

The Book of Womanhood



Amy F. Davis Abdallah
foreword by Lisa Graham McMinn



CASCADE *Books* • Eugene, Oregon

THE BOOK OF WOMANHOOD

Copyright © 2015 Amy F. Davis Abdallah. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3 Eugene, OR 97401.

Cascade Books
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

ISBN 13: 978-1-4982-2134-4

www.wipfandstock.com

Cataloging-in-Publication data:

Abdallah, Amy F. Davis.

The book of womanhood / Amy F. Davis Abdallah.

ISBN13: 978-1-4982-2134-4

1. Women's spirituality. 2. Women and religion. 3. Title

BL458 .A230 2015

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) are from The New Revised Standard Version Bible, Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

SECTION TWO

Relationship with Self

“Self-care is one of the primary things I have learned. Again, we have to work with our bodies. Well-being isn’t about wrestling our bodies until they are subdued, but having a relationship with them, in which we listen and respond appropriately. Still learning, but loving the process.”

“I have become more aware of who I am as a Woman of God created in the image of God and it has drawn me closer to God as I try to grasp this identity, mostly in times of loneliness.”

“I learned how important it is to *pay attention* to my emotions, mental state of mind, and body (what I eat, exercise, etc.). I tend to neglect this and realize how my thoughts have been guided (or influenced) by society subconsciously.”

Introduction

Liking Myself

“Blessed women of God, you have come to develop your relationship with yourself. In your survey, you answered questions regarding how you have taken care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally, and now we journey together, seeking to understand the rhythms of our body as positive and as an ability to give life, tending to our bodies through nutrition, exercise, and healthy sexuality, becoming aware of our personal strengths and weakness, seeking to build our confidence and use our voice, and dreaming constructively about a future that is tailored to who we really are. We welcome you.”

I SAT IN MY office, and she sat across from me. She had thick bangs and long dark hair, which she used, along with a voluminous scarf, to cover her face and body. I'd been mentoring her for a few weeks now, and had discovered an intelligent, beautiful woman who wasn't sure how to use her voice and had little confidence. We had already talked through her bad break-up, and were exploring forward paths.

I asked what she liked about herself, and she turned a surprised face to me. “Ummmm,” was followed by a seemingly endless pause. I knew she felt like a different person in different contexts; the college arena did not seem to free her to be “fully herself” and happy. I waited, but words describing what she liked about herself were one or two halting questions: “My hair?” “I am a nice person?” Answers did not come easily.

So I gave her two challenging assignments. First, to write a list of twenty-five things she liked about herself, and then to write a list of twenty-five things she loved to do that made her feel “fully herself” and happy. She left feeling a little overwhelmed.

Perhaps most of us would be overwhelmed when faced with such an assignment. Perhaps we would join *Woman* participants in a stare of fear when we contemplate spending eight hours in solitude with just a Bible and journal. Unfortunately, negative voices can outweigh the positive voices, and loneliness can be crushing. Socrates’s “Know thyself” and Jesus’ “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, NIV) call for self-understanding, self-love, and self-respect.

This section focuses on understanding our sexuality, physicality, confidence, and voice in order to develop our relationship to ourselves. We begin with a portion on loneliness, a state with which so many struggle. We will explore how we are physically created to partner with God in giving life, taking care of our physical bodies, and developing our ability to speak and pursue life in confidence. Humans, created by God, are worthy of being loved by God! If God, the almighty Creator of the universe knows and loves me, then who am I to not love myself and know myself?

5

Alone and Lonely
Can the Two Be Separated?

It is strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely.

~ ALBERT EINSTEIN

Women need real moments of solitude and self-reflection to balance out how much of ourselves we give away.

~ BARBARA DE ANGELIS, RELATIONSHIP EXPERT

We, who are so schooled in the art of listening to the voices of others, can often hear our own voice only when we are alone . . . For many women, the first choice, then, is to give ourselves the necessary time and space in which to renew our acquaintance with our lost voice, to learn to recognize it, and to rejoice as we hear it express our truth.

~ FLORENCE FALK, *ON MY OWN: THE ART OF BEING A WOMAN ALONE*

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature, and God.

Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be.

