

mystics in the making

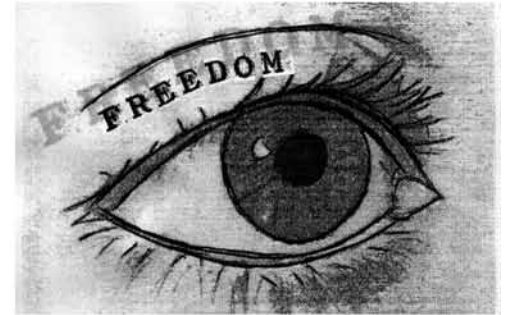
carol lee flinders talks about the four
women in her new book & how the passionate work
they are doing may be the next step in human evolution

interview by clea mcdougall

Introduction:

At the beginning of her latest book, *Enduring Lives: Portraits of Women and Faith in Action*, Carol Lee Flinders introduces the idea of “stealth spirituality.” It’s an idea I am familiar with, but have never heard put so perfectly. In short, it is the kind of compassionate action that is inspired from a groundedness of being, and as Flinders says, “If sometimes we must travel in disguise to do it, as scientists or lawyers or filmmakers or politicians, so be it.”

illustrations by beth maciver



In her book, Flinders gives us what are basically mini-biographies of four women, “whose lives have been lived with a dedication on improving the human condition”:

Etty Hillesum, a Jewish artist and intellectual from Amsterdam who died at Auschwitz shortly before her thirtieth birthday. Her surviving letters and diaries reveal her passionate insistence to love in the face of horror, and her dedication to serving those who were suffering around her.

Jane Goodall, nature mystic and environmental activist whose work is a call for all of us to take responsibility for our impact on the planet. She has a quiet power, born out of seeing the unity all through nature.

Tenzin Palmo, a Buddhist nun (familiar to readers of *ascent*) who is working tirelessly to re-establish a lineage for the young Tibetan nuns in her care.

Sister Helen Prejean, widely known now as the nun whose work was the subject of the film *Dead Man Walking*. She believes that death row is a form of torture. She accompanies prisoners on their way to execution and is advocating to end the death penalty in the United States.

Enduring Lives is something of a sister volume to her earlier book, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*, in which Flinders presented the lives and literature of medieval mystics. While she is clear that the women of her new book aren't mystics of the visionary category, she does emphasize the “continuity of voices between the medieval women mystics and contemporary women. We are trying to validate the same kinds of experiences in many ways.”

Flinders calls the contemporary women “the spiritual great grand goddaughters” of the medieval women mystics such as Teresa

of Avila, Clare of Assisi and Julian of Norwich. She traces their work back to these holy women in an attempt to construct a living history, a spiritual mother line for the West.

I see Carol herself working in the lineage of these women. As a writer, she is conversational and autobiographical. Her other books include *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst* and *Rebalancing the World: Why Women Belong and Men Compete and How to Restore the Ancient Equilibrium*. She takes material that is often given a stifling academic treatment – feminism, literary criticism, biography – and creates erudite and loving tributes to her subjects. She also is the coauthor of *Laurel's Kitchen*, the classic vegetarian cookbook, and her voice still resounds an intelligent, earthy spirit that makes you feel as if you are sitting around her kitchen table late into the night, talking about everything that matters.

She is a student of Eknath Easwaran and has been a resident of Blue Mountain, the community he founded, for over thirty years. It is her relationship to her teacher that initially inspired her to study the medieval mystics and begin to clarify a mystical tradition that she, and her readers, could step into.

This is how we begin:

Interview:

Carol Flinders It was 1967 in Berkeley. I had just started graduate school, and I was studying Dante, and other visionary poets, but I knew nothing of women mystics in the West. And here was my teacher, Sri Eknath Easwaran, an Indian man who spoke fluent English, and one

of the first things he urged us to read was the autobiography of Teresa of Avila and the poems of Mechthild of Magdeburg and the life of Clare of Assisi!

He came from a matrilineal tradition. He grew up in a household where women were loved and honoured, and where both name and property descended through the mother-line. In fact, he used to say that it wasn't just name or property – but that spiritual awareness flows down the mother-line “like a river.” His own teacher was his mother's mother.

The whole idea of a spiritual mother-line was enormously appealing to me. I had always been close to my mother and grandmothers, but what he was describing was on a whole different level, and I was intrigued. Later it would merge for me, imaginatively, with something women's historians proposed: that in order to be free and full participants in democracy, women need “a useable past.” It seemed tremendously important to me that we reconstruct not just the historical achievements of women, but their spiritual attainments as well.

