

Womansoul

Letters of Encouragement
and Possibility



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Salutation

Dear Woman of Soul:

Do you remember the first piece of mail you ever received? For many of us, the moment our mothers announced: "You have mail!" was a wondrous event. I asked several friends if they could remember the first time they received mail. I was amazed that without hesitation each had a story to tell.

Peggy recalled being about four years old. Her father was in the Navy and had sent her a letter. Peggy related her memories of the grand ceremony that accompanied the letter's arrival. She remembers cleaning out a drawer, placing the letter in it, and eagerly anticipating the letters that would follow. The drawer became a sanctuary not only for her father's letters but also for the birthday cards and other greetings that arrived throughout the years.

Liz remembers a time when she was four or five years old. She had gone to the movies with her mother and saw a contest display for the movie *Bambi*. Her mother filled out the raffle coupon for her and about one month later, long after she had forgotten about the contest, her letter arrived. Liz remembers the joy of seeing her name on the envelope from the Loew's Theatre. Enclosed was an announcement that she had won a set of Bambi buttons. The buttons were immediately sewn onto her new coat and the announcement card was framed!

I was approaching my fourth birthday when I received my first letter. It was a birthday card from my aunt with a one-dollar bill enclosed. Life was never the same after that event! I began looking for mail on a regular basis. I was delighted when someone thought of me and was willing to take the time to share something of themselves with me, particularly if a dollar bill was enclosed!

From Christmas cards to pen pal letters, we all learned the importance of taking a pen in hand and communicating with another person. The mail I receive now consists mainly of catalogs, bills, and credit card offers. In this world of email and instant messages, I am still delighted to open the mailbox and see a letter hand addressed to me. How wonderful to know that someone thought enough of me to take the time to write!

This book is a collection of letters to women. It began with a single letter I was moved to write while on a retreat several years ago. I wanted to share something of the beauty and peace I was experiencing at a Trappist Monastery in upstate New York. One evening I sat down and simply began to write to women who I knew were longing to grow in relationship with God and themselves. When I finished writing the letter, I realized that through my pen I had communicated something of my soul. Writing the letter enabled me to express what was happening within me.

Letter writing has traditionally been a means of sharing something of the writer's soul with another. Throughout history people of faith have written letters to express the ways they are both moved and led by God. From John Chrysostom to Clare of Assisi to Thomas Merton, there is a recorded history of God's activity in people's lives through the letters they wrote. Present-day readers of these letters can enter into the experience of the writer's spiritual life as well as the relationship they shared with the one they were addressing.

So much of this kind of communication seems to be lost in our fast-paced society, where emails can be hastily sent and just as quickly deleted. In order to truly absorb the contents of a "real" letter, you must read and re-read it. I am not the sentimental type and have a tendency to dispose of letters long before I have let

them rest within me. I have, however, saved one letter for over thirty years.

When I first entered the religious life, we were allowed visitors only once a month. Mail arrived twice weekly. My mother always made sure that I received a letter from her on mail days. She would keep me abreast of all that was happening in the lives of my family and friends. My father, on the other hand, never wrote to me. He was a quiet man of few words who would point out that he didn't write because my mother had already told me everything. I was genuinely surprised one mail day to see my father's handwriting on an envelope. In the enclosed letter, he summed up our relationship in a few words, and in the process gave me a treasure. My father has been dead for over twenty years now, but every once in a while I take out his letter and read it. I am instantly reconnected with my father and all the love he brought into my life. Those few words are a long-ago gift that keeps giving me something of this great man's heart and soul.

The letters that follow are from my heart and soul to yours. They are expressions of my struggle to grow into wholeness and to share the many ways I meet God in everyday life. They are also filled with wisdom I have gleaned through listening to women who long for "something more" in their lives. There is one letter for each month of the year. I encourage you to spend time reflecting on each letter and making it your own by using the Soul Suggestions given at the end of each. These are just suggestions that are intended to facilitate your reflection. You may discover other channels to open your soul to the grace of this present moment. If you gather with other women who search for more, you could use the letters as a common reflection. Above all, have fun with them!

