

The Book of Womanhood

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foreword by Lisa Graham McMinn



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THE BOOK OF WOMANHOOD

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for the women

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Introduction

IT IS A SPECIAL evening, one of my favorite evenings of the year. After months of preparation, we are about to initiate the third class of participants in the rite of passage called *Woman*. The atmosphere is perfect—candles are lit, gifts laid out, desserts visible, and alumnae are assisting. All the college student participants are in semi-formal attire sitting somewhat nervously in a half circle, not quite sure what the evening will be like, since this is their first “initiation.” Before beginning the initiation rite, I ask each of the women to share why they chose to invest themselves in this voluntary process that offers mostly intangible results and no academic credit. Many state that they were raised in a Christian subculture that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) taught them that marriage made them a woman. They, however, are convinced that being a woman is not simply being married, and are participating in the rite of passage in order to find a framework that helps to define themselves as women, whether single or married, whether with children or without. I am invigorated, knowing that their life stories will be different from mine because of *Woman*.

I remember knowing two single women in the small-town upstate New York church we attended during my formative years. One was the divorced mother of my friend and the other was on her way to be a missionary. Almost all the others were married with children. My extended family all married young, most to high school or college sweethearts, and the women focused on their children. Predictably, then, my college hopes included meeting the man of my dreams, marrying soon after, and becoming an elementary school teacher who took time off for her children’s early years and then spent summers with the kids when they started school. I simply thought that was what women did—women found their identity in the roles of wife and mother.

As with most of us, life did not happen quite the way I imagined it would when I was eighteen. I took the fact I did not marry (or have) a college sweetheart in stride, enjoying the freedom to travel to Asunción, Paraguay and to teach there, although I must admit my hopes were still similar to the college ones. I was part of the *jovenes* (youth) group at church—a group of teenagers and any others who were unmarried. After two years, I returned stateside, and my new teaching job brought me to a church in Pennsylvania that was similar to my earliest one. There, I often wondered why people thought I was still in college—it certainly wasn't my young fashion style since I was a dowdy schoolteacher whose drop-waist dresses functioned to free her to sit on the floor with the littlest students. Was I immature? Was it my marital state? I knew I was in the fourth year of my teaching career, but was I a woman or still just a girl?

My heart longed for international work, so I left my public school teaching career to pursue a seminary education, still with the hope that this new stage in life would provide me with what I had desired in college. But people do not blunderingly call seminary “cemetery” without cause. At graduation, I was no longer headed to full-time international work, and I was still alone, wondering where I fit, whether I was a girl or a woman, and what it meant to be a woman anyway.

I can picture the room that held my first forty-student college Bible class and I can still feel the jitters that I experienced most of that semester. I was a full-time college instructor, but as I looked out at the sea of young faces, I felt like I was one of them, often identifying more with them than with my married colleagues. I deeply knew, however, that I was an adult, not a college student, and a woman, not a girl. My identity as a woman had not been found in the roles of wife and mother, so I began a journey of naming myself “woman” and seeking to define it.

Though we've not grown up the same and our experiences profoundly differ, I find that many women still wonder about womanhood in a similar way, regardless of how their backgrounds defined womanhood. A woman may refer to a friend as “her girl,” and may have only heard the term “woman” in a pejorative context. Media and society encourage her to find empowerment in a “Girls Gone Wild” or “Spring Break” rite of passage experience, and to allow her peers and the opposite sex to form her meaning and identity. The Christian church negates these ideas, but offers discipleship that is often one-dimensional teaching about following God's commands. She needs more than that. She needs to know what being a

Christian woman is and when and how she can become one. That's what I was searching for when I began to name myself "woman."

It was a significant step for me to stop referring to myself as a girl, whether out loud or in my head, but this journey of womanhood did not suddenly take all of my attention. Sure, being the only full-time female professor in Bible and Christian Ministry made me consider gender questions and they came up in classes, but the journey of womanhood did not suddenly become central to my life.

Seven years after that first college class I taught, however, my first dissertation topic gets rejected, and I need a new one. My advisor suggests that I review all my previous papers and projects to see if any still interest me, and my work on Rites of Passage for Women stands out. As the dissertation project is approved and all the details fall into place, the journey of womanhood comes front and center. I want to know how others envision the passage from girl to woman and to analyze it ritually and theologically. *Woman*, Nyack's rite of passage, is the result of that research, and I now have a framework that encapsulates how I understand myself as a Christian woman.

