



RECLAIMING OUR HEARTS: BEING OUR AUTHENTIC SELVES

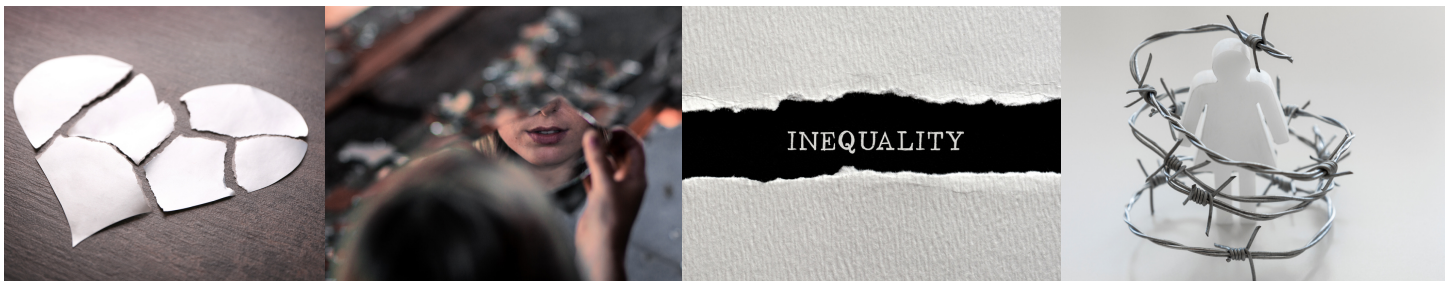
A REFLECTION BY CLARE JOHNSON



BROKEN HEARTS AND UNHEARD VOICES

We live in a world where voices often go unheard, and distorted perceptions break hearts; the marginalised are especially vulnerable to unconscious bias and disempowerment. Women in patriarchal societies are one of the unheard voices; their individual or collective voices are often absent or suppressed. Since voice is crucial to self-expression and our unique inner self, this silencing or distortion means we forget our authentic identity and inherent dignity, and the beauty of these thoughts, deeds, and culture is missing from the world. The voice of our heart is lost.

Being female is tough; women are bombarded with false perceptions of what an ‘ideal’ woman should look, think, and act like. These untruths are often difficult to quantify but are identifiable in their presence and effects. For example, women are objectified and reduced to body parts or sexual functionality. Objectification is found in exercise trends, where looking fit and conforming to an ‘ideal’ body shape is idolised. It’s observed in social media, where selfie self-objectification promotes disordered thinking and behaviour, such as mental illness and eating disorders. It is reflected in advertising trends, where sexualised images are used to sell products and create unrealistic beauty standards. It’s present in everyday interactions, where sexualised behaviour (such as sexting) is normalised. It’s found in pornography, where extreme sexual objectification distorts healthy interpersonal relationships. Objectification changes how women value themselves and are valued by others; women’s worth becomes based on desirability, not on intrinsic dignity and individuality.



Women are not just objectified but also stereotyped, disempowered, and discriminated against; women are undervalued, overlooked, and abused because of their gender. Women experience financial inequality; on average, in Australia, women are paid 21.7% less than men (AGWGGEA). Women experience exclusion from leadership roles and positions of influence; only 29.7% of women hold key management positions in Australia (AGWGGEA). Women experience unconscious omission and bias; it was only in the early 2010s that female crash test dummies were used in car safety testing. Women experience self-doubt; for example, women are less likely to apply for jobs than men, even when they are equally qualified. Women experience silence and disbelief on issues directly concerning them; often, women’s testimony is not considered sufficiently reliable in sexual harassment trials, and women’s health issues are more frequently misdiagnosed or dismissed as something minor compared to men’s. Women encounter sexism and chauvinism; the portrayal of Julia Gillard in the media, especially after her misogyny speech, is a high-profile example. Women experience violence in many forms; in Australia, 1 in 6 women (over 15 years old) have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current/previous partner, 1 in 4 have experienced emotional abuse by a current/previous partner, 1 in 5 women have been sexually assaulted and threatened, and 1 in 2 have been sexually harassed (AIHW). Furthermore, women experience multi-level discrimination when otherness is combined with gender; women with observable markers of difference, such as Islamic women wearing a hijab or refugee/migrant women with accents and ethnic appearances, face barriers to employment and inclusion in Australian society. How a woman is treated is closely linked to perceptions of her identity; distortions can easily lead to mistreatment, exploitation, and abuse.

