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Foreword

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Foreword

Who shall find a valiant woman?
Look! We are all around you:
in the work rooms
of industry
and of every functioning enterprise,
unheralded,
invisible,
some say nonexistent,
but we know otherwise.¹

These words acknowledge both the title of this issue and the lengthy invisibility and suppression of women's contributions to human history, economics, society, culture and, especially, theology. At the same time, they recognize that deep down we know about the gifts of women's lives and their impact at home and in the world. When given an opportunity to remember these contributions, women and men not only identify more clearly the range of Christian ministries and gifts, but also have more models for what it means to be human. In this issue we celebrate only a few of the many valiant women, named and unnamed, in history and at our sides.

Diane Blanchard highlights the story of the Gentile (Syro-Phoenician/Canaanite) woman in "The Gentile Woman: Engagement With Suffering" as an "apt metaphor" of families dealing with the chronic suffering of a child. Blanchard places the story in historical context by using the ancient genres of "divine journey" and "narrative lament". We are invited to think of this woman not solely as a model of intercessory prayer but also as an advocate for an inclusive vision of a healing community, one which will necessarily challenge boundaries and require valiant action.

In his article "Thecla of Iconium", dealing with the Apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Brad Prentice presents evidence that this early text "contains one of the most direct and extensive witnesses that we have to the experience of women at this time". In the many vignettes about her we learn that Thecla preaches and baptizes against all odds. Prentice claims that by our reclaiming this literature, we can balance our view of the historical period of post-Paulinism. The story of the valiant Thecla offsets the picture provided by the pastoral epistles with their injunction that women not teach.

The lives, stories, and significance of Letitia Creighton Youmans, Winnifred Thomas, and Katharine Hockin, women in the Canadian Methodist tradition (1827-1962) are presented by M. Lucille Marr. She explores their sources of empowerment, including a "theology of friendship". While difficulties in juggling "career options and traditional roles" are noted, Marr also uncovers a "matriarchal culture" which nurtured these women and the girls for whom they themselves became role models. She urges us to study other women in church history to uncover the vibrancy of the female "shadow church".

Submerged living Canadian religious history is brought to light through interviews with the worker-nuns in modern Quebec (1970-1990) by Oscar Cole Arnal, who describes their lives and commitments. For example, friendship with other working poor women is central to the theology of these radical Catholic women. Sister Lebrun described her work as "bringing to birth a more just world which affirms life". Although Sister Lebrun wishes that she had been "more radical", Cole Arnal argues that she and other nuns represent some of the best parts of the feminist movement because they work in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

The article by Kaija Ranta examines the portrayals of Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth to determine whether the author/narrator's presentation is such that a contemporary reader could recognize these women as valiant. Ranta's insightful analysis reveals that there is much more to this story than is presented in the narrative. She challenges the reader to rework the text and gives helpful suggestions for reimagining Ruth and Naomi as valiant women.

In the final article Carol Schlueter calls us to recognize the valiant women around us who are survivors of domestic violence. Through her interviews with two survivors, the reader

is given an opportunity to become more aware of this social problem and to discover how the church can be part of a healing ministry with survivors. The reader is challenged to become valiant in speaking out against domestic violence and in offering support to survivors.

Each article presents women who press for real change for women, men, and the children of tomorrow. By claiming them as valiant women, we can find that "valiant" takes on new meaning. Usually associated with war, here it is a strong, wise, and persistent word of "peace"—peace, because in Greek the word refers to the work that one does toward creating a just society. By their lives the valiant women in these articles are birthing more life for all people, a difficult task and one which requires, as Dorothy Fadiman says, "the courage to push at the right time [and] the wisdom to rest between the contractions".

I offer this poem by Fadiman as a tribute to all valiant women, past, present and future who are "pregnant with peace" and are learning to give birth consciously.

Pregnant with Peace

I am pregnant with Peace,
 aching to give birth
 to the child of tomorrow.

My fear of labor
 gives way to the urge...
 an urge to push.

Part of me wishes for drugs,
 a numbing injection
 of unconsciousness
 to block the nerves
 to my feeling center...

Or to be able to sleep,
 and awoken with the baby
 already born.

But I know too much
 to allow myself to be drugged.

The birth of this baby is to be
 a conscious act.

Like a birthing ward, I see around me

many pregnant beings...
 each of us becoming ready
 in our own way.
I pray for guidance,
 the courage to push at the right time
 the wisdom to rest
 between these contractions,
 the love to bear the pressure
 of this birth
 with the joy of knowing...
 not that I have no choice
 and must endure
But that I choose freely!²

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Notes

- ¹ Miriam Therese Winter, *Resources for Ritual, Woman Prayer, Woman Song* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer/Stone Books, 1987) 115–141. I omitted the litany form of leader and respondent—[Editor].
- ² Reprinted with permission by Dorothy Fadiman from: Elizabeth Dodson Gray (ed.), *Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1988) 65.