

Why We're Here

by Patricia Gundry

I would like to tell you a story; it's two stories, actually. You people are scholars. Most people don't tell you stories anymore. They just tell you facts. And arguments. Neat and crisp, or fuzzy and half-formed, but almost always the kind of thing you can file in orderly piles in your head, or quickly put in your mental wastebasket.

And that is why I am going to tell you a story instead. Maybe because I know you need to hear stories, and not just arguable facts. When you were little boys and girls you loved stories. You could see the soldiers as you heard the words marching along. You could feel the fear and the relief. Stories bring us to experience and to life.

Once upon a time there was a little boy. He was smart in school. People praised him for being quick to figure things out and remember facts. Most of those people were grown-ups-- people with authority. Some people did not like him because they suspected he was smarter than they were. They threw rocks at him sometimes as he walked the path on the way home enjoying the flowers and listening to all the human and animal sounds, and the earth sounds like wind, and feeling the rain.

He found he enjoyed learning more than playing with people who threw rocks. And so more and more he studied and less and less he played with others who could throw rocks.

When this little boy grew bigger he went to a big building where there were lots of books. He stayed there many years. More and more people praised him for his learning. Less and less people carrying rocks could reach him. He forgot about them eventually, and -- spending so much time in the big building, where there were no flowers or wind or rain or other children -- he forgot them too, almost. In fact, ideas and facts became more important to him than people. He loved ideas like *truth* and *justice*, but when he thought about them they often had no real people in them.

Near the little boy lived a little girl. She also was smart. People praised her, too, for this. A few rocks came her way. But usually, rather than throw rocks, those who did not like her smartness laughed at her, or stranger still, they pretended that she was not there.

When it came time to go from her small school to the large building where the little boy went, the big people did not even see her hand raised asking to go. They did not call her. Finally she went away and did not ask anymore. But she still wanted to learn. So she learned without the help of the big building filled with books and authorities to tell you which ones to read.

She read books she chose for herself. As she walked outdoors, feeling the rain and looking at the flowers, she thought about what she had read and she wondered about things no one had ever told her. She thought of questions and went searching for answers. Where she went to find them was to people she thought might know or have clues that she could trace. And to history books full of stories about people who had wrestled with ideas and questions and had lived and died in the midst of struggling with them or for them.

As she walked and thought and made the beds and stirred the contents of pots and pans on the stove, she would remember those people she had read about and feel surrounded by them. And eventually she wanted to speak for those who had died working for what she could now enjoy, reaching for what she could now grasp. They were ever with her, beseeching her with loving and longing eyes to speak for them, to enjoy for them, to make their efforts bear fruit. To reach for their still-longing hands.

When she did speak and write, others reached out to her and said, tell my story too, I don't have the words or the skill. So she stands before you with their words, words they cannot say because it is too hard to stand before people who have not seen your hand up for too long and cry as you search for words to say. So they told them to me and they wrote them to me, because they thought I would understand.

Some of you are that little boy. You have insulated yourself from the eyes of the people. And some of you are somewhere not far from that situation. It is not that you do not care; it is just that clean, dry, neatly folded facts are less messy and easier to fold up and put away at the end of the day.

But you need to know that facts are not really what this is all about. We use facts, yes, but only as a means to freedom for those who are bound. The facts are our weapons and our

tools. The people are the real story, and must be our concern: the people, their pain, their need, and their loss.

I hate pain. So I fight it any way I can. I even know places you can press with your finger and make the pain of your headache go away. I do not like to talk about pain because it is abhorrent to me. I do not like to remind anyone of it who can escape it. But I will make an exception this time. I will talk about it. And I want you to feel it. The reason is that I want you to know it is real. And that you are the only people who can do what needs to be done at this moment to stop it. You have the ways, and fingers to press that I do not have.

In the sixteenth century in Scotland, Eufame MacLayne was pregnant. Most of you don't know what it's like to be pregnant. In the sixteenth century it was even less fun than now. Eufame was very big; she was carrying twins. When labor began, things got rough. Sometimes twins do not come the easy way. They can be in odd positions, causing long and difficult labors. Eufame, for whatever reason, requested a certain painkilling herb be given to her. I do not know how much it helped, but she survived and so did her babies.

However, someone found out what she had done. Painkillers were forbidden to women in childbirth. It was against God's law. He wanted women to suffer in labor. The Bible said so, their punishment for Eve's sin.

So Eufame was brought before those who decided punishment. And they could not, of course, let her go free (there was also the possibility of witchcraft, you see, because she had not relied solely on the grace of God for relief from her pain). So her babies were taken from her arms and given to someone else's care. Eufame was tied to a stake. Bundles of wood were laid at her feet. Then new mother Eufame was burned alive.¹

Now that was a long time ago. And maybe you think things like that don't happen anymore. But I can still see Eufame there with tears running down her face, watching her babies leave. And I can hear her groaning in labor and begging for help. I can see the pity in some midwife's eyes as she gives it. I can see the heartless churchmen pronounce her doom in God's name. And I cannot forget her. They didn't think Eufame was fully human, because she was a woman. So it was all right to do that to her.

