

*These Women Are My Sisters...*

by

Frances Forde Plude

*Dr. Plude is a Communication Professor at Notre Dame College, Cleveland, Ohio. She is one of the founders of the Communication Theology movement, has published numerous books and articles, and gives workshops globally on how religious organizations can adapt to the electronic culture.*

Years ago, as a Cambridge bus took me to a class at Harvard University, I noted that my six fellow passengers were all African American women, one wearing a colorful turban. A strong awareness surged up inside of me: “These women are my sisters!”

And as I edited and studied the essays in this volume, I also identified intensely with all of these women – professional communicators from varied nations. Once again I felt with pride: “These women are my sisters!”

This book contains the personal stories of a unique communication sisterhood, individuals with rich backgrounds and a variety of gifts and mentors. Each one can delight in the presence and the stories of the others. And their combined role models can inspire new waves of women to be effective communication leaders in this millennium. In the pages that follow I have called this strategy “webs of inclusion,” based on the research and writings of the organizational analyst Sally Helgeson.

## 1. Women Communicators' Stories

What a varied and accomplished group these women are! Their communication tasks were accomplished in about twenty different nations – from many locales on the African continent, to China and Japan, to Latin America, Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States.

Many of these women worked within religious congregations (Sisters with a capital 's'); several later left their religious orders. There are married women here too, several having been mentored (as I was) by a husband who helped them grow.

One of this sisterhood, Maria Krizova, lived for many years suppressed by a communist regime in Slovakia. Several of these women – Mary Newport and Beatrice Bissio – have worked with or interviewed national and international leaders. One, Bonnie Brennan, was the English-speaking reporter to the Canadian nation from the Second Vatican Council in Rome.

The group includes a woman born into Belgian nobility (Yvonne de Hemptinne) who pioneered for the Catholic Church a sophisticated appreciation of film as an art form. An unusual team is represented by a Scottish woman, Gay Ortiz, and an American living in Yorkshire, England, Maggie Roux, who write collaboratively about theology and film.

The Americans in the group reflect the diversity of that nation. One, Irene Fugazy, was an entrepreneurial head of a TV operation in New York. Another,

Ethel Gintoft, was the first woman president of the Catholic Press Association in the U.S. Another, Suzanne Nelson, learned about computers and cyberspace and applied all this to her pastoral ministry work.

One of these sisters of mine kept growing herself in amazing new ways. Born into a polygamous African family, Bernadette Vonai Paradza became a Catholic convert and a member of a religious congregation. She later left the religious order and, still later, adopted a child as a single mother at the age of 47!

One woman, Therese Winifred Egita, served as Executive Secretary of the Uganda Bishops' Conference. Ironically, this same post was denied to a woman recently by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference. Some women here were mentored by their husbands and by colleagues; others were encouraged to assume leadership by priests or bishops.

My own life as a communicator unfolded in similarly surprising ways. I didn't study TV production in a classroom; I learned it by doing it in TV studios.

After producing hundreds of TV programs in Boston, and hosting a weekly TV program there, I withdrew to Harvard and MIT for three years of doctoral studies in communication. I saw that dramatic communication technologies (satellites, faxes, global communication networks) would transform our world and I wanted to do my homework and be prepared.

My husband, who was alive then, took a second job to support my study habit, even typing my doctoral dissertation for me!

I remember wanting to prepare and work so these new communication technologies would serve women and developing nations. Therefore, part of my “agenda” was to utilize my Harvard education to leverage telecommunication public policy advances. I have used this background as a consultant to the U.S. Congress, the U.S. bishops and major religious groups.

And two decades in college and university classrooms allowed me to educate a new generation of young women and men in communication studies – especially the new technological applications like the Internet. Several years ago when doing a research project on telecommunications policy in European Union nations, in five different capital cities my local host was a former student.

Another major strand in my own story involves integrating theology and communication studies into a new field of thought. As a member of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA), I have worked with theology colleagues internationally to help them understand one basic principle. Liberation theory has infused liberation theology and feminist theory helped create feminist theology and, living in a wired world, we need to integrate decades of communication theory and practice into communication theology.

As co-editor of the Sheed and Ward *Communication, Culture and Theology* book series, we have been able to publish numerous books in a growing literature of communication theology.

And as an invited member of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture – a small ecumenical think tank – I have had opportunities to meet with religious leaders and media personnel in Latin America, Africa, Australia, Europe and Hollywood.

An interesting challenge has emerged as I moved along my pathway: helping religious groups (who are primarily people of the book) to reconceptualize themselves for an electronic culture.

The lives of the women in this book, like my own story, represent strands in a larger tapestry. This tapestry shows a picture of women's gifts integrated into a larger view of service to humankind as we work in our various corners of the globe.

## **2. When Women Tell Their Stories**

I have found great insights into women's biographical storytelling from two female writers and scholars: Jill Ker Conway, who matured in Australia, and the Columbia University (NY) professor Carolyn Heilbrun. These women have served

as mentors as I try to articulate my own story as daughter, wife, professional communicator and professor.

