

This keynote speech was delivered by Sister Joan Chittister at the 3rd Annual Women & Power Conference organized by Omega Institute and V-Day in September 2004.

Point ... women see things differently. Women do things differently. Women deal with things differently than men.

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At the turn of the 20th century, civilian casualties accounted for five percent of the war dead. In World War II the total number of civilians killed had climbed to 15 percent of total wartime casualties. In World War II civilians were 65 percent of the victims of war. By the early 1990s civilians were over 75 percent of the war dead. And now today here in our world over 90 percent of those killed in war are civilians. And who knows it better than we do. In Iraq for every dead U.S. soldier 14 other deaths, 93 percent of the total casualties U.S. and Iraqi are civilian.

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. . . But what is forgotten today, what is unnoted, unmarked, unmemorialized, overlooked and unwarned is that most of these dead—most of these civilians on whom war falls most mercilessly, most defenselessly, are women and children. . . . Our generation has blurred forever the traditional line between civilians and soldiers. We've made the whole world prey, only some of them armed and most of them helpless, most of them powerless women.

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In modern conflict Kofi Anan said, quote: "Women and girls, neither its irritators nor its perpetrators, suffer its impact disproportionately. They are specifically targeted to humiliate the men of the society, to break down their resistance and to achieve ethnic cleansing. Steps must be taken", he declared, "to end this culture of impunity." Clearly the questions of war and peace, of life and death now have new meaning. For governments surely. For religions. And for all spirits without doubt. But for women most of all life, not death, has always been the fundamental spiritual question of every great spiritual tradition. Oh, yes, quote, "Let us live happily without hate amongst those who do hate."

Today I put before you death and life. Choose life. Who is better in religion the prophet teaches in the Koran than those who surrender their purpose to God while doing good to human kind. In fighting there is no wisdom. It is only fools that fight the Hindu Poncatantra tells us. And Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers. But if it's true all religions seek the God of life, it's also true life giving, not death dealing, has always been the particular province of women. It is women that born the sons who are sent to war, its women who have buried the men on who their very lives are dependent. It is women who have been left alone. Babies in their arms. Babies in their bellies. To deal with a madness that comes from the madness of war.

Indeed women have a place to fill and a stake to claim and a role to play in the world's pursuit of peace. It is women who are trafficked to satisfy the warriors, from 250 to 500,000 women were raped by mirage gangs of soldiers in Ruanda alone in

1994 alone. It is women that are forced into sexual slavery and exploitation for the sake of the warriors. The International Organization for Migration estimates over 200 million women are trapped in war zones this morning and are sold across borders annually. In 1995 in Cambodia 31 percent of the so-called sex workers were girls between the ages of 12 and 17. It's women who endure domestic violence at home from their frustrated and violence driven warrior husbands and it's women who bare and feed and raise the children, raping warriors leave behind.

But those issues never get negotiated. Those issues never come to the compensation tables. Those issues, the issues of women and children they are left to support in the midst of war as a result of war are never redressed by peace treaties, never dealt with by male mediators, never factored into the costs of war, never considered in the determination to go to war, never even counted as victims.

Indeed women have a place to fill and a stake to claim and a role to play in the world's pursuit of peace. Indeed women have a right to participate in the decisions that lead to the waging of war, to judge the strategies—They have a right to judge the strategies that are becoming the instruments of war and to suggest—no, to demand the feminine alternatives of listening and seeing and caring and relating and reaching out and feeling for the other that lead the world away from war.

It's time for women to take as much responsibility for maintaining the life of the world as they do for burying the life of the world. Otherwise we raise one world to destroy the other. Otherwise we make a mockery of the very spiritual responsibility we say we hold to bring life to birth in us, within us, around us. But if giving life, preserving life, and valuing life is of spiritual responsibility, what does religion have to do with war?

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Seven percent of our bombs in Iraq our own government certifies were defined as precision bombs. And only two to four percent of those so-called precision bombings the military certifies were accurate. And even the so-called accurate ones in urban settings destroyed property and people for miles around. Wipe out of your head the fallacious picture of a bomb dropping through the smoke stack in the middle of a city.

Surely that kind of indiscriminant killing of defenseless slaughter— call it collateral damage to justify your carnage if you can, is clearly a sin against the sacrament of life. We stand, you see—we religious people, this religious nation, on the brink of human extinction boasting that we seek the God of life. And so we have millions of dead, trillions of dollars used for human destruction rather than human development. Millions of urban refugees roaming the world today, over 13 million of them internally displaced, hundreds of thousands more of them on the roads and all of them in camps we so gently call refugee camps by we nice people. Where women are unprotected and war maddened military gorillas and even international aid workers the UN itself admit pray on the girls that were left behind . . .