Even in institutional churches, where the equal dignity of all people is a central tenet, we observe distorted perceptions and behaviour towards women. The image and language of God are frequently reduced to the masculine – Lord, Father, He; women searching for the feminine or alternate expressions of God – Mother, Creator, Wisdom – are forced to seek it for themselves. Limitations are placed on women’s participation in liturgies and within leadership structures; women serve, but are they recognised and honoured as ‘servant-leaders’? The stories of the Church matriarchs, women who encountered Jesus, and other women of faith are lost in time or seldom heard; opportunities for women to preach from the depth and breadth of their life experiences and encounters with God are rare. Patriarchy and tradition without reference to contemporary understanding are silencing the voices and breaking the hearts of women looking for welcoming inclusion and respectful dignity.

Considering women as marginalised is eye-opening, with women making up 49.7% of the world’s population (UN). How much more are statistically smaller marginalised groups, such as First Nations or LGBTQIA+ people, or refugees and asylum seekers affected? How do we counter the distorted images that are breaking hearts and empower the unheard, authentic voices? We look to God, the Sacred Heart.



FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are some negative perceptions or silencing of women that you have observed?
- What did reading the reflection make you feel and why?
- How did you feel called to respond?

FURTHER READING

- Caroline Criado Perez. *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. London: Penguin RandomHouse UK, 2020.
- UN International Women's Day. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/womens-day>
- Diversity Australia. Test Your Own Unconscious Bias with the “Implicit Association Test”. www.diversityaustralia.com.au/services/test-your-own-unconscious-bias

PRAYER

Lord, make me an instrument of peace:

Bless all women who daily strive to bring peace to their communities, their homes, and their hearts. Give them strength to continue to turn swords into ploughshares.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love:

We pray for all women who face prejudice, inequality, and gender disparities. Help us to see and to face the discrimination against women in all the many forms it may take.

Where there is injury, pardon:

Comfort all women who suffer from the pain of war, violence, and abuse. Help them to become instruments of their own reconciliation and peace.

Where there is division, unity:

Forgive all people who let differences breed hate and discrimination. Let your example of valuing Creation help us to see that we are equal partners in caring for our common home.

Where there is darkness, light; where there is untruth, truth:

Comfort all women who struggle in the darkness of abuse, poverty, and loneliness. May we stand with them in light to acknowledge their suffering and strive to remove the burdens of shame or embarrassment.

Where there is doubt, true faith:

We pray for all women who live in fear of their husbands, fathers, and forces that control their lives. Help them to be empowered to be their true selves through your everlasting love and faith.

Where there is despair, hope:

We pray for all women who live in the despair of poverty, violence, trafficking, slavery, and abuse. May the light of your love bring them hope.

Where there is sadness, new joy:

Help us to see the strength and goodness in everyone. Transform our hearts to celebrate the love and grace of all people.

Amen.

Source: TearFund

A HEART'S REVELATION

Scripture is an excellent place to start when searching for truth; it's a way to connect divine truth with human reality. Theological writer Ormond Rush states, "Only from dwelling within the heart of God do we get a perspective on things around us that is more likely to be from God's perspective." The story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42) is a crucial story about truth, identity, purpose, and mission for women (and all of us). Examining the narrative and its interpretations provides insight into women's challenges in reclaiming their authentic selves.

JOHN 4:1-42 (NRSV)

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Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

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Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

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The Samaritan woman is the third most written-about woman in the New Testament, behind only Mary (Our Lady of the Sacred Heart) and Mary Magdalene. What is written, however, is frequently an unfavourable commentary on the Samaritan woman's character and role; the woman is often dismissed as a sexual sinner or an ignorant tool used by Jesus to teach the disciples (and us). Only recently have alternate and contemporary interpretations of the text emerged, exploring the narrative and feminist implications of the Scriptural story. Finally, the truth of the Samaritan woman can be revealed!