Why a Rite of Passage?

Like many others, I began the journey to understand myself as a woman without a rite of passage. Rather than citing a distinct ritual, Christian women may narrate a series of several life experiences that catalyzed their transformation from girl to woman, while others may lament continuing confusion about womanhood. Still others may argue that becoming a woman is a daily, gradual occurrence that happens through gaining more responsibility at home or various "passage activities," like "beginning menstruation, getting a driver's license, reaching drinking age, graduating, moving away from the parental home, or earning an income."¹ These events are often unritualized and happen at different times for each person.

Without the presence of a rite of passage into adulthood, however, defining oneself as a woman is not only done at varying ages and degrees of maturity. It is also neglected, leaving the person who has adult responsibilities still feeling like a girl and unsure of her womanhood (like me).

Though many American Christians are suspicious of ritual and symbol, we return to them at the most important times of life. Students look

1. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 94.

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forward to a graduation full of “pomp and circumstance,” special symbolic clothing, “crossing the stage,” and changing the tassel right to left. Even the most non-traditional pastors celebrate a traditional wedding ritual where participants wear distinctive clothing, are physically given to one another, and adorn their left ring fingers with the symbols of that union. And when life has expired, we find comfort in a ritual that includes the biblical readings of future hope, the flowers and casket, and the line of cars with headlights on, journeying to the place of rest. These are not the “dead rituals” that provoke the ire of American Christians. No, they are meaningful ceremonies that accompany some of the most important rites of passage in life. In fact, “Although rituals tend to be conservative, that is, valuing the past and honoring tradition, rituals can also be innovative, that is, training their participants into a new way of thinking.”²

In 1994, *The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* cited the lack of rites of passage in global society as a problem that results in confusion regarding the marks of age-related social roles and the societal requirements for those roles.³ To mark passage to adulthood and adult social roles, some celebrate a *quinceañera* or a debutante ball, but most just float through this time as liminal, “betwixt and between,” wondering who they are and where they fit into the unclear societal or Christian scheme. A rite of passage into Christian womanhood can clarify the Christian scheme and provide teaching and experiences that grow a Christian daughter by referring to her whole being—spiritual, psychological, social, sexual, intellectual, and emotional.⁴

Rites of Passage Basics

Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase, “rite of passage” as a descriptor of his research into “coming of age” rituals in indigenous tribes at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, it was typical to observe only male rituals as the archetype for both genders, and he found that the ones he observed had three stages, preliminal, liminal, and postliminal, or “rites of separation, transition, and reincorporation.”⁵ The rite of separation (initiation) separated the boy from his mother and physically moved him to

2. Ramshaw, *Christian Worship*, 36.
3. As cited in Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 91.
4. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.
5. van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 11.

another place—out in the “bush”—where he would undergo various trials and learn skills that he would need for the next stage in life. This training was a liminal stage, where the “no-longer-a-boy-but-not-yet-a-man” would be in special non-hierarchical community with others like him.⁶ Having learned skills and passed the test, he would be reincorporated into the community as a man with a new social status, new responsibilities, and higher expectations.

Traditional rites of passage for women, however, are different from those for men. Humanities and Religious studies professor Bruce Lincoln found that traditional women’s rites follow a basic pattern of “enclosure, metamorphosis (or magnification), and emergence.”⁷ Thus, often at menarche (first menstruation), a girl is separated from others and isolated or enclosed. At this point, she magnifies the skills she already has and may identify with a cosmic or mythical heroine through the stories she is told. Then, she emerges as a woman, one who is able to create and sustain life. As we ponder these two distinct processes, let us consider psychologist Abigail Brenner’s conclusion, “While this [enclosure, metamorphosis, emergence] may be true for traditional rites of passage, women today are finding the ‘male’ structure of the ritual—departure, journey, and return—to be both powerful and true to their own process.”⁸

So shall we reject the entirety of the traditional female pattern in order to embrace the entirety of the male pattern for our rite of passage? And how much of another culture’s rituals should be transplanted into our non-ritual society? Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes would argue against ritual fantasizing and wholesale borrowing. To think of another culture’s rites as idyllic is simply not reality, and to borrow them wholesale is to “cannibalize” them and take “spiritual booty.”⁹ And while the female process does not sound equal to that of males, there is merit in enclosure and magnification that should not be lost. Why not seek to learn from both? The male process is accomplished in community of peers, while the female is individual, but our rite of passage, *Woman*, seeks to combine individuality and community; other readers may seek this combination as they journey with friends.

6. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 139.

7. Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, 101.

8. Brenner, *Women’s Rites of Passage*, 21.

9. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 114.

Unfortunately, we must acknowledge that rites of passage are not always effective—people may remain unchanged.¹⁰ Grimes, however, found that the effective ones have three characteristics. First, they *function* to draw attention to the passage—“spiritually, psychologically, and socially,”¹¹ and I add intellectually and emotionally. Second, they have the *purpose* of transformation, as from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Finally, they *require* much from the individuals going through the rite and their communities. “Ritual knowledge is rendered unforgettable only if it makes serious demands on individuals and communities, only if it is etched deeply into the marrow of soul and society.”¹² Thus, an effective rite of passage *functions* as an attention-giver, has the *purpose* of transformation, and *requires* much from individuals and their communities. *Woman* has these characteristics.

Key Elements of Christian Rites of Passage

I analyzed several Christian rites of passage that are in use today,¹³ and this analysis revealed that mature Christian womanhood is realized through relationship, since the rites emphasized relationship with God and with others. This may reflect a common reading of Genesis 1–2 and an implicit understanding of male and female as created in the image of God. Since God is Trinity, and thus in eternal relationship, relationships among humans, whether family, peer, marital, or other, display the image of the Trinitarian God. Though the rites themselves specifically emphasized relationship with God and others, some also implicitly emphasized a relationship with self and hinted at a relationship with creation. *I suggest that the true identity of a woman (or a man) is realized through developing relationship with God, self, others, and creation. The role of a rite of passage into womanhood is to create opportunities for girls to gain knowledge, skills, and a disposition that seeks maturity and development in these relationships.* Though a relationship with self is not clear in Genesis 1–2, relationship with God, others, and creation is. A relationship with self, or knowing and caring for oneself, becomes clear in the biblical injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself.¹⁴

10. Arthur Magida in *Opening the Doors of Wonder* and Grimes in *Deeply Into the Bone* narrate ineffective rituals.

11. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 5.

12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. Davis, “Rites of Passage.”

14. Lev 19:18, Matt 19:19 and 22:39, Mark 12:31, 33, Luke 10:27, Rom 13:9, Gal 5:14, Jas 2:8.

Since adult Christian women reading the above may consider their own development in these four relationship areas as incomplete, a journey motif for womanhood is also a core principle. The women who lead the rite of passage and seek to help others develop these relationships have not completed the journey of womanhood, for it lasts a lifetime; they are simply further along. A rite of passage invites “younger sisters” to journey together with “older sisters” who offer wisdom and experience and are still continually growing.

Possibly the main function of a rite of passage is to create space to talk about being a Christian woman. Though churches may nurture one’s relationship with God and with others, it is often in a generic human sense rather than in a gender-related sense. Christian women relate to God, self, others, and creation in ways that are often similar to other women and different at times from the way men do. A rite of passage creates space where participants are not simply taught to be a Christian, but to be a Christian woman.¹⁵

Woman is Proven Effective!

In the spring of 2011, in tandem with colleagues, I pioneered *Woman* for a group of seniors at Nyack College. It sought to follow all the above principles, but focused primarily on a woman’s relationship to self simply because of the short time frame. The results showed significant transformation,¹⁶ revealing that even this narrow focus also yielded significant growth in the participants’ relationship with God, others, and creation. This was evident through comparison of the participants’ responses on intake and exit surveys as well as their presentations that defined what being a woman meant to them, made at the final Crossing Over Ceremony.

Allow me to include just a few of the participants’ written responses on the surveys. “I’ve gained much from the mentoring, it really helped me to find and apply confidence that stems from inner strength. . . [and] a strong foundation in God.” “One of the things that I gained [through *Woman*] was that power and authority . . . come with knowing scripture

15. Rites of passage for women in traditional societies are mediated by women. Men have a supportive role, because in the same way that men call boys to manhood, women call girls to womanhood.

16. See Davis Abdallah, “Development and Efficacy of a Rite of Passage” for the results of the first year of *Woman*.

and understanding [the Bible]. This was gained through the witness of [the leaders]. The way they were able to use and understand the Word and how it relates to and impacts their life was so powerful.” “I learned that as a woman, I always need to care for myself through proper nutrition. I didn’t know how important it was to care for myself before.”