~ ANNE FRANK

I USED TO TAKE after work winter walks with God. I would go to the corner coffee shop after work, get some of their special hot chocolate, and walk down to the pier and around town. I did it because coming home to an empty one-bedroom was at times difficult for me, and the walks helped. They did not, however, assuage my deep desire for companionship. Once, I wrote a song that demonstrates a desire for a companion, but still questions whether I would really be fulfilled with one:

Taking a walk to Starbucks alone
Maybe I'll see someone I know,
And maybe I won't

On a Sunday afternoon, so many fun things to do,
But there's so much time,
When you're alone

Went to church this morning with friends
And I had a party this afternoon
People coming over tonight
Somehow, it doesn't feel right
But what else is there to do?

I want love, I want you
I want the touch of a tender hand,
Someone to talk to and understand
But where are you?

I think about not being alone
About a cozy apartment made for two
But would that really make me content
Or would I always be bent
On needing something new?

I think I want some kids and a home
Coffee shop and a playground to walk to
A dining room full of friends
Togetherness without end
Alone, is there much more to walk through?

I still want love, I want you
 I want the touch of a tender hand,
 Someone to talk to and understand
 But where are you?

Even as I remember these lyrics, I recall the feeling when my loneliness would overwhelm me.

In a world filled with smartphones, social networks, coffee shops, and Skype, people are still incredibly lonely. Sitting in the coffee shop with a friend, she texts her boyfriend, uploads a picture of her coffee and snack to Facebook, and receives a skype call from across the world, all while sort of paying attention to the person sitting across from her. “Usually we are at one place, across from a person, but our hearts are elsewhere.”¹ When we are only present with others in body and not in mind, we are lonely.

When single, we like to encourage ourselves in our times of loneliness that someday our “loneliness problem” will be “fixed” by that special someone. While that may make us feel better in times of discouragement, it sets us up for unrealistic expectations and disappointment in the future, since no person can truly fill our void. In the most ultimate sense, we all sleep alone, and “No relationship, however deep, can ever fully take our loneliness from us.”²

And so young Christian women take the cue from older ones to be as busy and restless as possible, to avoid *feeling* the loneliness, and to avoid being alone. *Woman* participants are unanimously lonely and unanimously afraid of their assignment of spending eight hours in solitude. Yet being lonely and being in solitude are different from one another.

Ronald Rolheiser, in *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home in Times of Loneliness*, explores several different kinds of loneliness. We can usually fit ourselves primarily into one type. First is the loneliness of alienation, the kind where we find our interpersonal relationships inadequate and that frustrates us. Most of us have either watched or experienced the alienation caused through bullying. People are ostracized or different for varying reasons, and that makes them lonely and alienated.³

Another type of loneliness is that of restlessness. This is the kind where we are “never satisfied, but always restless; never quiet, always wanting

1. Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart*, 23.

2. *Ibid.*, 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 42–44.

more of everything.”⁴ Regardless of how our lives look, how many relationships we have, how much social activity we enjoy, it is never enough; we are never content. We are restless, dissatisfied, always pushing to do more—to break through and to break out.⁵ Perhaps you’ve guessed that this was my type of loneliness because of my song above. I clearly had social activity, but found myself restless and wondered if a life companion would actually make me content.

In order to illustrate the next type of loneliness, that of fantasy, Rollo May tells the story of a priest in an airport who had himself urgently paged so that everyone would know who he was. The priest wanted everyone to think he was important and available in case anyone in the crowd had need of him.⁶ The priest had a fantasy that he could save those in the airport and that he was integral to many lives. The way he understood himself and the way he really was were two different pictures. Because he projected a “false self” he was lonely and disconnected to reality. Others can perceive our projection of the fantasized self, and rather than attracting them, it often pushes them away.

The final two types of loneliness are the loneliness of rootlessness (lack of belonging anywhere) and psychological depression. Though we may not all suffer from the final two types, we all suffer from the first three to one degree or another. As I stated above, I primarily suffer from the loneliness of restlessness, and realizing this fact has freed me. When I learned that most people who feel things very deeply suffer from the loneliness of restlessness, I began to accept my loneliness as a “normal” part of my identity.

“In times of loneliness and pain it’s okay to be in that place and in that place crave real intimacy, as bad as hurts to avoid false intimacy.”