Everyone has a story...

The story's place within the overall narrative structure of the Gospel is significant; the placement discloses the author's intention and themes in writing the text. The story of the Samaritan woman is located at the beginning of John's Gospel, known as the 'Book of Signs' (John 1:19-12:50), a narrative section filled with signs (symbols, miracles) designed to reveal Jesus's divine identity and his mission to make the Father known. Specifically, it is located in the 'Cana to Cana' section of the narrative, where the discussion of discipleship and faith is framed by the two miracles at Cana (John 2:1-11 and 4:46-54). Lastly, the Samaritan woman's tale is a direct contrast, both in content and imagery, to the story of Nicodemus (John 2:23-3:21); it contrasts the continued misunderstanding of Nicodemus with the Samaritan woman's enlightened witness. The story's place establishes that the story's themes aim to reveal Jesus' identity (and mission) and the responses to that revelation (discipleship or disbelief) from different people.

The setting of John 4:1-42 reinforces these themes and emphasises the story's focus on the Samaritan people's encounter with and response to Jesus. The geographical markers indicate a journey between Judea and Galilee via Samaria (John 4:3-5). This route is unusual; the hostilities between Jews and Samaritans over religious purity and ancient worship practices usually prompted Jewish travellers to take a more cautious path. Therefore, the necessity to go to Samaria (John 4:4) is theological and divinely inspired; the early Johannine community, for whom the text was written, struggled with identity (deciding who was part of the community and in what capacity). A story about Samaritan inclusion was vital.

The geographical and physical setting of the story at Sychar and Jacob's well (John 4:5-6) provides a socio-culturally important place for Jesus and the Samaritan woman to meet; it emphasises that the discussion is centred on Samaritan-Jewish relations. The discussion reveals that Jesus wants to start the relationship with the Samaritans; it's the only time Jesus initiates an encounter. It shows Jesus' inclusive nature; when necessary, Jesus breaks socio-cultural and religious taboos, such as talking with a Samaritan woman alone or sharing a water jar with the Samaritans (John 4:9). It reveals that Jesus is more significant than Jacob (the Samaritan's patriarchal ancestor) is, as Jesus can offer "living" water (John 4:12-15). It reveals that worship is not centred in a place, like the Samaritan holy mountain or the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (John 4:20), but in looking towards God in "spirit and truth" (John 4:20-24). The setting creates a space to reveal who Jesus is and the nature of his relationship with the Samaritan people.



The well setting is also a literary marker for a betrothal-type story; the audience is set up to expect a covenant promise, similar to Jacob's betrothal to Rachel (Gen 29:1-30). In this story, Jesus acts as the bridegroom to the Samaritan people through the Samaritan woman; it echoes the bridegroom imagery of the Cana wedding miracle story (John 2:1-11). The woman's representation of the Samaritan people is suggested by her initial identification using her national identity and by the use of plural pronouns in the text; "gave us", "our ancestor", and "we worship" (John 4:12, 20, 22). Furthermore, the marital imagery throughout the story emphasises the new covenant relationship between Jesus and the Samaritans. The betrothal promise is found in the offer and acceptance of living water, the promise of life together forever; the marriage is found in the relationship between Jesus and the woman that slowly reveals identity and leads to worshipping God; and the fruitfulness is found in the woman's witness and sower/reaper/harvest imagery that represents the Samaritan people's ripening faith. The ultimate fruit of the betrothal/marriage is recognising Jesus' identity as "Saviour of the World" (John 4:42), a title representing the universality of Jesus' inclusiveness.

