



# Rewilding Motherhood

Your Path to an  
Empowered Feminine Spirituality

SHANNON K. EVANS

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Feminine Spirituality

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PART ONE

# Growing Inward

one

## Forging Identity

*Self-Actualization beyond the Roles We Serve*



One of the greatest social myths of our day is that a woman can be totally fulfilled by motherhood. This is reiterated to us in many ways and through many voices: media, religious institutions, nostalgic family members (or sometimes, total strangers), perhaps our own lifelong yearning for children or battle with infertility. By the time we hold our first child in our arms, however they come to us, most of us have taken in the narrative hook, line, and sinker. *Behold, universe: I am a mother. I shall henceforth want for nothing.*

It's a compelling idea. The trouble is, I know no real woman who can honestly say this has matched her experience. I'm lucky to know many women who are incredible mothers and who are doing that mothering in incredibly different styles and circumstances. I have yet to meet one who desires nothing for herself beyond motherhood.

As someone who has wanted to be a mother since before I even menstruated, I can say that parenting my five children

has exceeded my wildest dreams. My kids are incredible, but they did not arrive in tidy packages and suddenly deliver me from all personal desires and interests. My sons and daughter make my life more meaningful, but they do not exist to give my life meaning.

Mothers are fantastic at berating themselves for not being “content.” This discontent, we are certain, is indicative of spiritual immaturity, or ungratefulness, or cultivating a bad, worldly attitude. But what if contentment is not the point? What if the idol of contentment actually holds us back from something greater? What if the idea of total contentment through motherhood is simply a bill of goods we’ve been sold?

Most mothers are not content; they are hungry—hungry for a deeper spiritual life, hungry for inner healing, hungry for intimate friendships, hungry for more of themselves. Yet we are immersed in a society that has always told us the hunger of women is bad. Dangerous. Undesirable. We have been indoctrinated in every possible way to believe that our hunger will make us too big, too indelicate, too uncomfortable to be around. *Here, have this small salad and be satisfied. Here, have this small life and be content.*

We long to follow that gnawing hunger, that instinctual knowing that tells us there is yet more transformation to lay hold of. But there never seems to be enough time for that sort of thing. After all, there are mouths to feed, appointments to keep, games to attend, baths to give. The work of her soul is never the most imminent need in a mother’s line of vision. There is always something else to be done first.

That motherhood leaves a small margin for personal time is a reality no one would deny. But there is a greater reality available to us, one in which the spiritual vibrancy we seek is actually realized by examining more deeply *the very things we are already doing*. The limitations on a mother’s time are real, but the rhythms of that burdened time can serve the life of our

soul, not diminish it, and we will explore the ways this is so for most of this book.

We would be remiss, though, to believe that busyness is the only scapegoat for our lack of inner growth when in fact larger, even systemic, factors are at play. We exist within a cultural (often religious) ideology that exalts selflessness as the most laudable quality of a mother. But this should give us pause. Why do we believe the loss of self is a noble goal?

Self-giving is an incredible human gift and a virtue that we should all seek to cultivate, whether male or female, mother or not. There is no disputing that in every healthy relationship and system, mutual self-giving must be present. The problem arises when the expectation of self-giving falls predominately on one person; and when it comes to mothers, our social narrative assumes this as a given.

In religious spheres in particular, we are inundated with messages that glorify the sacrificial nature of motherhood, which further perpetuate ideals that would have women throw themselves on the altar of our marriages and children. The voices in these spheres are well-intentioned—at least, mostly—and sincerely want to honor the vital role that mothers play in the lives of their children. But we have to examine the narrative; we have to ask hard questions and recognize when we are allowing ourselves to accept messages that are downright harmful to the women they are meant to encourage. When the selflessness of motherhood above all else is exalted, value is indirectly assigned to each mother based on how small she can make herself. The result is not true self-giving but needless martyrdom.