I had already realized that being with people or in a romantic relationship did not solve my “loneliness problem.” Thus, when I was instructed, when feeling lonely, to go into solitude, pray, and wait until I hear God lovingly call my name, I was ready to try it. And though often difficult to do, it has helped me develop a sense of self.

I want real intimacy, and I’m not talking about the physical kind. I want to know and be known completely and to be free to be my best

4. Ibid., 51.

5. Ibid., 53.

6. Ibid., 60–62.

and worst self. I want to feel deeply connected on all planes. I suppose most of us are like that, and most of us realize that this longing is only fulfilled in short bursts of time, giving us only sporadic tastes of deeply intimate euphoria. Most of life is lived in between those moments, and we spend time desperately seeking them, often through the false intimacies of masturbation or casual sexual acts, just being at social events or social places (coffee shops, bars, etc.), or otherwise avoiding *feeling* the fact that we deeply want real intimacy and do not have it. Everyone else looks so happy and fulfilled, so we falsely assume there is probably something wrong with us and we fear what that might be. Solitude makes us look at ourselves, and only when we look with the compassionate God calling our name, who knows even the hair on our heads, can we love ourselves and embrace our stories.

I'm not sure that we ever fully know ourselves in this mortal life—it seems to me that there are always surprises or more to know with every new experience. It is important, however, that a woman begin the process of knowing and appreciating herself, and that task is accomplished in part by admitting loneliness, not choosing the false solution of restlessness, and learning solitude. Next time you feel lonely, don't try to solve the problem by being with people, but allow yourself to be alone, and wait for Jesus to call your name. It may take longer than you desire, but the rewards will last far longer than the short-lived social event. It is okay to want deep intimacy, not have it, not choose false intimacy, and sit in the longing. God meets us there.

Indeed, when we do not admit our loneliness, we miss its potential value. My times of deepest loneliness were the times when I wrote poetry and songs with increased creativity, and those times of pain helped me to be more empathetic to others' pain.⁷ Loneliness “can teach us how to cry, and by that very fact, sensitize us to all that is deepest, softest, and most worthwhile inside ourselves.”⁸ Paying attention to our loneliness and being in silence and solitude allow us also to share in the loneliness of Jesus,⁹ whose friends slept at his time of greatest need (Matt 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46).

“I learned
to be still
and know
that he is
God.”

7. Although I personalize the potential value of loneliness, they are all listed in Rolheiser's chapter entitled “The Potential Value of Loneliness,” in *ibid.*, 130-49.

8. *Ibid.*, 135.

9. *Ibid.*, 148.

Various historical rites of passage have emphasized times of silence and solitude. Lisa McMinn tells the story of a more modern vision quest for Sarah at her menarche (her first period);¹⁰ she spent time alone in a deserted cottage and was transformed. This is a delightful combination of the male rite pattern of separation, and the female rite pattern of being enclosed. Though silence and solitude are sometimes difficult to find, and are spiritual disciplines many prefer to avoid, writers on the spiritual life state that spiritual growth is hindered without them.¹¹ Silence and solitude not only increase one's relationship with self, but also with God.

It has often been said that each human has a hole inside that only God can fill. If this is true and if God is infinite, that hole inside us is an infinitely deep hole that is never infinitely full, at least on this earth. We will always

"I am more willing to go on adventures and spend that time with God."

feel that we are lacking something. Loneliness is thus neither scary nor sinful, but rather a part of the human condition that some feel more than others. This truth may encourage women to face loneliness and experience solitude in order to develop their relationship with themselves.

To chat about over tea, coffee, and/or chocolate:

What is it like when you are lonely? How would you describe it?

Which type(s) of loneliness do you experience?

What do you try to do to "solve" your "loneliness problem"? When you try to stay alone and wait for Jesus to call your name, what happens?

Spend eight hours alone with only your Bible and a journal, then chat about the difficulties and joys of the experience.

How does all this affect your relationship with yourself?

10. McMinn, *Sexuality and Holy Longing*, 16.

11. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, as cited in Jones, *The Sacred Way*, 39.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, you who are called the Comforter, I ask you to comfort me in my loneliness. Transform me into a woman that runs to you rather than to short-lived social pleasure. Please teach me what all of this means and guide me not into temptation. Jesus, you called the people to love their neighbor as themselves, and while I seek to love others, help me to love myself. I pray all this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.