The Samaritan woman's role as a representation of her people doesn't diminish her individual value; it enhances it. The dialogue between the Samaritan woman and Jesus is the longest exchange between Jesus and another person in the Gospels; it allows the different facets of the woman's character to be revealed. During the story, woman's identity progresses from "Samaritan woman" (John 4:9) to "Woman" (a Johannine title of respect) (John 4:21) to 'truth teller' (John 4:18) to 'questioning worshipper seeking guidance' (John 4:19-26) to 'testimony giver' (John 4:28-29) to a metaphorical "field ripe for harvesting" (John 4:35) to 'sower' (John 4:39,42). The woman is revealed in her complexity and uniqueness, an individual who is identified by her relationship with Jesus. This co-revelation is reflected in the parallel movement of Jesus' identity from "Jew" (John 4:9) to "Sir" (John 4:11,15,19) to "prophet" (John 4:19) to possible "Messiah" (John 4:25,29) to "I am He" (John 4:26) (the ultimate self-revelation of divine identity, Exod 3:14). Furthermore, the Samaritan woman's active role is central to her characterisation; her ultimate response to Jesus is testimony in word and deed (John 4:28-29). The woman's proactive approach is contrasted with the disciples, who remain silent and stuck in misunderstanding (John 4:27,33) and with Nicodemus, who comes with questions but quickly fades into the background and inaction (John 3:4, 9-10). The woman acts as a model disciple/apostle who reveals Jesus to others and brings them to faith through that revelation.



This positive portrait of the Samaritan woman is sadly a minority interpretation; many commentaries present the Samaritan woman in a negative and often dismissive way. Like contemporary Australian women, the Samaritan woman suffers from distorted perceptions of identity that change how she is treated.

Perception is based on the perceiver's context, outlook, and expectations; words are open to interpretation without additional visual, behavioural, or background clues. The interpretation of noon in the Samaritan woman's story is a good example. Some commentators use this temporal setting to emphasise the Samaritan woman's sinful past; noon is an unusual time to collect water and, therefore, a sign of her exclusion from ordinary community life. However, intertextual clues suggest an alternate explanation of the noon setting; noon is the lightest part of the day, and as light is a Christological symbol in the Gospel (John 1:4-9, 3:19-21), it could signify Jesus' revelatory power. Furthermore, the enlightenment and openness of the Samaritan woman at noon is presented in contrast to the darkness (night) and misunderstanding of Nicodemus (John 3:2, 3:9-10). Since symbolism and contrast are standard rhetorical devices used in John's Gospel to emphasise points of importance, a narrative explanation of noon could be a more accurate interpretation of the author's intention.



The negative emphasis on the woman's sexual behaviour arises from John 4:16-19; commentators focus on the five husbands and living with an unknown man as a sign of infidelity or promiscuousness in the woman. However, these interpretations seem to distort the truth of the narrative; they take a section out of context and use it to create a false perception of the woman. Based on the textual themes (Samaritan inclusion) and the symbolism of the woman as a representation of the Samaritan people, the husbands are likely also to be symbolic representations; Samaria was colonised five times and was currently under occupation by Rome. The emphasis on sexual sin misrepresents the situation; Jesus demonstrates no interest in the unusual personal circumstances but instead focuses on the woman's truthfulness (John 4:18). Truth and revelation are themes of the text; the narrator uses the opportunity to reveal something about Jesus' identity, Jesus is a prophet (John 4:19). Furthermore, some commentators combine the woman's personal history with the betrothal-type scene to negatively portray the woman as harlot and to argue the theme is the redemption of a sinful woman and thus a sinful Samaritan people. This judgemental and distorted interpretation arises because no clues are given to the woman's physical appearance (age, dress) and her expression (tone, posture); interpreters infer innuendo and flirtatiousness. In this light, the Samaritan woman is sexually objectified.

The Samaritan woman is further mistreated when commentators underestimate her intellect and dismiss her faith; the woman's misunderstanding of Jesus' words and the speculative expression of her faith in John 4:29 is used to diminish the woman's role in revealing Jesus's identity and bringing the Samaritan people to faith. The narrative uses misunderstanding (irony) as a tool to tell the truth; the woman needs to grow in her comprehension so that Jesus' identity and mission can be gradually revealed. The content of the woman's dialogical responses draws out important religious and theological points, such as how Jews and Samaritans interact and where to worship. The symbolism of the woman leaving her water jar (John 4:28) suggests that, like the apostles leaving their nets, she is beginning her discipleship/apostleship. Furthermore, the strength of the woman's faith doesn't diminish her impact; even if tentative and questioning, the woman's testimony and witness brought others to "come and see" Jesus (John 4:29-30). By evangelising others, the woman perhaps comes to full faith; revelation is ongoing, and the impact of truth is divinely transcendent.