A few years ago I was at a large convention in Detroit. I was one of the token women speakers. (I don't resent that--you can ride the bus with the right token as well as with real money.) Just before I was to leave to go home and bake a birthday cake for one of my sons, a woman stopped me, very hesitantly. She wanted a couple of minutes, she said; something bothered her that I had said in a workshop. So I sat down and listened.

With the iron-controlled intensity of those who are near the breaking point, she told me how she resented my saying we must be gentle and understanding in making changes in the church, that we can open doors a crack in some hearts and that is enough for a beginning. She said she thought I didn't know how difficult it really was or what people like her were experiencing.

She told me of her superhuman attempts to maintain a large and successful youth ministry at her church while sitting under a scathingly anti-female pastor who did nothing but laugh at her honest and sincere questions. She was trying to hold on and wait for change but she was being literally eaten alive by the flames of inner conflict.

This was a twenty-four-carat woman. The kind of person you know right away is competent and good and absolutely reliable and levelheaded. She would not exaggerate. If anything, she was unaware of how close she was to flying in a million pieces. She was being burned alive because she was reaching out for help from those who should be giving it and they were putting her in an impossible position. She was sacrificial material to her church. I will never forget her and sometimes I wonder what has become of her.

Everywhere I go, women like her come to me and tell me their stories. I am quite sure that most of the people in their churches do not know how difficult things are for these women. They have no one to tell. They even suspect that something is wrong with *them*. Like the child who naively believes that his parent abuses him because he is bad, they suspect they are in the wrong somehow, even though all they know of themselves, the Bible and God as friend and Father tells them otherwise.

Their letters to me are poignantly revealing:

¹ Bernard Seeman, *Man against Pain* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1962), p. 96; see also A.D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), p. 62.

It wasn't too long ago that I cried myself to sleep because of an excess accumulation of church-dispersed propaganda on the inferiority of women (oppression in the name of Christ, I call it). I was so devastated that I was beginning to almost believe the Holy Spirit in me was somehow not the same Holy Spirit that indwelled "the brethren", or if otherwise, why am I to keep quiet in the church and not let that Holy Spirit speak through me, simply because I have a woman's body? God surely makes more sense than that. But they pointed to Holy Scripture for "proof" and I was about to sink under it. "Bring your pies, ladies, but leave your ideas at home." Our pastor, in addressing a group of young girls, our nine-year-old daughter among them, laid it on them that they could never be pastors but they could do other things – like bake a pie for a church supper. If I sound angry, I am, but it just seethes inside me. I don't say much here. This is a small town in rural _____, and to challenge the traditions of male dominance here is to rush in where angels fear to tread. But I'm gathering enough strength to question the things they are trying to tell me I must believe. "It will come," they tell me. "You'll understand someday." I think at least I'm beginning to!

It's finally dawned on me that it's not a sin or an act of rebellion for a woman to have a desire for success.

You spoke to that deep split in me that has almost torn me apart over the past few years....I have known that I cannot live with honesty or integrity if I refused my relationship with Christ. I also could not live with honesty or integrity within a context of continual putting-down, cutesy jokes about women, and the assumption that women really only live through their husbands and children.

A few months ago I attended an adult Sunday morning class at a large church near my home. They were going to discuss women's equal participation, and a friend who goes there told us we might find it interesting.

The room was completely filled with well-dressed adults from this prosperous, rather intellectual community of Christians. As the hour wore on, man after man spoke his opinions about the pros and cons of allowing women to participate in the higher echelons of leadership. Not one woman said a single word. Not one male commented on the women's silence or asked for their views. Though at least fifty percent of the group consisted of intelligent female adults, they were as invisible beings to the participants.

I looked around me. The women's faces were drawn tight, their bodies held totally still. The atmosphere was electric with tension, yet they said nothing.

The time for the session was almost gone, I thought I would say something myself, something carefully thought out so as to not be intrusive (after all, I was an outsider), but at least *something*.

I was immediately seized with a terrible fear. I was terrified of speaking out in this group. On some level I knew that I was alien and unwelcome – not because I was a visitor but because I was female. Three years before, in that same building on the Calvin College campus, I had spoken to an audience of 1,200 people without a fraction of the fear I now felt.

Finally I managed, shaking, to choke out that I, as an outside observer, could not help noticing that not a woman there felt safe enough to speak on a subject that greatly affected them all. And that I thought their silence was a profound comment on the subject.

