

New Monasticism:

A Feminist's Perspective on an Engaged Contemplative Life

By V.K. Harber



I am many things: a woman, a yogi, a mother, a spouse, a writer.



"...spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now".

Henri Nouwen

I am also a contemplative. Before you begin imagining me serene and peaceful, clothed in flowing robes and residing on a mountaintop, allow me to tell you straight away: I'm not that kind of contemplative. No, I am elbow-deep in the business of life and all the mess and beauty that it entails: family, children, sex, love, relationships, and work. I am a new monastic.

Central to my interpretation of new monasticism is the acknowledgment that we cannot effect change in the world unless we are deeply and wholly engaged with it, embracing it at every turn. The goal of the new monastic movement is not only personal transformation for the individual, but radical social change. From where I sit, personal transformation that does not motivate one to become actively engaged in the work of healing and rebuilding our broken systems is not what the world needs right now. This feels especially true both as I reflect on my own experiences and those of other women within these systems, as well as when I consider the futures of my children. I cannot help but see the urgency, the necessity, of engagement.

Even if my spiritual practice led me to a place of personal contentment, how could I be content with the state of the world?

If one chooses to see it, every interaction and experience can serve as spiritual practice. The experiences that are provided by a deeply engaged and full life are, therefore, invaluable. And these experiences as engaged members of society, struggling ourselves within the broken systems that need to be fixed, provide the necessary motivation to effect radical social change.

I can only speak from my own perspective, which is that of a married heterosexual female mother, so none of what I say about my own experience excludes or minimizes the experiences of men and fathers or non-heterosexual persons or people partnered in different ways. But from my perch in the world, I find myself asking these questions: Why I am I drawn to this movement? How does this affect the way I live my life? What kind of presence am I in this world? What do I want to embody? How does commitment to the transformative process manifest in my life?

As Yogi

I came to Yoga via what Matthew Fox might call the “yoga of despair”. I was in the deepest depths, unsure of how to keep living, unsure I even wanted to keep living. Yoga, very literally, saved me.

Now as a yoga teacher and student, one of my greatest ongoing frustrations is witnessing it being used as a means of pacifying the masses through the commodification of Spirituality. It has become a popular way to engage in a shallow new-age spirituality that, while not entirely useless, is far from authentic. Inner Peace is the product and people are buying. Trite slogans abound, serving the purpose of making a person *feel* as though they are on the path to some form of enlightenment, without asking anything of them. Spending 90 minutes on a yoga mat, five or ten of them in meditation, will not bring true inner peace and more importantly will not heal the world. We do not serve humanity if the end goal of our yoga practice is to feel good.

After years now of practice and teaching, my relationship to Yoga and its place in my life is still constantly evolving. When I can set aside my frustrations with how it is practiced in the West I realize how much clarity it has given me in recognizing what I want to embody in the world. The yogic framework is what allowed me to re-enter into a relationship with God after the troubled start I had with my family of origin. I experienced a wholeness, a completeness in my

practice that once experienced and named, I could bring “off the mat” as they say, and into the world. The yogi’s commitment to non-violence, which encapsulates all other commitments and moral obligations towards Self and others is perhaps *the* guiding principle of my life.

A commitment to non-violence involves more than abstaining from physical, mental, and emotional violence. It means being actively engaged and committed to peace. Not just talking about peace, but creating it through thoughts, words, and actions. By choosing peace when there are other, perhaps easier, choices to make.

My yoga practice occurs on many levels: physically, energetically, mentally, in relation to my inner wisdom, and spiritually. I do inventory every day, sometimes multiple times a day. How do I feel in my body? What is my body communicating to me? How is my energy? Am I feeling depleted? Am I feeling full? Am I spending my energy wisely? Do I need to plug any energy holes? Where is my mind today? Is my mind quiet and calm or loud and chaotic? Am I clinging to thoughts? Am I retelling stories over and over again? What are my knowledge and experience telling me? What wisdom is revealing itself to me today? How connected do I feel to God and all other beings? If I feel disconnected, what do I need to do to reestablish connection?

It is this daily practice that helps me to be at ease, a prerequisite for being present in the world in a positive way. If I am distracted by physical discomfort, if my energy is depleted, if my mind is overactive or sluggish, if I am not paying attention to wisdom as it is revealed to me, and if I am not feeling connectedness I cannot and will not be a healing presence in the world.

As a yogi who came to Yoga from such a broken place and one who is well acquainted with despair, I know firsthand it’s potential for healing and creation of wholeness. As such it is not enough for my practice to remain personal. I feel called to share my story, to empower others to share their stories, and to create and hold space for others to experience healing.

