

## The Web

SARA WHITESTONE

*A lock on the door means the power to think for oneself.*

—Virginia Woolf

“You’re going to vote for a Democrat?” my husband almost shouted. We were standing on the porch, having just come home from church. Dan’s hand had frozen in mid-reach for the screen door.

“I can’t believe it!” he said. “If you do that, we’ll just cancel each other out. Then what’s the point in either of us voting at all?”

His eyes matched his narrow face as he waited for my response. But I said nothing. I had spent months researching the issues, turning each candidate over in my mind, carefully formulating a defense of my decision to vote for a different kind of candidate in this election than for the staunch Republicans I had chosen by default in the past. How then, in just four sentences, could my husband move me from confidence back into doubt?

There was a spider in its web by the door, moving toward a honeybee that was struggling to free itself from the sticky threads.

Dan and I were raised together in a Baptist church. We went to the same Bible college and got married a week after graduation. Our vows promised to support each other, to use our gifts and talents to be all that God wanted us to be.

But only a few weeks after our wedding I found that this idea of “us” was going to be the essential theme for our lives. I wasn’t an individual anymore. I was part of the marriage unit—a unit that demanded complete unity.

“God wouldn’t want us to disagree on anything,” Dan told me. “That’s what oneness means—always thinking alike, sharing everything. Even your writing isn’t yours alone anymore. It’s ours—ours together.”

Bound up by this forced togetherness, when I exposed feelings in my journal that could not be revealed to Dan, I felt guilty. But when I tried to write what Dan would approve of, it came out trite and insincere.

While the act of creating was exhilarating, it wasn’t worth the doubts. Was I wrong to think negatively of my husband in any way? And what if I was sinning to write about God in such a deeply personal and passionate way? Dan would call it blasphemous.

But I couldn’t help how I felt about God. My relationship to him had preceded Dan and was stronger than anything else I had ever known.

When I was four years old I first felt the longing—the bittersweet pang of reaching for something I could not see but still yearned to know. One night in the dusky evening the rusty swing set in my front yard groaned as I pushed my swing higher and higher. With

each upward arc I felt as if I moved closer to some kind of joy that I didn't understand but desperately wanted to experience. If I could just pump high enough, I would be able to meet it—to learn what it was. The clouds knew. The sky knew. I wanted to know.

But it seemed our church knew a different God. He called us to suffering out of obedience. Where was the joy?

What I felt and what I was taught didn't fit together.

Dan also said he knew what was best for me. It was his responsibility as my husband to “present me without spot or blemish before God.”

“But,” he warned, “because of your stubbornness, we have a long way to go.”

For Dan marriage meant no locks on our doors, no physical separation in our bed, no disharmony in our thoughts, and, especially, no emotional secrets. There was not even a lock on my journal. Dan felt he had the right to read it anytime he wished.

Eventually the constant second-guessing proved more than I could bear. In what I later termed “creative shut-down” I stopped writing altogether. I didn't have the mental room for it anyway. My mind was busy with the daily emotional repair that I was told all Christian marriages required.

I am not sure why, then—almost 25 years into our marriage—I chose to assert my independence, voting my conscience in that election.

But there we were, my husband and I, in a standoff on the porch. Finally, Dan opened the door, walked through it, and held it—expecting me to follow.

I didn't.

The screen shut with a bang—with me on the outside of the door and Dan on the inside, his face distorted through the maze of the wire.

Then Dan turned into the kitchen, clattering the dishes as he helped himself to the stew in the slow cooker I had prepared that morning before church. I stood on the porch, transfixed by the web. The spider was almost to the bee.

With my bare hand, I smashed the spider against the wall.

Had I hurt the bee as well? No, there she was, still dangling from a couple of threads.

“Now don't sting me,” I whispered. “I'm trying to help you—to set you free.”

With her bonds broken, she flew up. Up toward the sky and the clouds. Up—I knew—toward joy.

Recently I again voted my conscience in the presidential election. But this time I didn't have to justify my decision.

Dan once said that I would never have the courage to divorce him: I wouldn't be able to support myself financially, I would lose my reputation and most of my friendships within my church family, but most devastatingly, I would become an apostate by turning my back on my faith.

Those triple chords of fear held me in their web, lifeless. Until one day I prayed this: “God, if leaving Dan is the worst thing I could ever do, then even in this, I know you will still love me and that somehow you will forgive me.”

That is when I first felt the grace that Dan and others in our church had talked so

much about.

When I shut the screen door of our house behind me for the last time, I was truly on the outside. I was walking away from Dan, my marriage, and from financial stability; I was walking away from my church, from most of its friendships, and from many of its absolutes.

But I knew I was not walking away from my faith.

Instead, I have been following that bee in her flight—up toward the sky, up toward the clouds.

And up—always up—toward joy.