Then another woman, braver than I, spoke eloquently and openly of her concerns. She was interrupted, even as she spoke, by a derogatory comment from the moderator. Later, on the way out of the church, she and I happened to be at the door at the same time. She said to me, "I will never come back here again."

Why am I telling you all this? Do I just want to create some kind of emotional response in you, that dirty tactic of too many sermon preachers who substitute horror and pain for worthwhile content in their sermons to get a crowd response? No, I hope I would never do that.

I am telling you this because I want you to know how crucially important you are to freeing women here and now, women who are the successors to Eufame MacLalyne and thousands, maybe millions, like her.

History progresses in stages. You can study it and find that ideas and changes develop in a predictable sequence. We have passed the state of opening the door a crack, of introducing the subject and getting people to think about it and talk about it. People like me have written books, spoken and taken a few bricks on the chin to do that.

But we cannot do the next item of business on this issue. After the first wave of interest and discussion, people who have a certain credibility, people in intellectual authority, if you will, eventually validate the findings of the groundbreakers and present them to their constituency. In any era, in any issue, this happens. And until it does, vulnerable people who have been sensitized to the issue by those who have cracked the door will be slaughtered by the powers that be wherever and whenever the times and conditions are right for it.

I cannot go out and do what only you can do. You are the people with credentials. You are the ones who will make this all respectable. You can do what only you can do.

I was very conscious of my silent sisters while I began my first book, and I remained conscious of them throughout its production. I know there were thousands, probably millions, who wanted answers to the same questions I had. But they were afraid to ask, embarrassed to pursue the first rebuffs, or they didn't know whom to ask. But they wanted so much to know. Not just because they were curious, but because their whole lives are bounded and boxed in by these questions.

As I continued in my research, I became aware of other silent ones who were even more needy and pitiful. I heard the voices of my sisters from the past, crying out to me from page after page of historical narrative and document, saying, speak for us, vindicate our loss and sorrow, we never had a chance to do so.

I want you to know that we are dealing here, now, not with ideas and facts, theories and proofs, but with people. Flesh-and-blood women's lives are being contorted and restricted here and now by a situation we have all inherited from the past.

And I believe that I owe something to those women from the past who were not only deprived of opportunity, enlightenment and joy in participation, but often deprived of their very lives.

If you men and women had been there with the information, the skill and power you now possess, Eufame MacLayne would not have died, nor would the thousands of others who were accused as witches. I owe Eufame something, and I think you do too.

But all we can do now, besides tell her story, is do what we can to make sure the same kinds of ignorance and error that tortured her do not bind and torture women any longer.

Since we are talking about women, and pain, and freedom from that pain, and most particularly about the tools and tool holders to gain that freedom, I would like to tell you one more story. This one is also from the annals of childbirth. I chose that area purposefully because it is uniquely woman's experience. Because it can either be an experience full of promise and joy, or one of pain, sorrow and tragedy. And because all too often *other* people have had the choice as to which it would be for the woman.

So many of the ironies of woman's condition hinge on her capacity to give birth. She presented the body and blood of the Savior to the world, yet she is prohibited from presenting the elements representing that body and blood at the Communion table.

Did the woman say,
When she held him for the first time in the dark dank of a stable,
After the pain and the bleeding and the crying,
 "This is my body; this is my blood"?

Did the woman say,
When she held him for the last time in the dark rain on a hilltop,
After the pain and the bleeding and the dying,
 "This is my body; this is my blood"?

Well that she said it to him then.
For dry old men,
Brocaded robes belying barrenness,

Ordain that she not say it for him now.²

I recognize anger and anguish in that poem. Many people see the anger of women working for freedom and equal opportunity and do not see the anguish it represents. That anger is the only healthy way many women know to express their pain. And it *always* represents pain: personal, searing, emotional pain.

And now the story. In 1569 a French Huguenot physician, named William Chamberlen, landed at Southampton, in England. He proceeded to produce, with the help of his wife, a large family. Two sons – both named Peter, for some reason that escapes me, but called the elder and the younger to differentiate them – became physicians in their father's footsteps.

The two Peters settled in London and became particularly proficient in midwifery. "They then attempted to control the instruction of midwives, and to justify their pretensions, claimed that they could successfully deliver patients when all others failed."³

What we know now, but no one else knew then, is that they had good reason to make such claims. They had developed a tool, the obstetrical forceps, that revolutionized difficult deliveries. Forceps of the kind the Chamberlens had developed made it possible to save many mothers and babies who would otherwise have surely died.

But this is not the end of the story. This is only the beginning of the story, because the Chamberlens did not share their invention. No, they secreted it away and protected it for four generations.