I can't tell you how many Sunday homilies I have sat through that have bestowed grandiose praise on mothers for their selflessness and yet have failed to mention the many other qualities that mothers demonstrate: qualities like strength, resiliency, tenacity, leadership, and problem-solving, to name just a few. This has been true within both Protestant and Catholic churches



I've attended. In fact, thinking back on the churches I've been a member of for any significant length of time, I can recall only one in which selflessness was not preached as the crowning jewel of motherhood. It was the one where the pastor was herself a mother.

### **A Symbol of Self-Sacrifice**

Years ago, as I was preparing to give birth for the first time while parenting our three-year-old adopted son through a difficult season, I came across an ancient symbol of a pelican mother piercing her chest and letting the drops of blood fall into the mouths of her hungry chicks. The symbol predates Christianity but was assimilated into the Christian tradition because of the obvious association with the blood of Christ shed to give life to human beings.

At the time of my discovery I was in a painful stage of motherhood: physically painful in that I would be facing the most excruciating experience of my life—childbirth—in just weeks, and emotionally painful in that my preschooler was suffering in ways I did not know how to alleviate. I was vehemently protective of both of my children and utterly overwhelmed by what they were requiring of me.

The pelican stirred something deep within me. It seemed to dignify the sacrifices I was making and affirmed the vital role I was playing in the continuation of life. It also doubled as a metaphor for the Eucharist but with a rare feminine quality I found fascinating.

So like any good millennial, I found an Etsy shop that sold necklaces with the image and ordered one. The artist was phenomenal, and the colorful pendant of the feathered mother and her wanting chicks left light pressure on my chest for several months, including during the birth of my son Moses. And then suddenly, one day, it was gone. The bleeding mother pelican

had been such a source of affirmation to me that I almost never took the necklace off. But one day, in a rare departure from my norm, I did. And I haven't seen it since.

For several years I bemoaned the loss of that necklace, sorely missing the physical reminder of my spiritual reality. I considered replacing it but never did. I considered getting it as a tattoo (because I'm a good millennial, remember?) but never did that either. My sentimentality slowly faded until it became only me turning to my husband about once a year and asking, "Remember that pelican necklace? I hate that I lost it."

Only now, years later, it occurs to me that maybe losing it was exactly what I was meant to do. A self-sacrificing pelican mother symbolized my reality in an important way for one season of my life; it gave me comfort and pride. But I don't believe I was meant to identify with the pelican forever. My family is not an ancient myth, and I am not an archetype. No one can bleed forever and hope to live.

### **When Self-Sacrifice Becomes Unhealthy Martyrdom**

Dr. Christena Cleveland, a social psychologist and director of the Center for Justice and Renewal, writes prolifically on overturning what she calls "whitemalegod." To her, "whitemalegod" is the false understanding of the divine that we have collectively bought into—a false understanding that permeates not only our religious institutions but all of society, and it serves to create unhealthy relationships with one another, with God, and with ourselves. Cleveland writes, "'Self-sacrifice as the pathway to significance' is one of whitemalegod's most impressive deceptions. He's constantly demanding our self-sacrifice because what better way to keep people in bondage to white patriarchy's dehumanizing hierarchy than to teach them that the more they sacrifice on behalf of the whole, the more significant they will be."<sup>1</sup>

This disordered theology goes far beyond any one religious tradition, though some sink deeper into it than others. Such thinking has permeated our collective view of God. And most of us—women, especially—have internalized this sick twist on self-giving for much of our lives, hoping that the more of ourselves we sacrifice for the greater good, the more value we will have to God. Sacrificial love is a beautiful thing. When it is tipped out of balance, it can easily turn into a toxic trap.

If we believe, however subconsciously, that our worth is earned by our self-denial, we will never believe how deeply good God says we really are. We will spend our lives becoming less and less, hoping it earns us the approval of Someone up in heaven, when the whole time the God-Within-Us has been asking us to listen, to trust, and to know ourselves, because *this* is the interior pathway to heaven.