The Samaritan woman's story reveals truths relevant to today's world. Firstly, no one is exempt from distorted perceptions of identity and mistreatment because of them; however, the truth can be reclaimed. Like the Samaritan woman, women can discover and recover their identity through a relationship with Jesus, the Sacred Heart. Secondly, striving for understanding is essential: question, challenge, inquire, and protest. Thirdly, testifying to the truth in word and deed is powerful; witnessing can change perceptions and actions. Finally, Jesus is the 'Saviour of the world'; the invitation to a relationship with Jesus is open to all.



FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

LECTIO DIVINA REFLECTION QUESTIONS (SCRIPTURAL READING, MEDITATION, AND PRAYER)

Use the biblical story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42) for Lectio Divina.

- What words or phrases catch your attention?
- How does the story draw you towards God?
- Where does love call you to reflect, respond, or change?

FURTHER READING AND LISTENING

Read or listen to female voices and experiences.

- Cornish, Sandie, and Andrea Dean, eds. Still Listening to the Spirit: Woman and Man Twenty Years Later. Australia: Office for Social Justice of the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference, 2019.
- Australian Women Preach. In Her Voice: Raising Women's Voices in Preaching the Gospel. Australia: Garratt Publishing, 2023.
- Australian Women Preach Podcast. <https://australianwomenpreach.com.au>

PRAYER

Blessed are the generations of brave women who dared to hope, for it was women who were the last ones at the cross with Jesus, and it was women who first visited the tomb.

Blessed are the generations of faithful women who dared to resist, for it was in the women's homes that Christianity first spread, back when you still risked your life to follow in the way of Christ.

Blessed are the women who have been making our churches what they are since the very beginning.

Blessed are the martyrs, missionaries, and mystics. Blessed are the prophets, poets, and preachers.

Blessed are the ancestors who forged a way in the wilderness so that we wouldn't have to fight the same battles and clear the same paths they once did.

Blessed are the descendants we may never meet, who will carry on the work we have yet to begin and will create the worlds we haven't yet dared to imagine.

Amen.

Adapted From: [YoungClergyWomen](#)

RECLAIMING OUR HEARTS

To reclaim our hearts and become our authentic selves, we would do well to follow in the footsteps of the Samaritan woman – encounter God, be transformed and empowered, speak with a prophetic voice, and live authentically with God and others.

We are invited to seek divine truth through a relationship with Jesus through prayer, theological reflection, spiritual guidance, or whatever means necessary to prompt questioning, rethinking, listening, and being open to where the ‘spirit of truth’ leads. Women (and all people) must turn inwards to discover their authentic identity before turning out to others. Women can look to Mary, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart as key example of this internal to external approach (‘pondered in her heart’ (Luke 2:19)) and the importance of having an authentic identity growing from relationship with Jesus, her Son.

As Catholics and people living Spirituality of the Heart, we strive to live so that our hearts are in loving relationship with the Sacred Heart of Jesus and others (‘may we be on Earth the Heart of God’). We must live so the truth of each person’s inherent dignity and worth is valued. We must empower them to speak by providing safe spaces for them to share themselves (whether with words, gestures, art, music, clothing, styling, or any other external expression of self) and be ready to listen to and encounter their inner being—to be moved or transformed. We must be someone to understand, respect, include, welcome, and connect with them—someone to love them like God.

Women (and all people) are invited to give witness to the truths they discover. Rabbi Abraham Heschel says a prophetic voice “*combines a very deep love, a very powerful dissent, and a powerful resolve with envisioning hope*”. We are encouraged to challenge stereotypes and prejudices, raise awareness of mistreatment, and offer alternate viewpoints within parish communities, ministries, or with friends and family. We can start in small ways with people we know; the Samaritan woman went to her community to share her testimony. Women can also give witness in the broader community by what they say, how they act, and who they include. Authentic witnessing is sharing experiences and building relationships; it’s in getting to know others that the truth is revealed.