As teacher, I struggle very much with knowing the best way to teach each student. Most people come to Yoga, not seeking spiritual awakening or total transformation, but something that on the surface appears very superficial. I try to be very aware of the need to listen and trust what a person is telling me they need, rather than deciding for myself what they really need, even if I know what they are saying is not what they mean. Many times it is not that they are completely unaware of what they need, it is that they simply lack the vocabulary to express it.

“We have to walk our talk and do the inner work that allows the outer work to be authentic and also effective.”

Matthew Fox

I was a yoga teacher before I was a parent, but I've discovered that both relationships are dependent on a need to be able to tune into another person without projecting. So much of being a yoga teacher is simply taking a person in without judgment and this is surprisingly done with few words. It's not what you say to a student, it's how you make them feel. And unless you are at ease yourself, you will never be able to put another at ease.

A few years ago I started working with a group of women who were living in a group home after serving time in jail for mostly drug-related offenses. They were all recovering addicts who were in a program and attempting to regain custody of their children. It was one of the few group homes that would allow women who had already regained custody to stay while they found a job and a place to live. All of them were victims of sexual violence to varying degrees. To even attempt asana practice with these women would have been a waste of time and energy at best, and harmful to everyone at worst. For people who have never experienced sexual violence (though I would argue that most women have to some extent or another) even if they are not embodied, they can still begin a physical practice. At first they will be punishing their bodies, forcing them, treating them like objects, but hopefully they will eventually move beyond that and into some form of embodiment.

However, for women who have experienced sexual violence, who know intimately what it means to have their bodies forced, used, controlled, and subjugated by another, a physical yoga practice is virtually impossible. Their bodies are a source of shame, fear, and pain. Asking them to move them in unfamiliar ways is simply asking too much for where they are. Our entire yoga sessions were spent breathing. That's it. We sat or lay down and focused on our breath. We noticed the effects the breath had on our bodies, our minds, our energy. I grew more as a yogi and a yoga teacher from teaching these women than I have from all of my other teaching experiences combined.

If my Yoga practice happened only in my home or on my mat and never motivated me to teach, to engage with a community, what purpose would it serve beyond my own personal joy? And would I truly be able to experience joy if I were not involved in this work? I can recite Yoga sutras and I can talk endlessly about yogic philosophy, but what good is any of it if I am not using it to build relationships, to facilitate healing (my own and others)? While traditional monastics have chosen to live sequestered, literally or figuratively, as a new monastic I am compelled to use the wisdom I've gained from my practice to engage deeply with the world.

As Mother

While the work of mothering can be summed up many ways – unending, tiring, tedious, rewarding, fulfilling – nothing frames it better than these two: spiritual and practical. Parenting is one of the most deeply transformative and soul-churning experiences a human may have and is therefore inherently spiritual. When we live a life with intention, it becomes even more so. But as with all things that involve the well-being of another – in this case our precious children – this spirituality must be practical. It cannot be lofty, it cannot be removed, it cannot be practiced separate from life, and it must work a purpose greater than individual realization.

For me, pregnancy and childbirth were deeply transformative experiences. From the moment I knew I was pregnant, I inhabited my body completely differently. As someone who had struggled with body issues from an early age and who had experienced physical assault, I was worried about how I would handle all of the physical changes, which essentially translate to a feeling of a loss of control. It is this fear – the fear of losing control – that tends to be a barrier to full embodiment.

Interestingly, vows of celibacy, still considered necessary by some for the monastic, under the guise of having more energy to devote to spiritual transformation, are most likely rooted in this fear. Asking a person to deny their physical body of natural and healthy physical urges is the exact opposite of embodiment. It treats the human body as something which is to be controlled and subjugated; something that cannot be trusted; something that is less than Divine.

Pregnancy forced me to practice much of what I intellectually believed to be true and wanted to be capable of, but had struggled with for years. I experienced not only acceptance of my body but appreciation and amazement for what it was capable of. I began to see it as an instrument of creation, a holy vessel for this precious life that it was protecting and nurturing. This forced me to face all of the ugly thoughts I had harbored against it for years. How many times had I looked at myself in the mirror, disgusted by what I saw?



How many times had I tried to hide it in shame? How much time had I spent worrying about my physical imperfections at the expense of being present to the person I was with? And how many times had I used seemingly spiritual pursuits – such as yoga – as a means to bend it to my will, rather than embrace and nurture my body?