### Rejecting Perpetual Daughterhood

It's convenient to find our identity in motherhood. I won't say it's easy, because there's not much about motherhood that is. But there is a certain usefulness to having a clearly defined identity assigned to us in one single moment. It allows us to bypass the hard work typically required in establishing a sense of being. It tempts us with the possibility of defining ourselves by those we are in relationship with, rather than by a self that we have actually worked hard to come to know.

And it *is* hard work. When you have spent your entire life believing messages about selflessness and the importance of assenting to outside authority, becoming a woman who knows her inner voice and trusts it as divine movement is a long, hard-fought battle. But it is not without rewards.

If you've spent any time sitting through a Psych 101 class, you are likely familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The famous theory of human need and motivation is illustrated in

pyramid form: physiological needs are the base, followed by safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and finally, self-actualization at the top. It is in this highest space where humans are able to become their fullest selves, capable of realizing all their potential as directed by an inner compass rather than by external rewards.

In a just world, every human being could meet each level of Maslow's needs. As it is, even thinking about self-actualization is a luxury many cannot enjoy because they are struggling at the lower tiers of the pyramid. Women who have been socially marginalized have twice the work cut out for them in pursuit of self-actualization, having to overcome prejudice, generational injustice, poverty, and severe stress alongside the internal spiritual work the rest of us are undertaking. There is a discrepancy of privilege here that must be acknowledged. The amount of time and energy I have available to give to my own enlightenment journey does not reflect that of a second-generation Latina woman who is working three jobs to support her family.

However, this inequality does not nullify the importance of the endeavor. In fact, this is why it's so vital that those of us who *can* pursue self-actualization *do* pursue it. The more people there are living out their full potential through a vibrant and healthy inner life, the more passion, innovation, empathy, and creative solutions we will see, resulting in a more equitable world for all. We must work for a world in which every single one of us can flourish—and this usually means starting with our own interior work.

What most often keeps comfortable, white, middle-class women like me from self-actualization is the deception that we are already self-actualized. We assume that since we are relatively healthy, happy, well-liked people, there is nowhere further to go. We believe that our comfortable lives prove we have long been on the track of personal fulfillment, when instead we have more or less walked a road that was laid out in

front of us since the day we were born. In ways that include but are not limited to motherhood, women (and white women in particular) are culturally conditioned to maintain the status quo. This might be painful to swallow—the truth often is—but it is critical for us to honestly and with curiosity ask ourselves how this has been true in our lives, rather than rush to write it off as unfounded gaslighting.

In her groundbreaking spiritual memoir, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, author Sue Monk Kidd recalls a time early in the process of her own inner awakening when she was working in her garden and was suddenly bombarded by a strange new awareness: “*I am grown, with children of my own. But inside I am still a daughter.*” She continues on to explain, “A daughter is a woman who remains internally dependent, who does not shape her identity and direction as a woman but tends to accept the identity and direction projected onto her. She tends to become the image of a woman that the cultural father idealizes.”<sup>2</sup>

We who like to think of ourselves as modern, enlightened, independent women may balk at this characterization of daughterhood. But when we start peeling back the layers, we might be shocked by the approval-seeking conformity that we find deep within. Being a daughter gives us a place, gives us respect, gives us belonging and assigned value. But being a daughter can never give us back ourselves.

### **Shedding the Old to Find the New**

When I found out I was pregnant for the first time, I immediately knew where I wanted to have the baby. Near the downtown area in our city, off a charming side road, was a small historic home with a large sign in the front yard that read “Inanna Birth & Women’s Care” with a list of the names of several midwives under it. On the day of our first appointment, while

our three-year-old Ugandan-born son, Alyosha, played nearby, a midwife sat across from us, smiling as Eric held my hand supportively, and said, “Let me tell you the story of Inanna.”

Not seeing what this had to do with my pregnancy or future delivery, I humored her and let her continue. She proceeded to tell of the ancient myth *The Descent of Inanna*, considered by some to be the first epic poem ever written at around four thousand years old—even older than *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the story, Inanna descends to the underworld to visit her sister Ereshkigal, the queen of the dead, whose husband has just died. Naturally the underworld is not a safe place to go, so Inanna is armed with divine powers to protect her: a crown, two necklaces, breastplate, ring, scepter, and fine clothes. When she arrives, her sister Ereshkigal is none too pleased and orders the seven gates of the underworld bolted shut against Inanna. She is allowed through one gate at a time but is required to strip herself of one divine power at each gate, so when Inanna finally meets her sister she is naked and utterly vulnerable.