Distorted perceptions, disempowerment, and silencing of women will not disappear quickly; we can testify to the unjust situation, raise awareness, and become changemakers. Women of this generation can sow what women of another era will reap. Women can inspire, empower, and lead change, starting with themselves and then reaching towards others. By being and acting as their authentic selves, women can give witness to the value of inherent dignity and self-worth based on truth. Together, we can slowly reclaim our hearts, heal brokenness, and restore beauty by being our authentic selves.



FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

PRAYER

Thank you and love to the beautiful women in our lives that comfort, encourage, support, challenge and empower us and those around them!

With you, we too will love fiercely and strive to be the best version of ourselves.

Let's continue to be vulnerable with each other and share what is hurting our hearts.

Let's continue to do a happy dance when we celebrate joyful news.

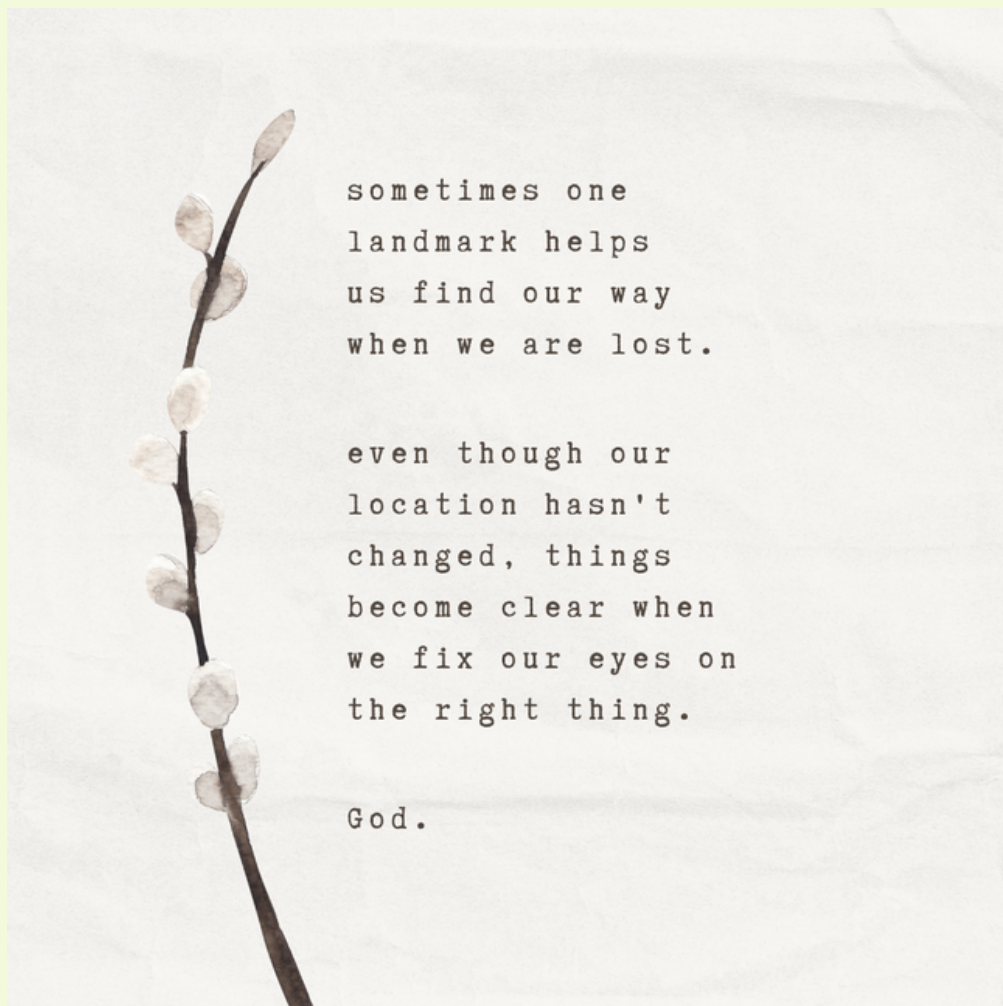
Let's continue to acknowledge how beautifully unique and precious each woman is.

Let's continue to advocate for changes that will recognise the value and inherent dignity of each person.

Let's continue to empower people's voice and to listen to what their hearts are saying.

Let's continue to be authentic to who we are - created for love, by love, and to love.

Amen.



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