

RETURNING TO MY MOTHER'S HOUSE: TAKING BACK THE WISDOM OF THE FEMININE

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READING GROUP STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

This study guide is intended to help readers discuss and understand their own relationship to the many themes involved in taking back the wisdom of the feminine. It follows the four major phases of the book: the imprint of the feminine from our mothers; the loss of our female wisdom; how we take back our wisdom; and finally how we pass on our wisdom and protect the lineage of the feminine.

1. Living in Your Mother's House: Identifying the Imprint of Your Feminine

1. Our mother, or the person who fulfills the role of our mother, is the primary force that imprints the feminine on us as children and young adults. The degree to which our mother lives her authentic life -- connected to her deepest instinct, intuition, and heart's desire -- is directly related to her capacity to pass on the conscious feminine to her children. If she listens to her female wisdom -- protecting her interior life, respecting her creative priorities, standing up for her emotional intelligence -- her imprint of the feminine will be strong and lasting. Her mother Jacquie's life prior to author Gail Straub's birth revealed invaluable information about her dreams and deepest longings. What do you know about your own mother's life before you were born? Did she stay true to herself as a young woman, following her deepest instincts? Do you think your mother followed her dreams once you were born?
2. During Gail's early childhood years Jacquie's female wisdom was fully intact. She imprinted an unblinking trust in the imagination and a deep appreciation of beauty. Jacquie encouraged her children to live in their bodies as well as in their minds, and to develop a close relationship with the natural world. Her style of mothering was highly intuitive, and represented an innate balance of nurturing guidance and independence. Jacquie created a home that was a haven of safety and love. Proud of her emotional intelligence, she stood up for it in the face of her rational husband. What was the essence of your mother's imprint on your childhood? Did she offer her female wisdom by encouraging you to respect your emotions and your body, your intuition, and your imagination? Did she create a home that nourished you? What was your mother's style of mothering and how did her style influence you and your own way of mothering?
3. The degree to which your father respected the wisdom of the feminine has an impact on your mother's capacity to pass on her knowledge. Although Gail's father loved Jacquie, he also clearly disdained her emotions and sensitive moods. The linear and rational always won out in the Straub house, and Gail was swept along in the strong tide of her father's logic, leaving far behind the heart's wisdom. What was your father's role in supporting or undermining your mother's emotional intelligence? Was the heart as well as the head respected in your family? Whose side did you take in family arguments?
4. When Gail was about 13 years old complicated and dark forces began to influence her mother, who gradually began to lose her connection to her female wisdom. Slowly but surely, the subtle interior compass that guided her was replaced by exterior standards and outer status symbols. Her need to belong to a conservative, patriarchal society represented by her husband began to steal away her untamed imagination. As she

became more masculine and less feminine, her interior life receded into the background. The doors of Jacquie's heart eventually closed, causing both her spiritual and, ultimately, her physical death. This loss of her wisdom was a complex mixture of both what had been taken from her and what she herself had abandoned and betrayed. Did forces such as money, religion, race, husband or partner, or a dominant patriarchal culture make it difficult for your mother to stay true to her wisdom? If she lost her feminine wisdom, how did it affect her spiritually and physically?

II. Leaving Your Mother's House: The Gradual Loss of Your Feminine

1. One of the most essential ways we lose our feminine is by closing our hearts, running away from our feelings and our pain. Gail's story depicts how she used her addiction to busyness and speed to numb her grief and shut the door against her emotions. Have you closed your heart while running away from difficult feelings?
2. Another way we abdicate our feminine is by losing connection with our physical body as well as with the body of the earth, the natural world. We live mostly in our heads, the tidy logical mind over the messy mysterious body. Spending more and more time indoors we lose our connection with the natural world and her instinctual wisdom. Gail describes her recurring dream of being a bust chopped off at the shoulders, all head and no body. In what ways may you have disconnected from your body or the natural world?
3. When we lose our connection to our feminine we lose our interior life, our need for silence, solitude, slowing down, and spiritual inquiry. In Gail's story there were many years where she turned completely outward to her work and the world, to activity and accomplishment. Even though her work itself helped others develop their interior lives, Gail's workaholicism became the most subversive enemy of her own interior. Have you lost your interior life through busyness? If so, how much of this turning away from your female wisdom was a reflection of your mother's abandonment of her feminine, or was it different for you?
4. Gail's power struggle with her husband, David, depicted how she abandoned her intrinsic wisdom and wanted to adopt his rational and linear qualities. In your partnership or marriage are there times when you haven't stood up for your female wisdom -- your emotional intelligence and intuition, the inner worlds of the imagination and the invisible? In your work have you stood up for the values of relationship, collaboration, communication, and the interior life?
5. Jacquie's life highlighted the difference between mothering as a calling and mothering as a "should." When Gail made a conscious choice not to have children she was listening to her true voice. Was your decision to have, or not to have, children a conscious choice? How did that choice reflect your capacity to stay true to your female wisdom? What was your mother's influence on your decision? The conscious feminine teaches that every choice brings both gain and loss. Like Gail, some women live the choice that their mother did not take. With your life choices have you embraced both what you gained and what you lost? How much did your mother's un-lived life influence your choices?