Ereshkigal turns her defenseless sister into a corpse and hangs her on a hook, where Inanna stays for three days and three nights, until her faithful servant Ninshubur goes to the underworld with two demons, outsmarts Ereshkigal, and revives Inanna with the food and water of life. Inanna then rises from the dead and returns to earth.

When the midwife finished the story, she looked me in the eye with all the tenderness of a wizened sage who knows their protégé cannot yet possibly understand what they are about to say. “This is childbirth. You will be stripped of everything, for you can take nothing with you but what is inside you. You will die and you will be resurrected. You will know true things about yourself for the first time. And if you are paying attention, you can take that knowing with you into the rest of your life.”

This is the sacred mystery of motherhood, whether it has been entered into through childbirth, adoption, foster care,

step-parenting, or any other way. Motherhood does not tell us who we are; motherhood tells us how to find out for ourselves.

— **Going Deeper** —

Find a comfortable place to sit with a journal and a pen. Set a timer for ten minutes and write down everything that comes to mind about identity and motherhood. No one will ever see this, and there are no right or wrong answers. Just let your mind free-associate as it will. When the timer goes off, look back on what you've written and ask yourself the following questions, or any other questions that seem important for your inner process:

*In what ways have I hidden behind motherhood as my identity?*

*When I think about separating my role as mother from my identity as a person, what fears do I experience? What hopes?*

*What is something I have always wanted to do or learn about but have not pursued because it felt silly, selfish, or otherwise out of line? Could there be a divine invitation for me there?*

*What messages have I heard about God requiring my selflessness? Does that feel true in the deepest parts of my being?*

When you are done, sit in silence for a few minutes. Then breathe this prayer:

I do not have to become small for you to value me. You invite me to take up space.

two

## Maintaining Boundaries

*Generosity toward Self and Others*



We are irrevocably, unapologetically changed by our children. Author and activist Glennon Doyle has said that her firstborn “brought me into this world,” because finding out about the pregnancy ushered her out of addiction and into sobriety.<sup>1</sup> Doyle’s circumstances may be unusual, but her words resonate with many of us who sense we have been birthed into the world in a new and deeper way by the arrival of our children. Once they come into existence we are never, ever the same.

This truth that mothers have known in our bones for centuries has been evidenced scientifically in our lifetime. The medical community now recognizes that cells from the baby cross the placenta and enter the mother’s bloodstream, eventually becoming part of her tissue. If you are a mother who carried your child in your womb, pieces of their DNA are still inside of you—and always will be.

That is one hell of a bond.



It's mysterious. It's magical. The connection between a mother and her child is both physical and metaphysical. This is the holiness of our motherhood. Yet this can also be our demise, because how can a woman extricate herself from an interlacing of being that runs so deep? We literally have pieces of our children inside of us—how can we be expected to continue on into a life separate from them?

In her best-selling novel *Little Fires Everywhere*, author Celeste Ng crafts one of the most potent descriptions of the ache of motherhood I have ever read. Of children growing up, Ng writes, “Parents learned to survive touching their children less and less. . . . The occasional embrace, a head leaned for just a moment on your shoulder, when what you really wanted more than anything was to press them to you and hold them so tight you fused together and could never be taken apart. It was like training yourself to live on the smell of an apple alone, when what you really wanted was to devour it, to sink your teeth into it and consume it, seeds, core, and all.”<sup>2</sup> To someone who is not a parent, Ng's words might sound extreme—bizarre even. But motherhood has a way of making you a bit odd.

