized will suffice.

Ultimately, fresh ways of interpreting the bodily processes of reproduction, child care, and parenting have transformative social and political implications. A maternal feminist epistemology, if adopted, warrants serious and sustained societal action that would challenge and alter structures and ideologies of care and generativity both within the religious academy and beyond. Internally, it requires a theology that challenges its early twentieth-century heritage—an objectivist pursuit of universalizable truths and a "masculine definition of care" that promotes "a vocabulary of toughness, realism, masculinity, efficiency," and envisions the minister as "a man of imposing physique . . . six feet tall and exuding strength."⁷⁵ Externally, maternal feminist epistemology requires a public critique of academic ideals of knowledge and social and economic norms of care that artificially separate public material productivity from private procreativity, nurturance, and tending, rewarding the former and disregarding and devaluing the latter.

My suggestion then for the epistemological reflections of theology is both limited and challenging: to recognize gender differences and to recover suppressed but invaluable dimensions of "our bodies, ourselves" that inform theories and practices is task enough. A liberated consciousness of the potential power of woman's sexuality and mothering and a renewed awareness of the latent powers and vulnerabilities of men, here-

⁷⁴ Gudorf (n. 7 above), pp. 177–78.

⁷⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1983), pp. 167–68, 178.

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tofore suppressed under the reign of patriarchy, would transpose our ways of knowing both in theology and in society. Attention to the role of gender and to the experience of mothering provides an avenue toward greater recognition and comprehension of other contextual factors that critically impinge on and influence our epistemologies. Although we have a long way to go before accomplishing these reconstructive tasks and deepening our conversation, we are on our way or, at least, a pregnant pastoral theologian has had her word.