The next generation of Chamberlens produced another physician, again, named Peter. This man was well educated, studying at "Cambridge, Heidelberg, and Padua. On his return to London he was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians."⁴ He was very successful, many of his clients being of the royal family and of the nobility. "Like his father and uncle, he attempted to monopolize control of the midwives, but his pretensions were set aside by the authorities. These attempts gave rise to much discussion, and many pamphlets were written about the mortality of women in labor attended by men. He answered them in a pamphlet entitled 'A Voice in Ramah, or the Cry of Women and Children as Echoed Forth in the Compassions of peter Chamberlen.'"⁵

Did this compassionate, religious man share his lifesaving invention with others at this point? No, he did not.

He, like his grandfather, produced a large family, and three of his sons became physicians. And they (we know why) also specialized in midwifery. One of them, Hugh, when forced to leave England for a time because of his political views, attempted to sell the forceps to a French physician, making great claims for its effectiveness. The French physician produced a dwarf woman with a deformity who was in labor. After several hours of effort, Chamberlen admitted defeat, so no sale occurred.

But Hugh did translate this physician's book into English, and in the preface he refers to the secret forceps in this manner, "My father, brothers, and myself (though no one else in Europe as I know) have by God's blessings and our own industry attained to and long practiced a way to deliver women in this case without prejudice to them or their infants."

"Some years later he went to Holland and sold his secret to Roger Roonhuysen. Shortly afterward the Medico-Pharmaceutical College of Amsterdam was given the sole privilege of licensing physicians to practice in Holland, to each of whom, under the pledge of secrecy, was sold Chamberlen's invention for a large sum. The practice continued for a number of years until" two purchasers made the device public.⁶ But what they revealed was only *one blade* of the forceps. Either Chamberlen had swindled the original purchaser, or the Medico-Pharmaceutical College had swindled all the rest.

The next generation of Chamberlen physicians consisted of another Hugh. This man was a well-respected, well-educated philanthropist, and a friend of the Duke of Buckingham (who

² A poem by Frances C. Frank, appearing in *Women's Network News*, no. 22 (February/March 1980), p. 2; reprinted from the *National Catholic Reporter*.

³ Louis M. Hellman and Jack A. Pritchard, *Williams Obstetrics* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), p. 1116.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1116-17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1117.

had a statue of Chamberlen erected in Westminster Abbey). He too kept the forceps a secret, until, when an old man, he finally let the secret leak out.

Before this time, “in 1723, Palfyn, a physician of Ghent, exhibited before the Paris Academy of Medicine a forceps he designated *mains de fer* [“hands of iron”]. It was crudely shaped and impossible to articulate [join the two halves]. In the discussion following its presentation, De La Motte stated that if by chance anyone should happen to invent an instrument that could be so used, and kept it secret for his own profit, he deserved to be exposed upon a barren rock and have his vitals plucked out by vultures. He had little knowledge that at the time he spoke such an instrument had been the possession of the Chamberlen family for nearly one hundred years.”⁷

I said earlier that there is a historical progression to reforms. First there is need, producing pain. There is a cry for help, but no one comes. Then someone does come. The help that appears is opposed by the establishment and denounced by clerical institutions. Then, those with credentials begin to help also, and change accelerates. Eventually, over time, the changes become established.

Right now we are at the point at which those with credentials can accelerate changes begun already and bring lasting change into actuality. It is time for needed help. You are the helpers we need.

I am not asking you to defend, protect and free facts and ideas, but living, breathing women.

They are the sheep of your pasture. Help them be fed the truth.

They are your sisters. Help them to equal access to your joint inheritance among the saints.

There is but one central and watershed question in this conflicted issue: Are women fully human? All other questions and issues are peripheral to this question.

If the answer is yes, then say a clear yes, not yes, but....Yes, but....is not yes. It is closer to maybe, or not yet, or even no because yes, but....always carries restrictions and prohibitions that intrinsically deny that full humanity expression, opportunity or essence. Usually it denies all three.

So if you can say yes, yes, women are fully human creatures, as fully human as men, then be about the business of dealing with those peripheral issues with that central truth in mind.

If women are fully human, then help distinguish between inspiration and interpretation, between cultural and temporal instruction and divine and eternal principle, between doctrinal and practical, between then and now.

If women are fully human, then Augustine was wrong,⁸ but you can be right.

If women are fully human, then Aquinas was wrong,⁹ but you can be right.

If women are fully human, then Tertullian was wrong,¹⁰ but you can be right.

And you can right those wrongs, not just on paper, or in lectures and books, but in people's lives. Please do it.

⁷ Ibid., p. 1118

⁸ “The woman herself alone is not the image of God: whereas the man alone is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined with him.” *On the Trinity* 7.7, 10.

⁹ “As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex, while the production of women comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence, such as that of a south wind....” As quoted by Susan G. Bell, *Women from the Greeks to the French Revolution* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1973), p. 122.

¹⁰ “God’s sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil’s gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God; man! Because of the death you merited, the Son of God had to die.” As quoted by Julia O’Faolain and Lauro Martines, eds., *Not in God’s Image* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 132.

