

## **The Power of a Woman of Faith**

Good evening! It's good to be with you tonight, and I've been so inspired by the spirit of the writings that have been shared. Since our theme today is women and religion, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the two women who have had the greatest influence on my life. Women of faith. Women whose religious beliefs shaped their lives. I want to remember my maternal grandmother, Annie Eliza Hyde Johnson. Mother of 8, grandmother of 17, and great-grandmother of 31, she passed on to the next world in July 2006. I thank her for the values she embodied. She was an extraordinary seamstress, who at one time or another made clothes for me and my many other cousins, but I think her greatest artistic gifts were manifested in the way she crafted a strong and united family, fiercely loving and protecting, the matriarch of our clan. Her presence in my life remains strong. Also, I want to acknowledge my mother Leslie Yvonne Johnson Drummond, my great inspiration. She became a divorcee when I was four years old, yet she raised my brother and me with such devotion. As a single parent, she returned to the university to earn a degree in elementary education and by the end of her career she had become

a university administrator. When I was a little bitty girl, she taught me to pray, she instilled in me a love of God, and from as far back as I can remember nearly all of our conversations include a discussion of how God continues to shower upon us His blessings. Everyday, she models for me how to walk to in Faith. What a gift this has been throughout my life. On this Mother's Day eve, I thank her for the constant blessing she is to me, my children, and so many others.

When the Unity Feast committee asked me to speak on the subject of women and religion, I initially thought I'd focus on the great women historical figures throughout religious history, and I do reference some of these women in my remarks, but what I was really inspired to talk about is the concept of transformation. I want to consider the power of religion to transform individuals. I want to discuss how women can be transformed through their religious faith and how in turn our faith empowers us to transform our families, communities, and the world. What do I mean by transformation, you ask? I mean to be changed in radical way, to experience a metamorphosis to be made over, to be overhauled. As I'm sharing these brief remarks, please reflect on this question. **What is the power of a woman of faith?**

This is a great age in which to be alive. We see all around us God's hand in uniting diverse peoples of the world—people of all nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. We see the seeds of a new world being planted which will eventually produce the fruits of justice, unity, and peace. God, through his Divine educators has provided a vision of this new age. An Old Testament writer said, "Without a vision the people perish." As women, nurturers, caretakers, guardians of the future, we hold that vision of a time when the earth's resources will be distributed to benefit the entire world's people, when all the children of the world will be educated in the Divine teachings and the arts and sciences. We hold the vision of a time when poverty, disease, and warfare will no longer consign so many --to lives of misery and premature death.

But of course, we know that holding the vision alone is not enough. We must strive, and work, and pray to bring this vision of a world, guided by heavenly teachings, to fruition. We know this is no utopian ideal. It is God's plan for humanity, and we, as women of faith have a major role in ushering in this New Day! The Bahai Scriptures tell us that the world of humanity is like a bird with

two wings; one the male; the other the female. When both wings are reinforced with the same impulse the bird will be enabled to wing its flight heavenward to the summit of progress. So, that what we're interested in. We have to do our part so that humanity is progressing heavenward. We have to make sure our wing is strong. We have to make sure that we're doing our part to ensure lift-off. Our wing can't be in a sling! We can't let the bird of humanity crash and burn, can we? Of course not!

So, what's a woman to do? She, I mean we, have to keep the purpose of our lives in focus, and allow ourselves to have a spiritual MAKEOVER, the kind of makeover that is so much more gratifying than an episode of What Not to Wear—you know the show that magically gives a woman a fresh start with a modern wardrobe, a celebrity haircut, and the perfect shade of blush.

We want a makeover that takes place on the inside, a makeover that will sustain us in the right now and the hereafter. A spiritual makeover, an inner transformation, is permanent—it won't wear off, it won't go out of style.

Baha'u'llah teaches us that we were created to know and worship God. The apostle Paul says that that the Lord has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and

grace. We were wired with a spiritual hunger, a desire to believe in a power greater than ourselves, a desire to understand our purpose in life, a desire to walk a spiritual path. Religion provides us with the tools for this personal spiritual transformation. It reveals the guidance that we need to develop spiritual strength and to transform our character through the acquisition of divine virtues.

In every religion, prayer is extolled for its transforming power. We know that prayer is conversation with God. The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing, Baha'i scriptures tell us, there is nothing sweeter in the world of existence than prayer, and that we should live in a state of prayer. According to St. Teresa, prayer is the greatest of all blessings in this life, the channel through which all the favors of God pass to the soul. Prayer is the beginning of every virtue. So, the significance of prayer as a tool for transformation is an unchanging spiritual truth that has been reiterated in every Dispensation of God.

I can't think of any woman who has devoted her life to knowing God, to attaining his presence, to service to humanity who was not steadfast in prayer. "Spirit has influence, prayer has spiritual effect." Through prayer we commune with our

Creator, we become illumined, we request healing, we give thanks, we supplicate for ourselves and others, we develop spiritual susceptibilities. In essence, we become transformed beings, our attention is redirected to the reality that our eternal essence is spirit.

It is so easy to forget that as we go about our daily lives. We can be deceived into thinking that we are our bodies, our intellects, our status in society. We can be seduced into believing that what matters in this life are the material possessions we amass, or the number of degrees we acquire, or the recognition we receive in our careers, or the status we hold in the community. Likewise, we can mistakenly believe that we are defined by our infirmities, our financial hardships, our failures, our disappointments. Baha'u'llah calls these the changes and chances of this life, to which all human creatures are subjected. The bounties can distract us just as much as the trials and tribulations; they can actually arrest our spiritual development. But, thanks to God, one choice is always available to us--- in times of great joy and great despair ---a choice to walk the path of God. When we're on the path to God, we're going to see something different about ourselves, something new and improved, something different in the way we think and act. The pathway of religion is the road of the Divine

Kingdom. It involves the **acquisition of praiseworthy attributes**, heavenly illumination, and righteous actions in the world of humanity.