Clea McDougall *In your latest book, you move up to the present day, and have written about the life and work of four contemporary women. Why did you choose these women?*

CF Part of what drew me was that I could imagine these four women being in conversation with one another. I felt

sometimes as if I was eavesdropping on the conversation. I could have chosen Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Amma-chi, but they are just so unequivocally fully realized, that they feel almost out of reach. And with this book I really wanted women to be able to see more of themselves in the subject. To create a snapshot of someone who is in the midst of a transformation, so that we can see what the process itself looks like, this process of becoming a fully evolved human being.

CM *How do these women fit into the Western mystical tradition? You actually call them “mystics in the making...”*

CF The essential thing about mysticism is the discovery that life is one, indivisible. That discovery isn't just intellectual, it's *experiential*: so that you *know* you can't harm another human being or another creature without harming yourself. That they know this on the deepest possible level is what sets the mystic apart from the rest of us.

The way it plays out in these women's lives is that in one way or another, sometimes almost by accident, each woman found herself developing a stronger and stronger interior life. There is a quote from John Donne that says, “Be then thine own home, and in thyself dwell.” And I think that happened to each of them. They discovered that by training attention and gradually stilling the mind, they developed an interior life that sustained and supported

them as nothing else ever had.

In the process, they became so secure within themselves that they were no longer afflicted by the needs that drive the rest of us, and with that security came a sense of freedom and with that sense of freedom came the capacity to just throw themselves into the service of life. Each of them became resourceful and energetic beyond her wildest dreams. With selflessness there seems to come a kind of boundlessness – an ability to exceed all of one's supposed limitations.

I kept seeing that sequence in every one of the lives that I looked at. The medieval mystics were working within an explicitly and uniformly religious context, but if any one of them were reborn today she'd find herself in dramatically different circumstances. There are so many ways to be religious now, and there is no overriding vision of what it means to seek God. Contemporary women have to improvise much more to find their way inward.

CM *Where do we see mysticism in the modern world? How do we recognize it?*

CF What's intriguing me now is to see how the “inner mystic” begins to emerge in someone who doesn't on the face of things *seem* religious. I see more clearly now what my teacher and others have said – that the fully evolved human being is a mystic: that the unitive vision I've been talking about is the birthright of every one of us. But we prob-

ably work harder to suppress it than we would have to work to set it free!

I think of it as a kind of latency within the human being, a knowledge and depth that is trying to manifest itself, but with great difficulty – because we fight it! But it really may be that what the human being is trying to become is someone like a Helen Prejean or a Jane Goodall. What makes each of these women happiest in life is the ability she's acquired to enhance the lives of the people around her, elevate consciousness and help open us up to what it means to turn inward and what it means to be “realized.”

In other words, the decision to turn inward may be the ultimate adaptive behaviour. And I mean that in almost “reductionist” biological terms that this is what each of us is trying to become as an organism. You see how these kind of people flourish, they look so wonderful!

I also learned about extremophiles when I was writing this book. Extremophiles are tiny organisms that thrive and flourish in environments that aren't supposed to support life at all. An extremophile is literally a creature who loves extremes. And I think these women are extremophiles – drawn to the almost impossible in the way most of us are drawn to chocolate ice cream. The very fact that something really, really challenges them kind of inspires them. And if you look at Etty Hillesum as an example – she lived in the tightening noose of Nazi domination in Amsterdam during

the Second World War – she set this bar for herself, that she would keep her eyes wide open, be a fully conscious student of history and yet *not yield to hatred*. She would love – no matter what.

CM *If it is evolutionary, are they responding to something in their environment?*

CF Absolutely. I was just looking at Karen Armstrong's recent book, *The Great Transformation*. She looks at the emergence of religions in the "axial age," which is 900–200 BCE. It's always been fascinating to me that Buddhism, Confucianism, the Upanishads, the Greek Rationalists and the Hebrew prophet all emerge at about the same time. Armstrong points this out and urges us to recognize that these are not bodies of belief – those great teachers didn't ask us to *believe* something, but to transform ourselves. She points out that this passion to transform ourselves and become what we could be often seems to arise in times of great upheaval and violence. And that is our current context. The last century has been one of unprecedented violence. And every one of these women I write about is responding to that. They are motivated by the sense that the world is on fire. When you're surrounded by such immense suffering, you just can't lead a selfish life.

Jane Goodall has said, in terms of the environment and how much in peril it is, that we really all have to become

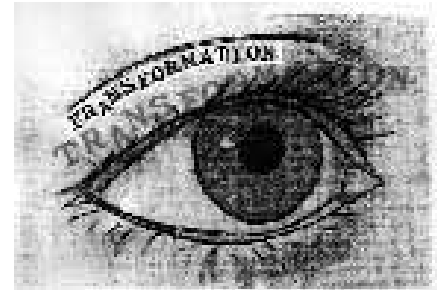
mini mystics, we've all got to become mini saints. She is very explicit that we have to find happiness, security and fulfillment within ourselves instead of trying to wrest it out of the world around us.