Once you experience your body as a holy vessel it is very difficult to go back to mistreating yourself in ways both obvious and insidious. This commitment to self-care – perhaps the first completely sincere one I had made - forced further honesty. I began to face the ways I had seen and treated my body as a sexual object. As someone who has identified as feminist, this was a very difficult thing for me to come to terms with. To admit that I myself was guilty to seeing my body, my self as an object for men, was a bitter pill to swallow but one that I needed to face to grow spiritually.

Pregnancy, childbirth, and the obvious continuation of breastfeeding are especially profound experiences when one is seeking to navigate and negotiate sexuality and the objectification of women's bodies. For many women, pregnancy and childbirth may be the first time they experience a partner delighting in their body in a way that is not sexual. A man may find himself admiring his partner's body, not because it arouses him sexually, but because he is in awe of its capability to grow life. For me, this was life-altering. The way my husband took in my body while I was pregnant with our son was so completely different than anything I had ever experienced. It was being admired for how strong and capable and fluid it was; its ability to accommodate and change and grow. And I had to become comfortable with being regarded and appreciated in this way.

This is especially true if he is there to witness labor and birth. He may, for the first time, see breasts as something other than sexually appealing as he watches his baby suckle at them for nourishment. And yet, we cannot say that pregnancy and childbirth are completely non-sexual experiences. Conception happens ideally because of the union of two bodies in sexual desire and bliss. The urge to define certain bodily experiences as sexual and others as non-sexual is an extension of duality and disembodiment. Our bodies are partners in creation and sex is a necessary part of creation. Trying to distance our selves from this fact is a profound rejection of our humanness.

If we define a spiritual perspective as one that does not see separateness, but only wholeness in everything, then pregnancy and childbirth are some of the best opportunities to develop a spiritual perspective. I am in no way saying that they are the *only* way, but they should not be excluded from the experience of those who identify as contemplatives. The very fact that these experiences force us to grapple with our bodies, our humanity, and our sexuality, are proof that they are spiritually valuable experiences that contribute to, and even encourage, transformation.

When a child is born, so too is a mother. Inhabiting this new role in a mindful, fully present way has been the single most difficult effort of my life to date. I have never felt more joy or greater frustration and am in constant pursuit of equanimity. The lessons I am forced to learn on an hourly basis are ones of humility, acceptance, patience, kindness, empathy, compassion, and letting go. Acceptance of what is and learning to fully embrace Life and all of its complications, while managing and wisely spending energy.

As a child, my mother was an avid bible reader. She would spend hours and hours reading, reciting, and studying. She spent countless hours in her ministry. There were very clear expectations for my behavior, and I was told that God is Love, but I never felt it as a child. God remained an abstract idea, something my mother knew intimately but was beyond my reach. She was so devoted to her spiritual life that there was simply no time or energy for play or rest or quiet togetherness. And yet, I was expected to feel and demonstrate the same devotion. Her brand of spirituality was completely impractical. All I learned was how to be *perceived* as devout and nothing of how to live an authentic life in line with my calling. A child is not well-served by a parent devoted to spiritual practice in a non-integrated way.

My deepest desire and greatest goal as a mother is to raise self-aware, humble, kind, gracious, vulnerable children who have been given support and permission to be themselves, to know who they are, and to listen to their calling, using their talents in service of humanity. This is one of the ways that I myself serve humanity. It requires that I am engaged in my own constant spiritual practice, but I do not need to seek out a time and a place to practice – my life *is* my practice. The time that I spend cleaning up spills, or playing Legos, or cooking nutritious meals, or tending to a sick baby; these are moments that are teaching me, transforming me, and further inviting me into my true Self.

So much of our growth as humans happens in relationship. The parent-child relationship is one of the most precious, most sacred, and most profound and as such cannot and should not exclude one from contemplative life. While the monastics of before sought to simplify and streamline their lives so that distractions were few, the new monastic fully integrates these "distractions" and sees them not as such, but rather as part of a fully engaged life. Tending to a child takes a lot of time, it's true, and hours cannot be spent in study or meditation, but they are no less spiritually profound. The challenge of entering into stillness becomes more acute, but one becomes more adept at doing so. The words of the Psalmist echo through my daily life: "Be still and know that I am God." **Be still. Let god. Be at ease. Cease striving. Just be.**

**Each small task of
everyday life is part
of the harmony of the
universe.**

-- St. Therese of Lisieux

As Woman

In terms of contemplative life, monastic life, there are few examples of women who have been able to devote their lives to spiritual transformation without forgoing very womanly experiences. I struggle with feeling unqualified and unsure. Even as I write, I wonder if what I'm expressing has merit. How will it be received? Will it seem too simple and unimportant?

