

# *Sister Wisdom*

WOMEN OF FAITH, FORTITUDE,  
AND INSPIRATION

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# Introduction



Dear Reader,

This book has an interesting backstory. To understand it, I'd like to share some details about my life.

I grew up in the 1950–1960s, a daughter in a very wealthy family in Dallas. At that time, men and women had different roles. A woman's role was to become a wife and mother and create a loving home for her family. Wedding vows at the time typically declared that wives were *to obey* their husbands. In fulfilling this calling, my mother had been an outstanding example! She loved getting us all dressed up, so when Dad came home, he felt welcomed. A man's role, I was taught, was not only to be the head of the household but also to succeed in a professional arena and do something meaningful for society.

Experiencing all this, I wanted to break out of these structures. Why were women's talents and power confined to home life? Couldn't men share doing grocery shopping? I was determined to develop some sort of expertise and become smart enough on my own to contribute something meaningful to society. How I would accomplish that was a mystery. During my twenties and thirties, I kept reading psychology books and began to work as a feminist activist, supporting the idea of women's equality. But in 1990, something happened that turned my life in a different direction.

While living in New York City, I learned that a friend was hospitalized. Wanting to visit her, and deciding it would be nice to bring her a book, I went to a nearby bookstore. I usually went to sections on philosophy or psychology. But on impulse, I went

straight to the section on spirituality. There, after quickly surveying the options, I impulsively bought a book by St. Teresa of Avila. This was a surprising choice, since I had been raised as a Baptist and had never picked up a book about a Catholic saint. I assumed this book by a saint would offer peace and comfort to my friend. During the thirty-minute taxi ride to the hospital, I began perusing the pages in the book. By the time I arrived, I had decided, shamelessly, to keep the book for myself. Instead, I bought my friend some flowers from a shop in the hospital lobby.

If I had supposed that the life of a Catholic saint was calm and peaceful, that was definitely NOT the life of Teresa of Avila. She was a powerhouse. She had the courage and audacity to confront her Carmelite order, convinced that they had abandoned the poverty and contemplative spirit of their origins. Against severe pushback and opposition, she managed to lead the “reform” of her community and went on to found numerous other convents. And then, with St. John of the Cross, she initiated a similar reform of the male branch of the Carmelite order. Again, I had thought that a nun’s story would be about lighting candles and praying unceasingly. In St. Teresa, however, I discovered a bold life of spiritual adventure that had dramatic implications for her church and the wider culture. In reading about her life, I learned that it was her prayer life, her communication with God, that was the source of her power.

In the Southern Baptist Church in which I was raised, only men were allowed to be ministers or deacons and stand behind the pulpit. Women were not allowed to speak or pray from the pulpit, though wives could *walk behind their husbands* as they stepped up to make announcements or offer a prayer. But women had to stay silent. This all seemed normal to me at the time.

From Teresa of Avila, on the other hand, I learned that a woman

could strongly influence her religious institution. And prayer itself could be powerful! This is not at all where I had felt my “source of power” would be. In the Baptist church, my prayers felt a bit structured and often passive. But Teresa’s prayers seemed conversational. She sent a message upward to the heavens, and then she opened herself to receive a response. In one of her books, she described how a person can choose to develop a deeper capacity to be in conversation with God, to hear what God is saying. Over time, Teresa began to feel “instructed to help transform the church,” so it would return to its original values, especially to learn what poverty can teach us. From Teresa, I learned that *being smart* isn’t the way to make an impact, but rather finding and following one’s calling, that is, God’s unique plan for one’s life. Might I also have a unique, preordained plan for my life?

