

The Shift from Doing to Being: What Does it Look Like?

By Phoebe Girard, Director Women to Women Project,

Santa Fe, New Mexico

Women seeking faithful aging face letting go of a life filled with activity (doing) and searching for a more contemplative or reflective life (being). How do women make this shift? How do they cultivate their inner journey?

Women spend so much of their lives actively caring for their families and pursuing their own professional and community interests. As more space opens up, children become independent and professional demands lessen, women are able to re-evaluate their spiritual portfolio. And perhaps think about diversifying.

Providing space and time for this new development is critical. Many books have been written about enhancing spiritual life. But little has been written about the practical aspects of making this shift and the discipline that it requires.

Do you know retired women or men who say with a sense of pride “how did I ever manage to go to a job? I’m busier now than I ever was.” They have not made the transition of doing to being.

Claiming a freedom to say “no!” to the many requests made on them week in and week out is a beginning. One woman reported that when the phone rings and someone asks her to head up yet another committee or project or altruistic activity, she just says “No Thank You” without an obligation to explain further. Other women gently suggest that someone else could now shoulder the responsibility as well as they. Realizing that one is not critical to the success of every project is a place to start. Curtailing involvement with big impersonal social events, parties, and functions in favor of smaller, more intimate visits and conversations are other noticeable shifts.

As women practice the polite skills of saying no, they also need to protect their new found time from trivial pursuits which often rush in to fill the void. The pressures are pervasive. Sue Bender has written a book about this stage of life which she calls Stretching Lessons. She reports a conversation with one her friend:

“What are you doing these days,” friends ask her. . “Nothing,” she answered. They didn’t understand. “My creativity is busy and happy making a new relationship to my body. Indeed, making a new kind of person: slower, more conscious of walking, eating, and talking—unhurried, pleased with human tenderness and assistance. It’s like living in another culture—released from old habits of push energy. I’m finding new ways –unaccelerated, unamplified, listening. Quiet, I like it.” (p188)

Many women intentionally work on simplifying their lives, so that less attention is demanded by possessions. This phenomena is observed as younger retirees give up the family home and move into smaller more manageable quarters, e.g. condos, apartments and patio homes. Women may simplify their wardrobes and their beauty routines to require less maintenance. Less time is spent with the demands of “things” and more time is available for other endeavors including inner work.

And then when finally confronted with solitude, how do women respond? For some women growth comes through enhanced prayer and devotional life. Experimenting with different forms of prayer, trying something new like Centering prayer, to Tai Chi or prayer walking. Some try chanting. Short or long retreats can provide the needed quiet and peacefulness to explore. Others take up more intensive journaling, giving themselves a chance to have an inner conversation and listen for God’s voice. Many of the books on the topic of women and aging and spirituality provide good reflection questions to help guide this reflection time. Anything that helps calm our psyche and opens our spirit.

Questions for Reflection:

1. When you think about the past six months, where are you on the continuum or “doing” versus “being?” Where would you like to be?
2. What are the three biggest obstacles to creating more clear space and time in your life? What concrete steps can you take to overcome one of those obstacles?
3. Which of your spiritual practices do you feel is most life giving to you? What can you do to devote more attention to it? What kind of support do you feel you need to move in that life giving direction?

4. When you think about facing a future where your identity is not linked to being a mother, a wife or a worker how do you respond?
5. How do you feel that God is calling to you in this time?

Sue Bender, *Stretching Lessons: The Daring that Starts from Within* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001) p 188.

Phoebe Girard is the Director of the Women to Women project in Santa Fe, New Mexico and a graduate of the Geriatric Pastoral Care Institute at the Center on Aging, Religion and Spirituality. As a part of her ecumenical ministry with midlife and older women who seek to understand and celebrate faithful aging, she conducts retreats and leads women's circles. She is a founding member of the Conscious Aging Network of New Mexico. She can be reached at phoebesf@aol.com or (505) 988-5556.