Do you know the power of a woman who has acquired praiseworthy attributes? Heavenly illumination? Righteous actions?

Mary Magdalene was such a woman.

In the New Testament, Mary Magdalene first appears in a fishing village near the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was rapidly gaining a reputation as a healer. She is depicted in the Bible as a single woman, probably in her mid-twenties, who is afflicted with “seven demons”. A few years older than Jesus and Jewish as well, she has made her way from Magdala ( which accounts for the origin of her name Magdalene), in search of Jesus, hoping to be healed from the psychological ills that plague her. After Jesus cures her, Mary Magdalene becomes the most influential woman in Jesus’ ministry. Unquestionably, she is one of Jesus's most faithful followers, witnessing the Crucifixion with his mother, Mary, while the male apostles flee to avoid arrest. In all four New Testament Gospels, Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at Jesus's tomb, where she encounters an angel who instructs her to go tell the disciples that Jesus has risen.

Mary Magdalene demonstrated her unwavering faith at the foot of the cross and was a founding disciple, entrusted by Jesus with a special mission to spread God's word. Jesus chose Mary Magdalene as the herald of his return. For her pivotal role in the Resurrection, she became known as "the apostle to the apostles," She admonished the other apostles to obey Jesus's command to preach to nonbelievers, regardless of the risks that entailed. Christian scholars consider her one of the primary forces of Christianity.

The faith of Mary Magdalene served as a **catalyst**. It transformed her from a woman with some degree of psychological torment to an obedient servant of Jesus, and on to greater service as a gifted apostle who spread His teachings and encouraged other disciples to do the same.

Similarly, Tahirih was a woman of faith.

Tahirih, meaning the pure one, was a poet, scholar, and martyr for women's rights. She was born in Persia, some time between 1817 and 1820, into a family of Islamic clerics. Her father, a mullah, had her educated far beyond the norm for women of that time and place. She was known throughout the community for her ability to memorize the Koran and to understand difficult theological concepts.

One night Táhirih had a curious dream. She saw a young Siyyid (descendant of Muhammad) standing in the air, reciting prayers. As she listened, she memorized his words. When she awoke, she could still remember them and wrote them down.

On the night of May 22, 1844, the Báb, the forerunner of Baha'ullah, declared His mission to Mullá Husayn in Shiráz, and in the course of that night revealed the first part of His commentary on (a chapter of the Qur'án). Eventually this text reached Táhirih, who had been awaiting the Promised One, she found that the text contained the words she had remembered and recorded from her dream! She immediately embraced the new religion and began to tell others about it.

Táhirih taught the Cause of the Báb with keen insight and clarity. Her talks were delivered with such eloquence and power that even those who had known her before were astounded. Many accepted the Báb as a result of her efforts.

At a conference organized by the Bab's new followers, Tahirih appeared without her veil before the men gathered there. A woman appearing unveiled, especially **in that day and in that place**, was perceived as a sign of promiscuity ,and it was considered a grave transgression against the clergy, and even God Himself.

This bold act symbolized the new dispensation of the Babi Faith and a denunciation of the oppression of women everywhere.

Tahirih's unveiling at the conference, became the first act of public unveiling in Iranian history. She was captured in 1852, along with other Babis, imprisoned and eventually executed that year. She prepared for her death with fasting and prayers. She was strangled with a silk handkerchief and then thrown into a well, later filled with stones and dirt. Her last words were, "You can kill me as fast as you like, but you can't stop the emancipation of women."

Tahirih's brief, but purpose-driven life, illustrates the power that a woman's religious faith can have on her own life and the lives of others.

Well, about now you may be saying to yourself---hmmm why did she have to choose two religious heroines to illustrate her point. And, there's no doubt that Mary Magdalene and Tahirih are amazing examples of great servants and teachers, but if you look around ---other heroines---surround you. Take heart, be inspired by the many quiet deeds, done outside of public view, that your sisters perform daily. The mother of toddlers, exhausted by meeting the needs of a young family, who makes time to teach her little ones to pray. The women who cares for the needs of aging and infirmed parents while still working or

volunteering in the community. The visual artists, writers, singers, actors--- women who uplift others with their God-given talents. The wives, the mothers, the singles---who are strenuous in their efforts and earnest in their endeavors to serve others.

In Every religious dispensation, countless women, many whose names we'll never know have demonstrated a faith in God, and His manifestation, a faith so strong that they desire to follow the divine spiritual teachings of their day. And, they become transformed---reborn---illumined---set ablaze—animated .

Their religious faith molds and shapes the decisions they make and the actions they take. These women have reflected on the life of the spirit, they understand the power of prayer, and the importance of meditating on the revealed word of God, morning and night. They understand that life is not the changes and chances of this world. Women of faith grasp the concept that the true significance of life is found in the development of the soul.

Women of religious faith yield their talents, gifts, and unique personalities to service to the Kingdom. They begin building that vision of a New World Order where peace, justice, and unity reign. They arise to guide others to the path of safety, infused by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sisters, be assured that our abilities are magnified, multiplied, intensified, glorified, and even sanctified when we walk a path of Faith. Do you all know that word sanctified? It comes to me from my childhood and adolescence in the Baptist Church. Sanctified means made sacred, blessed, consecrated. That's what I want. I want my efforts in God's path to be sanctified. I want my religious faith to bring about a change in my character so that I am closer to God and so that I can work with my fellow believers and co-religionists to establish bonds of love and fellowship, and to safeguard the interests of the human race, and to promote the revealed Word of God. **Is that not the purpose of religion? Is that not the power of a woman of faith?**