And yet we know we can't devour the apple. Apples need to be free to be their own little appley selves. We know that clinging too tightly to our children does not benefit them in the long run; we assent fairly readily to that fact, even when living it out is much harder. But do we understand that we too are damaged when we become indiscriminately intertwined with our children? Can we see that it is not only they, but also we, who cannot grow strong and able if our roots are gnarled around another living thing?

Preserving our emotional, mental, and physical health as mothers requires that we institute clear boundaries about how much self-giving we offer. This does not mean holding our children or partners at a distance—far from it. Part of the sacredness of womanhood is our fundamental gift of relationship:

we nurture, we include, we embrace. We are warm, soft, safe ports for the tiny ships of our children to return to after a daring adventure. We were made to be in deep relationships with our loved ones, and when we do it well, we thrive. But when we don't do it well, we suffer all the more.

Boundaries come in both external and internal forms, and we all need some combination of both to be our best, most whole selves. *External boundaries* serve our interpersonal relationships, helping us identify the treatment we will and will not accept from other people, as well as helping us differentiate our individual selves as separate from the people we care about.

Here are some examples of external boundaries that have been set by mothers I personally know (names and some details have been changed to protect their privacy):

- Natalie determined that because of health issues she could not handle having more than two kids, even though her partner strongly desired more. She was the primary caregiver, and limiting her family size was crucial for her well-being.
- Amy was laid off from her job but knew that working outside the home was something that kept her healthy, even if it was not financially necessary for her family. Despite pressure by some to become a stay-at-home mom, she kept her kids in daycare for months while she filled out applications and went on interviews—ultimately finding a new job that excited her.
- Selena enjoyed being the primary caregiver for her young children but recognized a need for a break by the time dinner came around every night, so she discussed this with her spouse. Now, every day after the meal is eaten as a family, she retreats alone while he oversees bath and pajama time.

- Katie used to find herself sucked into the rabbit hole of her spouse's cyclical bouts of depression, staying up late into the night talking with him and then feeling depleted the next day. Eventually she learned to communicate exactly what time she would need to stop talking and go to bed—and was pleasantly surprised to see her marriage improved by the change.
- Shanel had a challenging relationship with her parents but still wanted them to be a part of her child's life. She decided to continue making visits a few times a year but limited them to no longer than two days at a time.

*Internal boundaries*, on the other hand, are those that are self-imposed for our own welfare. When set and implemented well, internal boundaries enable us to treat ourselves with respect and make choices that move us toward inner wholeness.

Here are some examples of internal boundaries that have been set by mothers I personally know:

- Erin succumbed to alcohol abuse in the past, but these days she is in a healthier mental and emotional place. Moving forward, she has determined that no alcohol whatsoever is the right choice for her life.
- Swami does not own a scale because she has decided to assess her body's needs by the way it feels rather than the way it looks.
- Christi is active on social media in both personal and professional capacities but realizes that too much screen time can be unhealthy. Every six weeks she logs off all social media accounts for an entire week.
- Monique closes each day by recalling the events that unfolded and her responses to them, whether she is proud

of those responses or not. She then makes a mental exercise of separating her being from her behavior by noticing her mistakes and resolving to do better, while also affirming herself as a good and valuable person regardless of those mistakes.

Boundaries can vary from mildly consequential to life changing. Our lives are filled with both kinds, plus those that fall everywhere on the spectrum in between. Often we set boundaries without realizing we are doing it. But then there are other times when standing up for our needs feels like the hardest thing we've ever done. In those moments, setting boundaries can be an act of courage. In a very real sense, setting boundaries is a spiritual exercise in inner freedom.

### **Reclaiming Virginity**

It has been a long time since I considered myself a virgin. I realize that as the mother of enough kids to form my own basketball team, this news will surprise no one. What might come as a surprise, however, is that I'm starting to reclaim the concept itself. The more I learn about the history of the word, the more I realize that although my hymen is no longer intact, I am living out virginity more truly than ever.