III. Returning to Your Mother's House: Taking Back Your Wisdom

1. One of the first steps in taking back our wisdom is facing our terror of the deep feminine: our irrational feelings, and the fear of our body, death, and losing control. Most of us need someone to help us with this part of the journey. In Gail's story the surgery to remove her ovary compelled her to face her terrors, and her therapist Bert helped her during this important chapter of her life. How have you faced these deep fears? And who, if anyone, has helped you open your heart and embrace your emotions?

2. To welcome back our female wisdom, it helps to build a real embodied home for our interior life. Creating the trinity of home, place, and community provided Gail with a haven for her interior, a return to the natural world, and an extended family who could support her. Do you feel you have created a real home and a rooted sense of place? Do you have a community or a women's group that supports your feminine? If not, what would help you to do that?
3. There are many practices that cultivate our deepest female wisdom. Gail's journey to Bali reawakened some of these practices. In Bali the first essential practice was to slow down, to experience jam karet or rubber time. Do you have activities in your life that allow you to slow down for extended periods, a week or several weeks, during which you are being, not doing? Bali also returned women to their bodies and the natural world. Do you have a regular practice where you honor your body? Do you spend time in the natural world nourishing your senses and listening to the wisdom of the earth? And finally, Bali invited women to return to the creative arts, cultivating their intuitive right brain. Do you have a creative form like dance, music, art, or writing that immerses you in your imagination and creativity?
4. On Gail's pilgrimage to Ireland she learned that sustaining the feminine requires a deepening of our spiritual life through meditation, prayer, silence, solitude, or other contemplative practices. This can sometimes include a returning to our faith tradition on our own terms as wise women. What spiritual practices, if any, do you cultivate that help sustain your faith and your interior life? Have you returned to your faith tradition on your own terms?
5. With her therapist Bert's help Gail learned that she needed a strong conscious masculine to help her rebuild her abandoned feminine. For most of her life she had distorted the positive aspects of her masculine, turning will, manifestation, and responsibility into overdrive and overachievement. Gail needed to learn how to build an equal partnership between doing and being, inner and outer, personal and universal. Which parts of your relationship to your masculine are conscious and which parts may be distorted? Are you using your will and reason in service to your heart and intuition?

IV. In the House of the Great Mother: Passing Your Wisdom to Others

1. An essential aspect of protecting the lineage of the feminine is keeping people close to the heat and passion of existence, away from the cold meaninglessness of an overly affluent or lazy modern life. We are asked to challenge those we live and work with to go fearlessly into the fires of their pain and of the unknown. Only after many years of guiding people did Gail realize that her attempts to fix people or shield them from their pain were not only useless, but blocked the door of their liberation. As her spiritual mothering matured she finally understood that people want the truth more than they want to avoid suffering. How willing are you to support the people in your life to go toward the challenges that will transform them and lead them to the truth?
2. An appreciation of paradox and the inexplicable further protects the lineage of the conscious feminine. Empowering those we love, we teach them to embrace the messiness of paradox; joy and suffering, life and death, hope and despair, light and shadow. We guide them to refuse the temptation of taking simplistic, either/or, right or wrong positions. The situations in life that "don't make sense" lead us into our heart, the place that cradles contradiction and the inexplicable. When Gail's students tried to use their minds rationally to explain death, tragedy, divorce, depression, crises of faith, or violence of any form, they ended up with more confusion and more pain. The feminine teaches that the heart can hold the inexplicable when we are willing to feel all the feelings that surround those things that we can't rationally understand. Are you guiding the people in your life to embrace the inevitable contradictions of living? If so, how can you help

them avoid the seduction of simplistic right and wrong positions? What are you doing to help those you care about connect with their hearts and to feel what they can't explain?

3. Intrinsic to the very nature of the conscious feminine is her spacious womb that has room for diversity on all levels: lifestyle, political, spiritual, racial and ethnic. In the highest celebration of the sacred feminine there is no separation; everything is connected. To support the evolution of the feminine lineage, we are asked to support those we love in embracing "the other," as it exists inside themselves or in the world around them. Gail and her students learned how hard this is. Sometimes what's most difficult is taking back a disowned aspect of our self -- our darkness or despair, our softness or emotions. At other times what's most challenging is trying to embrace a part of the world that holds very different ideas or values from us. How can you encourage those you care for to embrace whatever "other" exists inside them and in the world around them? How are you role modeling this in your own life?
4. As protectors of the conscious feminine, we are asked to be guardians of the interior, helping others to find time for silence, solitude, slowing down, and spiritual inquiry. All these are antidotes to the speed and over action of modern life. Like Gail, many of her students had turned completely outward to their work and the world, to activity and accomplishment. Are you encouraging those you love to cultivate an inner life through slowing down, silence, solitude, or a contemplative practice of their choice? If so, how?
5. In passing on the wisdom of the conscious feminine, one of the most essential things we can do is encourage people to live with death as a close adviser. The sacred feminine teaches us that we die the way we live. Gail and her students had to learn to go toward death: facing their fear of dying; staying soft and open to their feelings when someone died; understanding that they had daily chances to practice dying whenever they surrendered to their resistances; and recognizing that an acute respect for death gave them the capacity to live more fully. How can you help those you care for to go toward death, giving them the capacity to live more fully?