Spirituality for so long has been the realm of men. It feels intimidating as a woman to enter into the discussion and yet I see a profound need for a more feminine approach to contemplative life. The rigid discipline and compartmentalization of spirituality seems very masculine. Women tend to be more integrated, whether by societal conditioning or nature, I don't know for sure. Even within the new monastic movement, much of what is written and discussed is very male-centric. I find the language to be somewhat esoteric and theological, when maybe a simpler language would serve better.

A feminist seeks to end all sexist oppression and violence. An engaged contemplative is no different. Although men benefit immensely from patriarchal systems, they have suffered just as much, particularly in the areas of fatherhood and marriage, as women because of it. Women have permission to be nurturing in a way that men simply do not, and as I age and become more experienced I see how painful this is for men, and how harmful it is to all of us.

As a woman I feel an obligation to be a healing presence particularly in this matter. This has required brutal honesty – examining how I relate to men, how I speak to them, what I expect of them, the behaviors I judge to be acceptable and unacceptable. It can be very difficult, especially in the face of blatant sexism, to extend compassion and empathy to the perpetrator. And yet, this is what is required and it is very difficult to be able to do that without dedicated spiritual practice.

Anger, while seen as a useless and even harmful emotion by some, is a completely rational response to sexist oppression and violence. It is even a required response to motivate action. Should a contemplative's goal be to avoid anger or should it be to transform anger into action?

The feminist model of the ethics of care places emphasis on the importance of response. The ethics of care asks the question, "what is best for everyone *in this context*?" rather than the more masculine question, "what is just?". While what is just is important, and Justice is important, when it comes to social justice the overarching question must involve the interdependence of all people and all circumstances. It is not simply enough to respond to the problem. The problems surrounding the problem also require a response.

This model of ethics is highly useful to the new monastic seeking to work towards a more just world. Many existing institutions – religious and secular – could benefit from this feminist approach and perspective. Traditional monastic life has entailed seeking solitude to commune with the Divine, but new monastic life is about connection with the Divine through connection with the world.

Amidst the noise and chaos of life, responding to suffering, not in a detached philosophical way informed by doctrine or study, but in a direct way that takes into account the lived experience and circumstances of both the person in front of you, as well as the greater context of the broken patriarchal institutions within which they are operating.

As Spouse

In my life, few relationships have transformed me and helped me to grow spiritually more than my marriage. Looking back, I see all of my romantic relationships as experiences that helped me to grow and arrive at new realizations, but my marriage is the first one where I am able to see it as it is happening. I still benefit from hindsight like everyone else, but in our day-to-day lives I am very aware, for the most part, of what I am working out, what I am learning, and how this relationship affects my relationship with the world at large.

Having grown up in the West surrounded by unrealistic and unattainable idealized images of romance, it would have been nearly impossible for me to escape them, and I didn't. My earliest relationships as an adult were very much formed by these images and ideas. I made very bad choices and was very disappointed much of the time. It wasn't until I hit my mid-twenties that I began to question some of these things. Even then it took me years to feel comfortable expressing them, or to express honest doubt about romantic love – not about its existence but about its worthiness as a goal.

Romantic love is wonderful and exhilarating and beautiful. The idealized versions of it that are so easily sold and consumed in popular culture, sadly, do not do it justice. Romantic love is depicted as what could perhaps be more accurately called infatuation – the butterflies, the excitement, the almost magnetic pull of the other person. If we were to confuse the agony and the ecstasy of this very beginning stage of romantic love with romantic love itself, then it would indeed be a very unworthy goal. When we find a partner that suits us, however, these feelings deepen and become true love, which is many things, romantic being one of them. But it does change over time. It can go from wildly passionate to companionably comfortable, which in no way diminishes its power or beauty. I wonder if what people mistake for diminished passion may be just passion that is so constant and ever-present that it becomes less noticeable.



When I met my husband, I was in the midst of profound, and incredibly painful spiritual growth. Perhaps because of how raw I was, perhaps because of how vulnerable I was, our relationship began from a very honest and open place. We both entered into it in pain and yet without expectation of being helped or healed or saved by the other. I recognized in him, and I think he in me, the ability we both had to allow the other person to experience and work through their pain.

I hadn't been sure that I wanted to be married, but in my husband I saw someone who would also approach our marriage, day in and day out, like a spiritual practice. If that sounds unromantic or drab, I can assure you it is the complete opposite. It is one thing for a person to make promises to you based only on romantic love. It is another thing for them to make these promises based on their love for you as well as their own commitment to spiritual transformation. The security that came with knowing that my husband was promising to treat me well, not only because he loved me, but because that was part of his spiritual practice made me feel indescribably safe and cherished.