Kim Hudson, author of *The Virgin's Promise*, says the original definition of virgin was "to know your intrinsic worth."<sup>3</sup> Feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye says a virgin is a wild and willful independent human as opposed to subjugated property.<sup>4</sup> In Greek mythology, a virgin goddess is one who is self-fulfilling and makes her own choices. I have read in various places that a working definition of a virgin is a woman "who belongs to herself."

However we define it, there seems to be substantial evidence that virginity has not always been synonymous with a lack of

experience of penetrative sex, which is what we generally mean when we use the word now. Understood in this broader context, it's fair to say that *virgin* could be a word for a person who has done her inner work to stay true to herself, her own needs, and her own voice, rather than conform to the demands or expectations of those around her—whether they come from individuals or society. It's actually quite handy to have such a word, especially in the conversation surrounding boundaries.

Kim Hudson developed her own theories about the significance of the archetype of virgin while studying the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Hudson was enthralled by Jung's analysis of the hero's journey and the archetype of hero, but she perceived the absence of the feminine, a curiosity that eventually led her to discover the virgin archetype. It's important to note here that both men and women have elements of hero and virgin in themselves and in their stories; the archetypes are not gender exclusive but representative of the masculine and feminine elements that are present within all humans. Yet in the discussion of seeking spiritual wholeness in motherhood, the journey of the virgin carries much more weight.

Hudson describes the virgin's journey as a “creative, spiritual, and sexual awakening that creates a boundary between who we are and who everyone wants us to be.”<sup>5</sup> While the archetypal hero must embark out into the world to find their true self, the archetypal virgin does so in the domestic realm. Sound familiar? Whether we work outside the home or exclusively within the home is not the issue; rather, all mothers by nature of our motherhood are tasked with finding meaning, identity, and spirituality right where we are. The boundaries of self must be created internally; we discover that we are a world all our own. While the task of the hero is to go out and become self-giving, the task of the virgin is to go inward and become self-fulfilling. “Whenever someone stands up for themselves, the virgin archetype comes out,” says Hudson.<sup>6</sup>

## **Breaking Unhelpful Bonds**

By the time I had my daughter Thea, I had already birthed and breastfed three babies in less than six years. She was the fourth. You can imagine how depleted and exhausted my body was by that point, and one day while breastfeeding I found myself mentally calculating the number of months left that I would have to use my body to feed a baby. We had already decided Thea would be our last child; I could almost taste the freedom that would come from sleeping through the night and not being relied on to produce food from my physical person. I had breastfed all of my biological babies for at least a year each, and I had found it to be a wonderful experience. The problem was, it no longer felt that way.

Oh, it did in the beginning, when she might as well have been a blind baby bird holding her mouth open for worms, but after months stacked on months, I'd become restless. The collective needs of my children were high, and breastfeeding began to represent something much heavier than just feeding a baby; it began to feel like a tangible ball and chain keeping my body from belonging to just me again. The fact that I identified with this metaphor troubled me. I'd known the feeling of empowerment that can come from breastfeeding a baby, and this wasn't it.

But with Thea being the only girl, I struggled with the possibility of her getting the short end of the stick: I knew breastfeeding was good for attachment and for nutrition. And regarding the latter, well, she was already such a little peanut, hovering at around the tenth percentile and eliciting "hmmms" from the doctor reading her chart at each well-child visit. At the six-month checkup the pediatrician told me I would need to bring Thea back one month later to check her growth. Although I wasn't worried per se, it didn't escape my thoughts either.

I had always taken it for granted that I would breastfeed all my babies until they turned one; after all, I had no medical

reason not to. I didn't want to deny Thea the quality of care I had given her brothers—especially knowing that as a female, she would likely have fewer advantages in other ways than my boys would have.

As I continued to do my own inner work through prayer, counseling, and seeking spiritual direction, I began to recognize my lifelong pattern of giving my body in service of others at the expense of self—a pattern that had created damaging relationships in my life and one I was determined to stop. I realized that weaning my baby would be an act of self-care, a way to put a stake in the ground and declare that I am entitled to set specific and tangible boundaries for my own wellness.

