The Transcendent Human Being: Life Beyond Gender Stereotypes

by Iris M. Yob

The concept of the transcendent human challenges us to live to our strengths and not our weaknesses, beyond imposed roles and definitions, revealing our God-likeness as creatures in God's image. To "transcend" means "to go or be beyond some limit; to excel; to surpass." Many of the limits we experience in our lives are self-imposed. Some of our most destructive self-limiting appears as gender-role stereotyping.

Stereotyping, including gender stereotyping, lessens our sense of control over our environment by prescribing, from a narrow base of considerations, what is proper for us to do in it. It circumscribes our creative endeavors by focusing our aspirations within certain spheres of activity and on certain levels of success. Regulating our relationships and our forms of service, ministry, and worship along the lines of gender restricts our personal and spiritual development.

Both men and women suffer from stereotyping restrictions, but women tend to be more adversely affected. In part, this is because the so-called "masculine" qualities of aggression, ambition, self-reliance, forcefulness, and individuality are more highly prized and more essential for success in the world as we have made it, than the so-called

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"feminine" qualities of sensitivity, gentleness, nurturance, warmth, and sympathy. The "masculine" attributes are more clearly related to success, prestige, and power. In the end, women with all the cultivated "feminine" qualities often feel they are unnoticed, without influence, and powerless.

The transcendent human is not the man who tries to live like a woman, or vice-versa. That is merely to exchange one set of limitations for another. Rather it is the person who lives beyond the artificial boundaries of gender-typing. The transcendent woman is glad to be a woman, a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, and a *person*. The transcendent man is glad to be a man, a son, a brother, a husband, a father, and a *person*.

In the life of Jesus we see most clearly the possibilities of the transcendent human. He demonstrated all the robust "masculine" qualities of decisiveness, firmness, assertiveness, self-confidence, objectivity, and courage. He appealed to other men and led them with power and purpose. He was physically and mentally aggressive and authoritative. He showed great courage and endurance. But he also portrayed profound sympathy, tenderness, caring and nurturing concern, and gentleness. He was unafraid of his emotions and expressed them publicly. He was trusting, loving, approachable, and winsome. His ministry was rich with all the finest human virtues.

Throughout human history, the combination of gentleness and strength, yielding and striving, self-reliance and dependence has contributed to the effectiveness of those who have served God in

a remarkable way. We should not be afraid of challenging the limitations that society imposes on us, so that we may live with integrity. We should not let custom alone define our personalities or our callings.

Over the past few years, scores of studies have been undertaken to determine the relationship not merely between gender and personality, but between the combination of masculine and feminine qualities regardless of gender and personality constructs. Overall, it appears that women and men who combine both the "feminine" and "masculine" characteristics in their personalities have distinct advantages in personal adjustment, mental health, satisfaction, success, and coping, over strongly gender-typed persons.

For instance, research suggests that growth towards psycho-social maturity is aided by more flexible gender-role functioning[1]; that the more males exhibit sympathy and responsiveness, along with typically "male" traits, and the more women exhibit objectivity and restlessness along with their "female" traits, the more likely they are to proceed to the highest levels of development in moral reasoning[2]; that the highly "feminine-typed" women are also likely to exhibit high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, low acceptance of their peers, and will probably do less well at college[3], while women who exhibit both "masculine" and "feminine" traits have more social competence, self-esteem, personal adjustment, achievement motivation, and less mood change and sense of helplessness. Even in those areas where women are thought to excel, such as nurturing, without some of the more "masculine" confidence and daring, women will hold back from acting out what they instinctively know to do.

"Masculine-feminine" people fear the results of success significantly less than "feminine" women, and they experience the greatest personal and work satisfaction. "Masculine-feminine" people spread more evenly through the career options and show more acceptance of nontraditional job change and more support for persons in nontraditional jobs, thus putting themselves in positions that could increase their chances for higher pay, status, and opportunity for advance-

ment. The nature of the task, leadership style, dogmatism, communication, understanding, and the motivations of the group members are more important considerations in the making of good leaders than is gender; and the best characterization of leadership is via psychological rather than biological gender-types.