Our 9 vows to each other when we married were the following:

1. Do you promise to help each other to develop your hearts and minds, cultivating compassion, generosity, ethics, patience, enthusiasm, concentration and wisdom as you age and undergo the various ups and downs of life and to transform them into the path of love, compassion, joy and equanimity?

2. Knowing that life is not always smooth and that your own minds and emotions may sometimes get stuck in negativity, do you promise to see all challenges as opportunities to help you grow, to open your hearts, to accept yourselves, and each other; and to generate compassion for others who are suffering?

3. Do you promise to seek to understand yourselves, each other, and all living things, to examine your own minds continually and to regard all the mysteries of life with curiosity and joy?

4. Do you promise to grow the love you have for each other and to share it with all? To take the loving feelings you have for one another and your vision of each other's potential and to radiate this love outwards?

5. When it comes time to part, do you promise to look back at your time together with joy--joy that you met and shared what you have--and acceptance that we cannot hold on to anything forever?

6. Do you promise to remember the kindness of all others and your connection to them? Do you pledge to work for the welfare of others, with all of your compassion, wisdom and skill?

7. Do you promise to be mindful in action, word, and thought?

8. Do you promise day to day, to be patient with yourselves and others, knowing that change comes slowly and gradually, and to seek inspiration and guidance from your family, friends, and mentors?

9. Do you promise to continuously strive to remember your own Divine nature, as well as the Divine nature of all living things? To maintain the awareness that all things are temporary, and to remain optimistic that you can achieve your greatest potential and lasting happiness?

Many people who have chosen to get married will tell you that standing in front of your loved ones and God and making a commitment to each other does change the relationship. I experienced that. My husband did as well. Little changed about our daily lives – we already lived together, we already owned a home together – but the act of naming our relationship and announcing it's intention and what our goals and expectations were for our marriage, very much deepened our relationship. I felt different the next morning, waking up with this man who was now my husband but also my committed partner in love and spiritual transformation.

The lessons I have learned in just our four short years married are too numerous to name. Much as a parent is the earthly model of unconditional love for their child, so too are spouses and partners for each other. The way my husband offers unconditional love and support feeds me so deeply and empowers me to fulfill my calling, to be brave in the efforts I make in the world. He holds my vulnerability so carefully and precious, allowing me to be fearless as I try to constantly become more and more of who I am. If that's no holy, I don't know what is.

Being a person with a spiritual practice does not mean that I do not behave in hurtful ways sometimes. I have hurt my husband. He has hurt me. We disappoint each other, we misunderstand each other, we take each other for granted, we fight, we argue, we don't always like each other.

If our marriage were based only on the idealized version of love that exists in movies and books and society at large, we would have already failed. But because we have framed our relationship as we have, these challenges are seen not as failures but as opportunities for growth, not only in our relationship, but also as individuals and in our relationships with all others.

Because of my marriage I have become far kinder in how I express myself. I have learned to care much less about being right and much more about being gentle. I have learned not only how to compromise, but when and when not to compromise. I have become a much more effective communicator, and I have learned to show empathy in circumstances where before I may have been more rigid.

Could I have learned all of these things outside of marriage? Yes, but I would not have learned them as quickly as I have, and even more importantly I would not have the daily practice of learning them and practicing them over and over again. Marriage and romantic relationships provide a constant space to grow and from this growth a constant source of energy and love that can then be used in service of humanity. Seeking God through celibacy and solitude cannot and should not be dismissed outright and it is the path that monastics have sought for centuries. For the new monastic, though, marriage, love, and sex do not preclude spiritual transformation. These things can, in fact, be a rich source of energy and love that can then be radiated out into the world.

“When angels speak of love they tell us it is only by loving that we enter an earthly paradise. They tell us paradise is our home and love our true destiny.”

— bell hooks

The new monastic movement names something I have yearned for, yet for a long time lacked the words to express: my desire to be devoted to a spiritual life while still participating fully in the world. It is a movement that does not ask me to sacrifice or forego the universal experiences that connect me deeply to my humanness and therefore all others. It is this deep connection to others and our shared experience in life's challenges, opportunities, and joys that have helped me to identify my calling, and more importantly to live it fully. I want to be a healing presence in this world. I want to embody Love in action, to be courageous and bold and radical as I work for social change. The new monastic movement provides a framework and community as I embrace Life and make every effort to use my energy in service of compassion, love, and justice.

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