Several of the presentations defining womanhood in the Crossing Over Ceremony (the final postliminal celebration) brought out different characteristics of women. As she described the emotion displayed in her detailed and beautiful drawing, one stated, “I think a beautiful thing about women is that we can hold such deep emotion and still go on and still survive.” Another stated, “This entire process of being a woman has been amazing, hard, but beautiful all at the same time.” Rather than stating negative things about herself, she learned to say, “I’m a woman, and I’m a cool one, too! And it’s okay to be confident in yourself because God created us to give what he’s given us to other people.” “A woman knows her identity, or she strives to understand it, but she does know it’s separate from what she can do. A woman lives and relates to God and to others . . . and to herself, from a place of knowing that she’s loved and out of loving. A woman will not stop journeying until she understands the core of this—all of this . . . I’m no longer a little girl.” All these women named themselves “woman” and gave meaning to the word.

It was a privilege for our community to invest and to walk with these women for that short semester, witnessing and catalyzing their transformation. The attention paid to the passage into womanhood was vital to their journeys, and they have progressed in understanding their personal identity much earlier in life than I did. It is my hope that this transformative process will become accessible to more and more Christian women.

Moving Forward

This book was originally intended to accompany the *Woman 2014–2015* rite of passage at Nyack College. Now, it is intended to nurture growth in the journey of womanhood for all the women who read it. Lisa Graham McMinn’s foreword encourages you to take this journey with friends, and I heartily agree! When the words used are from the *Woman* initiation that welcomes participants to the journey, consider yourselves equally welcomed. When *Woman* assignments are described, join us by also doing

them! And be sure to chat about it all as you journey with friends. Here is the path it follows:

Beginnings is the first chapter, and it recommends some overall habits that will help in the entire process of understanding womanhood. The next three sections develop the four relationship areas: with God, self, others, and creation.

Relationship with God addresses general Christian conversion and discipleship, stories of the women in the Bible, what it means to be created in the image of God, and the valuing of characteristics commonly associated with femininity.

Relationship with Self explores how a woman can value menstruation as giving life, accept and love her body, take care of herself physically and emotionally, and spend time alone without fear. It will develop her voice, her confidence, her understanding of sexuality as not limited to genital sexuality, and her commitment to sexual purity.

Relationship with Others investigates healthy interdependence rather than over-dependence or over-independence. It will touch on mentoring relationships, relationships with friends (male and female), relationships with older men and women, and romantic relationships.

Relationship with Creation develops the idea that creativity and giving life are part of what it means to be in the image of God. This relationship includes practicing Sabbath, habits of hiking or otherwise being in creation, as well as caring for the earth's resources and assessing one's carbon footprint.

These pages will be peppered with quotes from women who have journeyed before you, whose chorus of voices will join mine to guide and encourage. They will be anonymous, but are either at the beginning of each section or set apart from the regular text as a sidebar. Please receive the quotes knowing that they are from a diverse group of women—ethnically, culturally, and in age!¹⁷ Each chapter also begins with quotes whose authors are identified. The quotes are intended to make us ponder ideas

17. Thus far (2014), 57 women have completed the journey of *Woman*. Of those, approximately 21 percent were not college seniors, ranging in age from 23 to 40; about 25 percent were brought up in an urban environment, 67 percent were suburban, and 8 percent were rural; approximately 5 percent were Asian, 16 percent were Black (African-American), 4 percent were black (non-African-American), 16 percent were Latina (from various countries), 7 percent were multi-ethnic, and 50 percent were white (making 50 percent of participants non-white), and two of the participants were international students. The quotes are taken from a random sampling of these women.

together and do not denote complete agreement with any author, celebrity, or teacher cited.

Furthermore, each chapter ends with discussion questions and a prayer. The questions are for you to ponder on your own and to share with others who are journeying with you. The entire prayer for each relationship is at the end of the section, and the prayers at the end of the chapters generally form part of the prayer. Feel free to pray them devotionally.

Though this book is about womanhood, it is not only for women, but also for men who seek to understand and empower their wives, daughters, and friends to be the women God has formed them to be. And for those of us who never had a rite of passage to call ourselves women, may it also be for our personal transformation and inspiration to help those who come after us!