Yes, there had been a time when breastfeeding empowered me to become more of the mother I wanted to be. But this was a different time. This time breastfeeding my baby was actually making me less of the mother I wanted to be, one who was “touched out,” resentful, and short-tempered. In an act of self-compassion, I weaned Thea onto formula at seven months old. Immediately, I felt psychologically healthier. I was kinder to my other kids. Suddenly my toddler's terrorist antics seemed more charming than enraging. Almost overnight, I began to enjoy motherhood again.

One month later we went to the doctor for Thea's growth check, and my eyes bulged at the number on the scale. She had gained two pounds in one month. The very thing that I'd needed to grow, she had needed too.

## **Boundaries Help Us Thrive**

Setting boundaries can sometimes feel selfish. Many of us, especially in our roles as mothers or spouses, are slow to identify or implement the boundaries that would allow us to flourish because we feel guilty about the very idea of guarding our own needs so vehemently. Instead we run ourselves ragged trying to

be what everyone else in the family is asking us to be, and the result is that we become resentful of the very people we love the most. There is nothing healthy or sustainable about such a system. It benefits no one.

The most surprising thing about setting and maintaining boundaries is that, rather than producing selfishness, it actually produces within us a greater capacity for generosity. This might seem counterintuitive, but think about it for a moment. Those who cannot set boundaries do not have the space in their lives to care for themselves in a way that allows them to operate from their healthiest state because there is always someone else to put first. So while it might look like these people are the most unselfish, helpful, and merciful people we know, the reality may be that deep down they feel trapped, resentful, angry, and overlooked.

On the other hand, people who have put in the work of implementing strong personal boundaries have created space in their lives for generosity. They are not wasting away inside, having spread themselves too thin to do anything wholeheartedly. They are able to give generously to others in ways that perpetuate cycles of life, energy, and joy.

“Generosity can’t exist without boundaries,” says author and University of Houston professor Brené Brown.<sup>7</sup> In fact, her data indicate that the most compassionate people she has interviewed are also the ones with the strongest boundaries. The working definition of a boundary that Brown uses is simple: it’s the line between what’s okay and what’s not okay. In other words, research is telling us that to become more compassionate (read: spiritually healthy) individuals, we need to clarify with ourselves and with others what we are and are not willing to accept in life.

It sounds straightforward enough, but for us to identify and stand beside our personal boundaries, we have to first know what our needs are—and some of us moms haven’t thought



about our own needs in years. To know what boundaries would help us grow and thrive, we have to make space in our lives to stop and listen to the Spirit within: space to dull the noise, space to halt the hustle, space to be with ourselves in silence.

The first thing many of us will need, then, is to establish some boundaries around our time. This might look like making an arrangement with our parenting partner or a babysitter or another mom friend with whom we can arrange a childcare exchange. Getting time alone often feels impossible for mothers, but it is rarely impossible in actuality. It's a matter of prioritizing our own inner life, of deeming ourselves worthy to be a priority. If we can protect our inner life by giving it time to take root and sprout, we will find that the rest of our needs may finally have a place to make themselves heard.

### — Going Deeper —

Settle into a seated position with your feet flat on the floor as an act of grounding yourself. Turn your palms upward as a gesture of receptivity to the wisdom and insight God wants to offer you. Take a few long, deep breaths and find stillness.

Allow yourself to reflect on your daily life from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed. Go through a typical day in chronological order, being sure to include people you interact with (children, spouse, mom friends, coworkers, boss, etc.) as well as things you do (household labor, parenting, work, etc.). As you reflect on the minutiae of your life, begin to notice where feelings of resentment arise. Where do feelings of envy emerge? What about feelings of longing? Remember that feelings are neither good nor bad; they are merely giving you information.

In a spirit of compassionate curiosity, ask yourself questions about the areas that elicited these feelings. Often strong internal

movements like resentment, envy, and longing can be helpful indicators of an area in need of boundaries, whether internal or external. Allow yourself to dream about putting healthy boundaries in those places. What might they be? How would they feel? How might such a change create more generosity in your life, both toward others and yourself?