The point is clear. Violence has simply run its course. War is now total, which means that war as we define it and dream it and doggedly go on making up moral reasons, God help us—moral reasons to approve of it is now obsolete. It not only threatens the planet, it exhausts the resources of the very countries that declare it. And so in the end don't be misled for a minute. We will all lose this war, even if we win it.

War is much more than military conflict now. It is social annihilation. It is the displacement of the innocent, the destruction of the beautiful, the defilement of the holy and the disfigurement of the souls of the young, wounds from which the human spirit never wholly recovers unless and until religion rediscovers spirituality. . . . Spirituality on the other hand is about enlightenment, the ability to see beyond all the things we make God to find God . . .

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Religion is at base a cosmic call to cosmic consciousness. We must be conscious of the fact that we can no longer take war for granted. We took slavery for granted once. Ask the black in this room today. But we have grown beyond that now, God willing. We take war for granted now. We say it's natural and then we tell ourselves that life is like that. But it's not. Years of aggression studies show us that people do control their anger even under provocation. Years of anthropology show us that there have been cultures that did not practice war.

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This, then, is indeed your moment and historic moment. You and I are living at a time when by calling for a summit of religious and spiritual leaders, both men and women spiritual leaders, the united nations, this international organization, has recognized the untapped potential, both of religion and of women spiritual leaders as well to be a necessary force in the peace making process of a world in chaos. Mark it down. The texture, the composition, and the character of the political and peace making world changed in your lifetime, or as George Clemmons put it once, war is too important to matter to be left to generals.

This is a most religious moment. Why? Because religion is fast becoming the most dangerous thing the world has to offer.

Now our newspapers speak of jihads and Armageddon and new Crusades and biblical land grants and blame God for all of them. Religion has become, in other words, religion's worst enemy. Catholics and Protestants Buddhists and Christians, Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Hindus—religious radicals everywhere threaten the life for which each of them ironically say they stand. Clearly it is time for women, the other half of the human race, the other face of God, to save both their religions and their nations. Women, the life bearers, must now give to the world the spiritual life this world lacks.

Holy one, the disciples ask what's the difference between knowledge and enlightenment and the holy one replied when you have knowledge you light a torch to find a way. When you have enlightenment, you become a torch to show the way. It's time for women to take their place in bringing spiritual light, to show the world the way in a world that is adoring at the shrine of the god of death at their expense, at the cost of their children, at the destruction of the globe. It's time for women to be where they can say no, no, no to war in honor of drama, to extinction for the sake of Buddhism. To death on behalf of Allah, Yahweh, to massacres in the name of Allah, to Crusading in the name of Christ.

It is time for women to speak a public voice against the wars that men had designed to protect them. Without ever putting women themselves at the tables where a few decide to wage them or governments refuse to negotiate them.

To do that women must bring to the public arena values that have been long missing there. The first value is the awareness that our political policies can never be really affected if they're not based on sound, spiritual principles rather than on absolutist religious precepts.

The second missing value is the awareness that the spiritual can never be real if it ignores the political aspects of life. And the third value that must finally be recognized is that women have another agenda, a different agenda, that it must be brought to political systems in a world gone mad with arrogance, with patriarchal power. To each of those values each facet of the tradition that has formed the west and now threatens the world brings a light to show the way.

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Finally, we must refuse to ignore the question what do women have to do with war.

And we must cry out the answer to the ends of the globe women have everything to do with war. Everything. Everything. Everything. Women as a class excluded from the war making system on every major determining level go to war in the worst possible way. They go unprepared, unarmed, and unasked whether they want to be defended, defenselessly or not. Women are booty of war, their bodies have become the instrument of war, their children have become the father of war. Their homes have become the rubble of war. Their daily struggles to live have become one of the horrors of war and their futures have been left shattered in the shambles of war. They die, too, from bombs and bullets. They die in large cities and small villages today for lack of food and then they die left behind for lack of water or they die for years after that from drinking water destroyed by war and left filthy with human feces. They die in tent cities without medicines, without clothing, without sons and husbands and hope and they die seeing their daughters do the same. So much for the commitment of men to the protection of women. So much for the notion that men spare women the suffering of war.

Oh, yes. When all the warriors have finally left their battlefields, it is the women who are left abandoned there, either to rise or die alone in the ashes of war and the cemeteries of anguish. If truth were ever told war falls hardest, longest, cruelest on the backs of women. Indeed, women must have a role not only in the reconstruction of society's already ravaged by war, but more than that, they must take a voice until they are given a voice in the development of peaceful alternatives to war as well.

But is it possible and can it be done—will our spiritual traditions support such a thing? The fact is in another of our common stories we have a model of why we're here this week, why we're talking about this subject this week.