Research also suggests that "masculine-feminine" children use much more flexible, and therefore more successful approaches in problem-solving; that the high "masculine-feminine" person, who is characterized as more open to experience, accepting of apparent opposites, unconcerned about social norms, and self-reliant, seems to resemble the creative person; and that "masculine-feminine" mates were preferred by both men and women and were generally more popular.[4]

Studies would suggest that women who want to be well adjusted, successful, intelligent, creative, well liked, and psychologically mature, should reach out for "masculine" qualities, and, conversely, men who want to be more successful leaders, to reach higher developmental stages, and have women like them better, should adopt some "feminine" characteristics.

What would be gained from embarking on a full-scale program that encouraged people to live beyond stereotypes and gender-role determinants? At the personal level, individuals would have a wider range of behaviors at their disposal. They would be more effective in a variety of situations than the stereotypes presently encourage. For women, this greater effectiveness would contribute to improved self-esteem, confidence, motivation to succeed, and a sense of self-control and self-determination within their spheres of influence.

The so-called "feminine" qualities would be as highly valued as the so-called "masculine" qualities. This could mean that a "different voice"[5] would be heard where now it is silent and the complementarity of men's and women's insights and perspectives working together would give rise to more balanced and more representative decision-making at all levels of human endeavor.

For men, it would encourage greater confidence in situations demanding sensitivity and the expression of emotion. Accomplishment and success would be understood in the light of values presently underrated: the values of relationships strengthened, peace fostered, the underprivileged considered, and the natural world preserved.[6]

Both men and women in the work force could live and work more creatively. Traditional jobs for men and women would become open to anyone who had the necessary aptitudes and training. Students at all levels of schooling would encounter female and male teachers, and the helping professions would include female and male workers so that the needs of women and men would be met by those who understood them best. Both women and men would be seen as equally qualified for job advancement, pay increments, and leadership roles, and both would be equally willing to make sacrifices in time, money, and effort for a greater good. The interests of both female and male employees would be represented in policy-making.

The church would find it could draw on a greater supply of talents and abilities than it presently allows itself. People would be chosen for ministry and leadership, not on the basis of their gender, but on the basis of their potential contribution. All its members would feel equally valuable, useful, and called. Men would not be so afraid of expressing religious sentiment or women of grappling with theological issues. Both sexes would serve where they were best suited—whether it might be in counselling, comforting, preaching, healing, teaching, managing, publishing, or caring for the needs of others.

In the late 20th century, all the resources of humanity will be taxed. Half the earth's population, the women, must participate in the world for their own sake and for the good of the rest of humanity. Just as clearly, men must be present in the home and in those places where tender care is to be given if the needs of the young, poor, oppressed, and defenseless are to be met. All God's children need to think, to do, and to be creative; all of us must respond to the challenges of the next decades and the dawning of a new century.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Carol Ann Glazer, Jerome B. Dusek, "The Relationship Between Sex-Role Orientation and Resolution of Erikson Developmental Crises." *Sex Roles* 13 (1985): 653-61; A. S. Waterman, S. K. Whitbourne, "Androgyny and Psychosocial Development Among College Students and Adults." *Journal of Personality* 50 (June 1982): 121-33.

2. Jeanne Humphrey Block, "Conception of Sex Role." In *Beyond Sex-Role Stereotypes: Readings Toward a Psychology of Androgyny* pp. 63-78.

3. These conclusions are drawn from a dozen sources and more than a dozen expert conclusions. See especially the journal *Sex Roles*, the book *Beyond Sex-Role Stereotypes*, *Professional Psychology*, and *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

4. Ibid.

5. A phrase taken from Carol F. Gilligan (*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Gilligan makes an observation about the "different voice" that relates it to the transcendent person: "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but by theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex" (p. 2).

6. Cooper D. Thompson, "A New Vision of Masculinity," *Educational Leadership* 43 (December 1985-January 1986), pp. 53-56.