Both of these authors speak of “women as agent” or “having their own agency.” I call this “finding our own voice as women.” Conway creatively articulates her struggle to find her own voice in her autobiographies: *The Road to Coorain* and *True North*. I have found great inspiration, personally, in her lifelong dedication as professor and Provost at the University of Toronto and as the first woman President of Smith College in the U.S. Conway’s personal story also showcases the role of her husband as mentor – urging her own growth and development.

Both Conway and Heilbrun have written books about the genre of woman’s autobiography. Heilbrun’s study is entitled *Writing a Woman’s Life* (W.W. Norton). Conway’s work is *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography* (Alfred A. Knopf).

Conway notes:

Most of us, unless faced with emotional illness, don’t give our inner life scripts a fraction of the attention we give to the plots of movies or TV specials about some person of prominence. Yet the need to examine our inherited scripts is just beneath the surface of consciousness, so that while we think we are reading a gripping story, what really grips us is the inner reflection on our own lives the autobiographer sets in motion. (p. 17)

Conway puts this idea another way: “That magical opportunity of entering another life is what really sets us thinking about our own.”

She later reflects:

We all practice the craft of autobiography in our inner conversations with ourselves about the meaning of our experience, and those conversations, no matter what language we use, are fundamentally theological or philosophical. ... But it’s hard for someone who doesn’t acknowledge agency, even to herself, to reason very cogently about the morality of her actions. Once we’ve acquiesced in concealing our agency from ourselves and others, we’ve lost our moral moorings. (pp 178-179)

Heilbrun speaks, quoting others, of “the woman’s quest for her own story.”

She notes that women need to confront their own anger, along with power and control issues. (I think this may continue to be a significant theme as narratives continue to flow from women working within church structures).

Both of these women speak of the strength that lies within the female spiritual biography. Conway lists Hildegard of Bingen, the German abbess, as well as Dame Julian of Norwich and St. Teresa of Avila as examples. It is probable that the stories in this volume are heirs of this tradition – conveying, as they do, lives of courage and lives committed to this larger vision of love.

Heilbrun adds: “Despite the wonderful biographies we have had in recent years, there still exists little organized sense of what a woman’s biography or autobiography should look like.” (p. 27)

And, to conclude with Phyllis Theroux's thought: "Writing gives women psychic room in an overcrowded life"

### **3. Larger Issues That Emerge From Our Stories**

In the remaining pages of this essay I will discuss three significant issues I see emerging from the stories of my sister-communicators. Then, based on our own experiences, I will offer some recommendations for others who are struggling with these issues – in church communication and in other similar fields.

First I will look at *the power/authority status of women* as they work. Then I will examine *more specific challenges* these women face. And, thirdly, I will examine *a dynamic strategy* women can employ; it has been called "*the web of inclusion*" and this contrasts sharply with the hierarchical pyramid that describes many church structures today.

#### **Women and the Issue of Authority**

The stories in this volume bring into focus some of the thoughts I have had over the years about *power*. Mary Parker Follett, a U.S. social activist in Boston in the early 1900s, spoke of "power *with*" instead of "power *over*." The women here, like women in general, rarely have power *over*. However, they continually demonstrate the strength of power *with* (discussed further in my "web of inclusion")

ideas below). In fact, they repeatedly extend the Follett formula. Their lives demonstrate a “power *for*” others.

These stories force me to raise questions about the role of women as decision-makers in religious institutions. Several of these women actively strode upon the world stage. And yet... When one recognizes the gifts and the energy in these lives, one feels that churches are impoverished because so few women are authorized decision-makers within these religious organizations.

Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux mention attending a conference at Cambridge University where there were only three female speakers. In Spain a few years ago I spoke at a media conference at the University of Salamanca where not a single plenary speaker was female and only two or three (out of about 40) individual-session presenters were women. This in spite of the fact that there are many, many female communication scholars to choose from. I have known of at least one high-level Catholic Church conference on communication technologies where appropriate female representatives were deliberately excluded – even after funders of the conference requested their presence!

*Religious institutions will continue to be impoverished if women’s gifts are not integrated into church decision-making at every level, including the top levels of organizational leadership and decision-making.*

### **Additional Challenges Faced by Women**

Gay Ortiz and Maggie Roux write in their essay: “Women should feel themselves qualified to initiate communication strategies, to tell each other their stories, to be each other’s mentors, to make connections which bridge the gap, or, if necessary, to circumvent unhelpful structures.”

In many of the stories in this volume our sisters have encountered unhelpful structures. It must be our task in the future to work at removing structures that are dysfunctional in the organizations and institutions in which we work..

Another unique challenge for many women is the “juggling” that must occur as one tries to balance the needs of family, study, and job. June Johnston notes in her essay: “I have always enjoyed motherhood; my children have all revealed a different face of God to me.” But she adds: “I also know that I was not meant to be a full-time stay-at-home Mom. I have been successful at mothering to the extent that I could develop other aspects of myself.”

Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux also speak of this challenge. “We feel the challenge facing most women in developing careers in media and elsewhere... Unlike young women just starting out, who have no attachments or responsibilities, we married and had children before beginning our professional careers. ... building a career in communication often means working long and unsociable

hours, and the onus for stable family life must sometimes be on the other spouse. Professional ‘juggling’ involves making choices...”

Cheryl Allam speaks of another challenge most of us have confronted: dwindling resources. Communication and media costs are generally high and in many places budgets have been cut. This makes it extremely difficult for our messages to get produced and communicated. One strategy is to collaborate more effectively with others. In Japan, Cheryl – a Maryknoll Sister – worked with her Protestant colleagues in publishing a Christian Quarterly, a significant voice in a nation where there are few Christians.

Petronilla Chikambi mentions other challenges: “There is also a lack of proper articulation of women’s issues. This may be because there are not many publications and films produced by women and owned by women. I believe if women in Africa are to break the shackles put on us by the traditional Church, traditional culture, and colonialism – the three contributory factors to the African women’s arrested development – then we need to address these issues honestly and analytically.”

### **One Strategy: Webs of Inclusion**

Most of the stories in this volume show women accomplishing the ordinary and the extraordinary. This takes skills – like perseverance and creativity. It takes dedication, here often buttressed by a strong religious faith. This faith convinces

these women that their tasks are contributing to a larger significant vision (like “building the Kingdom”).

As I’ve studied and taught organizational communication I’ve found one principle that has probably been practiced by most of these women. I’m assuming this because of the research of two other women. Let me explain.

Deborah Tannen, a linguistic scholar, has written several best sellers about communication styles. Her research shows that most women’s conversation tends to be relational – that women, in general, like to work collaboratively, consistently trying to include others in projects and conversations.

Another writer, Sally Helgeson, has studied how this collaborative strategy is transforming organizations today in a highly technological and rapidly-changing world of competitive markets.

Helgeson’s book *The Female Advantage: Women’s Ways of Leadership*, features diary studies of a number of very successful female leaders. She notes these women consistently demonstrate collaborative characteristics.

Later Helgeson developed models showing how these collaborative leadership styles can coalesce into an organic organizational style she calls “the web of inclusion” in her book of that title. This book studies a number of organizations that demonstrate a new way of solving problems based upon relational *patterns* and *processes*. Among her U.S. research subjects: a large

hospital, an urban newspaper, a pioneer computer chip manufacturer, and a children's television network.

Dynamics of webs of inclusion include:

- .encouraging greater participation throughout the group
- .allowing flexibility and continual modification
- .practicing greater openness and information sharing
- .accessible leaders at the *center* (not the top) of organizations
- .delegating decision-making more to the grassroots level
- .creating many links and alliances

Helgeson compares this leadership/management style to improvisational jazz. As hierarchies evolve into webs one sees a kind of federalism evolving – whole webs of loosely-connected organizations and structures. This permits geographic *regions* to emerge once again as richly cohesive structural entities – helpful in a world that has become so global and generic. (This reminds one of the theology of the local church which maintains there must be more sharing of church authority with local churches and regional cultural Catholic identities.)

Helgeson's work indicates that the most creative people receive more satisfaction from their work in a networked world where decision-making is not separated from the implementation of tasks (as in the older mechanistic, industrial model).

Where do I find webs of inclusion here in the stories of my sister-communicators?

Dorothy Asher recalls the early days of the Catholic Broadcasters Association in the U.S. when folks shared scripts while trying to feed religious programming demands. Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux speak of the power of partnerships, adding “we have been each other’s mentor.” We read here that “in telling our stories and challenging others to do the same, we begin the collaborative process of encounter.”

Mary Newport, working in Australia with both the Prime Minister and the Catholic bishops, says “coordination and cooperation would define my role.” Yvonne de Hemptinne, in Europe, demonstrated the extraordinary skill of a film pioneer who was clearly a leader but one who empowered others around her.

Over and over these women demonstrate the value of webs of inclusion within the organizational structures in which they worked – structures that were often rigid and hierarchical, but were made more flexible by the presence and talent of these particular women.

### **And the Future?**

I have experienced the women who have shared their stories here as my sisters. More than anything else I would recommend that we see ourselves as a sisterhood and that we network actively and mentor others.

One singular communication web demonstrates the future potential of women networked – the Internet. Here is one of the best network nodes I have found:

International Women's Media Foundation  
1726 M Street NW, Suite 1002  
Washington DC 20036

Phone: 202-496-1992  
Fax: 202-496-1977  
E-mail: [info@iwmf.org](mailto:info@iwmf.org)  
Web site: [www.iwmf.org](http://www.iwmf.org)

The International Women's Media Foundation sponsors conferences and publishes studies that are of great assistance to women communicators around the world.

From its web site you can track links to related sites such as Asia Pacific Region News, the European Journalism Center, Gender Related Electronic Forums, Internet Journalism Resources, National Diversity Newspaper Job Bank and others.

Let's link!