Many women have contributed to the heart and soul of these letters. Michele Del Monte, my soul friend with whom I share a house, a ministry, and the ups and downs of life, has been the strength behind my writing, telling me, "It is time to put your feet to the fire and do it!" She has never tired of listening to a letter or celebrating when each one was completed. My dear friend, Sister Philomena O'Brien, OSU of St. Ursula's Center, Blue Point, NY provides the location and hospitality for my Wednesday night gatherings of women. These women provide the wisdom, truth, humor, and encouragement for my ministry as a preacher. Jane Vigliotta, my friend and colleague, has painstakingly made these letters readable. Jane is never afraid to say, "What do you mean when you say that?" The spoken word is a preacher's tool, and Jane has helped to transform my spoken word into the written word. Emilie Cerar, my editor at Resurrection Press, encouraged me to write these letters and believed that I would actually do it. Emilie delivers these letters to you. To all of these women, I give my heartfelt thanks.

Finally, my golden retrievers, Friar and Willow the Wonder Dog, listened to and labored through each letter. They never let me take myself too seriously, and are very pleased that these letters have been sent, for now there is more time for petting and playing!

In these letters I offer you something of my soul as a gift. I pray that through my sharing you will be encouraged to enter more deeply into your own soul. There, through the truth of your life, may you grow in grace, peace, and the love of your God.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sister Pat". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

January



NEW YEAR, NEW HEART

Dear Woman of Soul:

We have just walked across a year, and like a Clint Eastwood character, we can see that there has been “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” Hopefully, there has also been a touch of the delightful.

New Year’s Day is a good time to look back over the past year and make resolutions to grow. I always become concerned when I hear someone speak of New Year’s resolutions as if they are a correction of our behavior instead of a call to new life.

The other night we had a big snowstorm and our neighbors went outside with a yardstick to measure the amount of snow that had fallen. How many times have your New Year’s resolutions been the measuring sticks to see how you are doing? It’s good to remember that God invites us not to measure our progress or our faults, but to always begin anew in our journey to the fullness of life.

Grace—the love of God moving in our lives—is not given to us because we have performed well in life. It is a free gift, no strings attached. Grace is the movement of God’s vision in our lives. When we respond to grace, we are responding to the way God wants us to live. This is always a call to life!

In Isaiah: 43:19 we hear our God crying out, “I am doing a brand new thing. Can you not see it?” These challenging words

have nothing to do with measuring and everything to do with responding in trust and hope. As I was looking at journal entries I had written over a period of five years, I realized that I referred to this quote twenty-one times! I was astonished and I began to laugh. For years God had been telling me something *I did not see*. Now I have moved into living the “new thing” without knowing it. So much for years of study on the spiritual life!

We do sometimes just slip into newness, but we generally need a little push. When my disabled golden retriever was a puppy, we began to see a new veterinarian. He is a special man who is devoted to both his canine clients and their owners. His interest in our dog’s special needs touches me deeply. His openness to exploring both traditional and non-traditional treatments always keeps my hope alive for my beloved pet. It was obvious, however, that the doctor was both constrained and overworked in the clinic where he was practicing.

My roommate Michele and I suggested and even prodded him to begin his own practice. He definitely wanted to do it, but it just wasn’t happening. Meanwhile, people continued to choose him over other staff members as their pet’s doctor. He had a “practice-in-waiting,” but he failed to see it.

Everything changed when he met Joni. They fell in love, and her love gave him a new vision that changed his life. They are now married and have a large and thriving practice in a neighboring town.

Life is all about being open to love and the vision that God, who is Love, has for us. This involves taking a risk and trusting that God will indeed be with us. Ask yourself, “Has God been

faithful to me?" Perhaps your life has not turned out the way you planned, but has God been there for you? If the answer is "Yes," then you can step out in courage with the personal conviction that God will continue to be faithful in your life.

To take more risks in life, we need to look at life from different perspectives. Sometimes we are held back by one-way vision. I often suggest to people that they get a kaleidoscope and take the time to view familiar people and things through it. It is like a journey into the unexpected. The most familiar objects can take on a magical image when we shift our perspective.

For some of us, seeing with a new vision can be a gift of wonder. For others, however, it may be a very frightening experience. If your expectations of life are very high, you may be shaken by a shift in vision. "Expecters," myself included, are people who work hard, are deeply committed, and *expect* certain results from their labor. After all, we know what is best! This attitude is a feeble attempt to control our life situations and can lead to great disappointments and dashed hopes.

An example of this "expecting" attitude is my insistence on having a real Christmas tree. Several years ago even though I had recently suffered multiple injuries from a car accident and found myself bedridden for the holidays, I *expected* to have a real tree. As friends labored for hours to decorate the largest tree they could fit into my house, I struggled with my need to arrange the lights and garland myself. I inevitably found myself supervising every visitor in the rearrangement of the ornaments from my sickbed. Still, the tree did not live up to my expectations and was