Soon, I found myself buying other books about women saints. One day, oh my, I discovered Hildegard of Bingen! She was born in 1098 and raised in a Benedictine convent. She received visions, which she described in her books. She composed music; some became early versions of operas. She painted colorful images of the cosmos. She studied the medicinal properties of plants. She went on preaching tours. Today, one can still buy her music and read beautiful books that include her artwork. I began to read about these saints who received intuitive, spiritual, and/or artful messages that transformed their lives and the lives of those around them. And those messages were helping me confront problems I was facing in my own life. I began to read about other courageous, trailblazing women whose faith empowered their witness in the world. Not just Catholic saints. They were all around: Protestants and women of other faiths, activists, scholars, social reformers, poets, revolutionaries, and theologians—often sidetracked by history but hiding in plain sight. They invited me to see things from

a different perspective. My goal became to develop my spiritual life, so I could then discover how to fulfill the life calling God had planned for me.

As an adult, my first marriage had ended in divorce. Oh, the pain. It felt like such a tragedy. When I met Harville Hendrix in 1978, he was a professor at a seminary at Southern Methodist University. He was also divorced. But he started giving speeches about “three stages of loving relationship,” wanting to help people who fell in love learn how to maintain those feelings and stay connected. I had been praying for a way to help me to recover from the pain and sorrow of my own divorce. And here it was, in Harville seeking to help married couples learn to shift from conflict to connection. We decided to marry.

I was Harville’s ideal *thought partner*, since I had earned a Masters in Psychology from SMU. I began to realize that out of my pain, my prayers were getting answered! I felt my heart opening. I began to realize, like the women in this book, that I was finding *my life’s calling*, the assignment I was given to live with my life. Since then, my life has been dedicated to helping people learn to transform toxic relationships into connected ones. Harville and I feel that all of humanity needs to know more about how to be more loving to one another.

Here is the bottom line: No longer do I believe being smart is the answer to life. Instead, it’s being truly open to listening and learning from our prayer lives; reading from scripture; and overcoming pain, struggles, and hopelessness from the heavens themselves. Also, the message I received from the Sisters of Wisdom, described in this book, was that we must treat all people respectfully; embrace diversity; and learn ways to be empathic for one another, even if we have differences.

Many of my feminist colleagues in the women’s movement were skeptical about religion, based on the predominant role of

patriarchal values and structures of authority, where women were taught to stay in their place. I knew that world. But through my reading about Teresa of Avila and others like her, I knew that there was another story to tell. On that basis, I wrote a book, *Faith and Feminism*, about five women of faith, whose vision and unwavering courage helped to transform humanity. I then decided to enroll in a PhD program at Union Theological Seminary.

The study of theology was surprisingly fascinating, due to professors whose theological perspectives expanded my worldview. I was inspired by the many books I read by feminist theologians and by the professors that I studied under. I think of these professors as saints, though they would tell me not to describe them that way! They were humble. But they were also passionate visionaries who emphasized universal inclusion and who believed love should be our global ethic personally and politically.

While studying under them, I thought of the life of Jesus. When he lived on earth, he spent time with the sick, “sinners,” and other outcasts. He would also say radical things like “listen to the children,” reversing the source of where wisdom resides. As I think of Jesus saying that, I remember pushing myself to get as “smart” as I could be, as if that were the apex of being human. Instead, Jesus spoke about associating with the marginalized, spending time with and even learning from those in need: my professors identified ways that society needed this kind of radical transformation. When seeking to honor a God of love, shouldn’t we all be doing what we can to contribute to a civilization of love?

Being inspired by my professors, I began to realize they needed a much bigger audience. They became the inspiration for this book, which started with my writing a handful of “portraits of women” that I felt offered wisdom the world should know about. Each “portrait” presents a short biography of a woman and shares a spiritual concept or insight that might contribute to the reader’s

life. The number of women steadily grew, including historical and contemporary women, whose bold and courageous lives were rooted in the spiritual values they held and practiced.

I pray that these meditations might inspire you. And that their words will continue, now and into the future, to plant in our hearts the seeds of faith, courage, and hope. May the wisdom of these sisters light a flame in your heart, as they have done in mine.

*Helen LaKelly Hunt*