

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Authors of Spirituality/Religion

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LIBERATING INNER EVE addresses themes, expectations, and subconscious images that women have internalized around what it means to be a Christian woman.

LIBERATING INNER EVE combines author's love of Christianity with her understanding of the current social and historical pressures that impact on women, to support readers in nourishing an ever deeper experience of self-love and personal strength.

I once came across an article in a Polish newspaper, "Express Wieczorny;" its title translates in English to "In Earth's rhythm." This article was about mindfulness and summarized a well-known book, The Tao of Pooh. The article has been so influential to my everyday experience that I can even say that it changed my life.

Most definitions of mindfulness include a concept of a present moment awareness of one's inner experience.

Mindfulness involves the developing of an observing part of oneself that is able to notice, with compassion, one's various thoughts, feelings, and input received from the body and senses, without necessarily being too enmeshed with them.

Encouraging Mindfulness

There were many periods of history where women's sense of agency has been opposed and disapproved of by many of the respected theologians of the time, such as the patristic age or the middle ages. Theologians such as Tertullian, St. Jerome, John Chrysostom, Augustine, or Clement of Alexandria implied that women were subordinate to men and were expected to subjugate to their leadership and control. They spoke out against encouraging self-development in women, whether emotional or intellectual.

Even though many religious leaders strove to eradicate such views, especially in our modern times (e.g., Saint John Paul II), and there is much awareness in our society about working

towards equality of rights and privileges for men and women, in my counseling work I anecdotally find that many women still find it difficult to be attentive to and aware of their thoughts and feelings, let alone feel compassion and acceptance toward them.

Many women continue to find that even in today's society they are often frequently defined more by their attending to others' needs (often at the expense of their own), than by whom they are in terms of how they think and feel.

Many have been conditioned to focus their energy on attending to and being mindful of others' thoughts and feelings more so than their own. Often they find it easier to empathize with the experiences of others.

In many relationships there continues to be an unequal distribution of power and consideration towards their experience. For example, women may find themselves doing more than their fair share of household chores, or not having equal decision-making influence in their families. They may lack the encouragement and support to find a sense of personal strength and self-acceptance by those who are motivated to overshadow the relationships with them with their own wants and expectations.

Many women may also experience the judgment of others around how they feel. There is a well-documented difference in the wiring of the brain in men and women in relation to how they experience and express emotions. Women in general tend to be more emotionally expressive and experience emotions with greater intensity, while men, in general, tend to minimize emotions as a way of coping, due to having a lower threshold of experiencing "emotional flooding."

Without understanding and compassion for one another's experience, women can misinterpret and judge this difference as men lacking empathy and compassion, and men can misinterpret and judge this difference as women being overemotional.

Either way we can be left with the message that our experience is not okay, and miss out on receiving the understanding and compassion that we all would like, that could help us to understand why we feel a certain way, and support us in developing ways of coping.

During the week I come across many clients who, sensing the lack of approval from others around how they feel, try very hard to suppress their feelings. Not often do I find clients who experience compassion towards what they are experiencing, especially women.

The combination of being conditioned to attend to others' experience more so than their own, suppressing the way they communicate about how they feel in order to avoid others' judgment, and trying very hard not to feel a certain way, can be emotionally and physically tiring.

There is plenty of research suggesting that we actually have less control over how we initially react than we believe. Feeling bad about how we feel is like feeling bad about the color of our eyes, something that is beyond our control.

While we have control over our behavior and over how we choose to cope with our feelings, the initial emotional reaction that we experience is very much influenced by our past learning and conditioning, and outside of our immediate control in that moment. Any attempts to fight against it are like pushing against a strong wind and apologizing for the weather being windy.

On the other hand, attending to our emotional experience with compassion and acceptance simply by observing it and not resisting or pushing against it (but learning from it about the nature of our thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and values), has been found to have numerous benefits.

It is like finding some shelter from the wind, observing its currents, and brainstorming the most effective way to get from A to B, in spite of it—perhaps while even appreciating its strength and purpose.

Among the benefits of this are: a reduction in emotional reactivity and irritability, a reduction in the experience of stress, an improvement in the working of memory, a lowering of blood pressure, and an improvement in the functioning of the immune system.

Mindfulness of Pooh

Another way of metaphorically describing mindfulness is through the character of Winnie-the-Pooh. In his book *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff has done just that.

Winnie-the-Pooh embodies an easy-going nature, open-heartedness, and faith. He is perfectly present in the here and now and able to surrender all expectations about what the future “should” hold and how he “should” be feeling. Instead, with an open heart, he receives with gratitude whatever the given moment grants him. Pooh has faith that things will somehow work out for him.

One of my favorite images of Winnie-the-Pooh is him standing beside an open window, through which he is looking at the world. To me this represents a beautiful attitude of opening the window and welcoming what the day brings with an open and trusting heart, untainted by one’s own excessive expectations of what should happen and how the day should unfold...