CM *Mystical traditions and mystical experiences often feel like very abstract things, out of the range of regular experience. Does it take a vision or a deeply transformative spiritual experience to start to live these high ideals?*

CF You know, Teresa of Avila said that a visionary experience can be enormously helpful at validating one's deepest longings. Her experiences had allowed her to rise above certain selfish attachments that had been holding her back for years.

But I do tend to favour a somewhat broad definition of "vision." I like your phrase "deeply transformative spiritual experience" because it allows me to recognize right away that every one of these four women describes pivotal, grace-filled moments in her life that I think did indeed draw them across a crucial kind of interior threshold.

Tenzin Palmo said it beautifully: "I don't care if you call it Self or Not Self, Atman, or God or whatever you want to call it, there is a level of consciousness in every human being where we know that all of life is one." Each of these women has touched down in that place and they move now with a tremendous confidence.



What's intriguing me now is to see how the "inner mystic" begins to emerge in someone who doesn't on the face of things *seem* religious. I see more clearly now what my teacher and others have said – that the fully evolved human being *is* a mystic: that the unitive vision I've been talking about is the birthright of every one of us.

With regard to mystical experiences in general, and hearing that “still small voice of God,” in particular, my own teacher was very conservative. He always said that it takes years and years and years of meditation, and just that much time practising allied disciplines, before you can hope to know for sure that the still small voice you think you hear is God’s and not your own ego’s. And he never let us forget that it is one thing to have a mystical experience and quite another thing to become fully established in it.

CM *You also do a lot of work in gender issues. How do you think that the circumstance of being a woman affects faith and action?*

CF I’ve been looking at this question for thirty years now – you can even see it between the lines of *Laurel’s Kitchen!* It’s absolutely the case – I saw this firsthand, in my own teacher – that gender really doesn’t have meaning for the fully realized man or woman. They see right through the disguise of gender just as easily as they do through race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any of the other apparent differences. But the rest of us aren’t so fortunate: we’ve grown up unconsciously absorbing the assumptions about gender that are endemic to our culture, and those assumptions really do shackle us. I think that “deconstructing” them is a spiritual practice.

There is talk right now of a renewal of the women’s movement that some are calling “fourth-wave feminism” that embraces spirituality and resembles in some ways Gandhian non-violence. I find

this possibility thrilling: I’ve been saying for years that feminism would catch fire again when it reconnects with its inherent spirituality. The medieval women mystics that I wrote about in *Enduring Grace* represent perhaps the first really powerful expression of the women’s movement in the West. Those women could be – *should be* – our reference point.

Instead of seeing waves, I’m inclined to speak of “turnings,” and to suggest that today’s fourth-wave feminists are in fact “women at the fourth turning.” This model calls up the Buddhist idea of the turning of the Dharma wheel. I love that way of describing the evolution of an idea, or a religious tradition, because it suggests that we don’t need to abandon anything of the past, even though we might in time want to expand on it.

Fourth Turning women are unequivocal that what we advocate as feminists is recognition of the full humanity of *everybody*, and that nobody should have to exist within rigid gender roles.

CM *What can we learn from reading the life stories of these mystics and mystics in the making?*

CF By practising spiritual reading, reading the great mystics, we can start seeing ourselves in a new light. When we immerse ourselves in the great authors like Gandhi or Teresa of Avila or Jane Goodall, it is like a little mirror, and that gives us courage. Each story is unique, but on the other hand you get the feeling that you are watching the unfolding of certain laws. And that’s a thrilling thing and gives us

confidence to take the next steps. In feminism, we talk about how important it is to construct a useable history for ourselves as women; and as mystics in the making it’s just as important.

I think their stories can inspire a burning curiosity to know about ourselves, what we are capable of. Because who could have predicted, for example, that the four women of *Enduring Lives* would end up doing the work they are doing? Their stories suggest that each of us might be carrying around within ourselves something like that incredible potential, and if we are, surely we should want to find out what it is! It’s the most interesting possibility that life holds, and I think clearly it has everything to do with turning inward.

You look at the world we live in, and how it seems to be set up with an almost demonic dedication to turn us outward, to distract us, to fill our heads with voices. Whether we are listening to our iPod or text-messaging someone, everyone is plugged in. And yet these women suggest to us that there is a completely different direction to go in, and that if we can follow that other still small voice within, the possibilities are endless. ☸

Clea McDougall is a writer, editor and artist.