We have to remember in a special way today the story of Moses mother and Pharaoh's daughter. The baby Moses doomed to die because his presence a threat to control of the time. He was taken by his mother to where the daughter of the king would see the baby and take pity on him. There and then, then and there, two women together connived the baby's survival. One Arab and one Jew saved the

impoverished, the outcast, and because of them a whole people was saved. Moses mother sent her child into the house of the enemy because she knew what the men did not know. No mother was an enemy to a child.

Pharaoh's daughter took into her own life the mothers and sisters of the very ones her father said must die. Pharaoh's daughter defied the king and made a mockery of his laws. Moses mother put her hope not in the military revolution, but in the open heartedness of women and peaceful co-existence. Presence of women in the Moses story, the empowering cooperation of Moses mother and the Pharaoh's daughter was an antidote to extremism then, was the beginning of community then, was the seed of another newer, more nurturing world that was needed then and it's even more needed now. The lives of our children, protection of millions, the hopes of all human kind wait again now for women, from opposite cultures, opposite traditions, to step over the lines of political hatred to save them. We cannot afford many more male military mistakes. The United Nations is very clear about the needs of women being ignored here and the need for women in the political arena and the peace making process. It's put this way; he says the future of the world depends on women.

So noted by the now unconceivable God awful living conditions of women everywhere, thanks to the women's movement everywhere, the UN has taken leadership to promote governments of the world, to civilize their attitudes towards women.

We can judge the level of the civilization in the culture only by the way it treats its women. With those realities in mind, the United Nations is calling first for an international truth and reconciliation commission on violence against women in armed conflict. If you want to be a woman peacemaker, you must pursue that passionately.

Two, they want sanctions against the trafficking of women and girls and criminalize it everywhere. We must demand that passionately. They want protection officers deployed at the highest levels to shield secure and sustain displaced populations, all of them largely women. And you must insist on that passionately.

They want HIV and aids programs to address the disease burden now being carried almost entirely by women whose very bodies have been made a weapon of war. We must demand that passionately.

They want gender-training programs to guide government officials in dealing with women victims and we must press for that passionately. They want gender based conflict resolution processes that seek peace through understanding rather than force and we must seek this passionately.

They want gender equality, not tokenism in all the peace processes so that the agendas of both men and women, women and men will be integrated into peace building programs. We must prod and prod and prod them to do this passionately.

And finally they want resolution 1325 implemented in every country in the world. Consider yourself blessed if you've even heard of it. In October 2000 the first UN Security Council resolution on women and peace and security, resolution 1325 passed unanimously. It's a watershed resolution. It makes women and gender specific exclusive of all peacekeeping operations, and all reconstruction plans in war

torn societies. Have we as this government installed that in the so-called new government in Iraq?

Resolution 1325 finally gives political legitimacy to the long history of women's peace activities, global peace initiative of women, countless, countless others, all of which have been ignored for years. It's time for women indeed, indeed it's time for women—you and I must take responsibility for making real the religions this country says it believes in. It's time for women to be an organized international voice for peace, a religious critic of national policies that threaten the life of the world, a sign of peace on a local level everywhere. It's time for women to reach across the borders that men will not breach, to take the hands of the other, not to bind them, but to bond them.

It's time for women's analysis of world situations and women's solutions to conflict be heard.

The global peace initiative of women is asking, therefore, that people and women like this, that women like you, prod, press, provoke so that in the name of Ramen, Buddha, Yahweh, Jesus, and the Prophet, that the United Nations institutionalize what they alone have had the courage to create, a universal call to the women's spiritual and religious leaders of the world to monitor, create, and publicly critique new initiatives for peace—the kind of peace making that armies, politicians, and even religion itself has not given us up to this time. A philosopher wrote the saints of our time that those that refuse to be either its executioners or its victims.

It's time for women to refuse to be either victims or executioners. Not only to make safe the world, but to make real the religions the religions teach so that before death can come, as God wants, life will come for us all. The question for us all, then, today isn't why isn't it happening and what does that have to do. The question is that the answer is you. The answer is crucial now.

When we need to develop the kind of religion that finally makes us love one another. When we need to foil the dictators who are using religion as a prop to keep themselves in power. When we clearly need to release women, the boldest and most unmanageable of all revolutionaries. Then perhaps we, too, this country, too, this government, too, the Samurais of this time, too, will finally come to see things differently, do things differently, deal with things differently than we, too, will come to know the real difference between heaven and hell.



Sister Joan Chittister

Joan Chittister, O.S.B., is a theologian, social psychologist, and noted national and international lecturer whose keynote addresses and conferences focus on justice, peace, human rights, and women's equality in church and society. A Benedictine Sister of Erie, Chittister is founder and executive director of Benetvision: A Resource and Research Center for Contemporary Spirituality; and past president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses. She is the author of more than 20 books, including *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*; *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life*; *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light*; and *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. She is also a regular columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, and an active member of the International Peace Council. Chittister attended the Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and the Parliament of the World's Religions in South Africa in 1999.