

Women's Spirituality and the Primacy of Women's Stories

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Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.¹

These opening words from Carol P. Christ's *Diving Deep and Surfacing* struck a chord with me when I read them in my first class at California Institute of Integral Studies—a class in Feminist Research Methods taught by Professor Connie Jones. I was immediately taken back to the moment of greatest crisis in my adult life, when, while living in Guatemala, I faced the possibility of raising my two newly adopted children as a single mother. As panic threatened to engulf me, I realized that in immersing myself so completely into motherhood in a new country, I had cut myself off from deep relationships with other women and the sense of connection they had always provided. As this realization dawned on me, I began to reach out and build friendships with women in my new community and to read books written by women, books such as *The Feminine*

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1. Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 1.

Face of God by Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins,² that offered the stories of other women in spiritual crisis. It was women's stories that helped to ground me again. Women's stories that affirmed my experience and pointed the way home to myself. Women's stories that led me to women's spirituality and to the Goddess. I am indebted to the stories of women for who I have become, for what I am doing, and for what I hope to do in the future.

There are too many stories that have *not* been told—stories lying dormant within women that have the power to transform their sisters' lives. Stories that need to be shared, heard, felt, understood. Stories that can let a woman know she is not crazy or alone in her experience. Stories that offer ways to survive, to grieve, to forgive, to heal, to love, to celebrate life. I believe we need these stories as much as the soil needs the rain. We need to absorb them with every cell of our bodies, to be nourished by them, and to let the seeds of our own stories sprout and blossom.

The stories of women's bleeding are almost never told, even though most adult women between the ages of thirteen and fifty spend at least a few days every month menstruating. These are the stories that have been shamed into silence. Since we have not heard each other's blood stories, our own experience of bleeding remains incomplete, subject to the overwhelming influence of religious, medical, and corporate interests rather than the healing wisdom of other women's shared experience. Without our sisters' blood stories it is difficult to challenge the negative conditioning the dominant Western viewpoint has inflicted upon our experience of menstruation. Without these stories we are not inspired to explore new possibilities. Without these stories we remain ignorant of the spiritual potential intrinsic to the cycling of our bodies.

MY STORY

*we need a god who bleeds
spreads her lunar vulva &
showers us in shades of scarlet
thick & warm like the breath of her³*

I grew up in India among a vast multiplicity of faiths and ways of relating to and perceiving the Divine. Throughout most of my childhood I woke to hear either the *muezzin* from the mosque calling faithful Muslims to prayer or music from the Sikh *gurdwara* signaling the first of the day's services. Although I was devoted to my own religion, Christianity, I loved the richness of all that surrounded me and felt blessed to be in the midst of such diversity. I attended a Christian international boarding school in the foothills of the Himalayas in north India and had classmates from all over the world who were Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Parsi, and Christian.

My school, which I often think of as home because I lived there most of the year, was in an exceptionally beautiful and largely unspoiled environment. I often spent

2. Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

3. Ntozake Shange, "We Need a God Who Bleeds Now," in *A Daughter's Geography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 51.

weekends hiking with friends into the mountains, where we slept in pine forests or, in the rainy season, on the floors of village schools. The monsoon season would begin in June and last until October. Heavy rains would pelt the hillside and I would splash through puddles in my rubber *chappals* (flip-flops) as I walked back and forth to school. The hills would erupt with ferns and flowers, the croaking of toads and the buzzing of cicadas. During the brief summer vacations I traveled to Kashmir with my family, where we spent half of our time living on a houseboat on a lake, the other half living in tents, hiking, and riding horseback into the glaciers and mountains. The longer winter vacations were spent in the fertile plains of the Punjab, known as “the bread basket of India,” where my father taught Indian history in a Christian college. There I would ride my bicycle, climb trees, visit the villages of my father’s students, and participate in harvesting their sugar cane crops. Back at school in the spring, the days became warmer and clear, allowing for unobstructed views of the Himalayan range to our north. Nature was a bountiful and lushly beautiful presence in my childhood.

It was while I was at home for Christmas vacation one winter when I was thirteen and a half years old that I began to bleed. Although I didn’t recognize what had happened at first (I was expecting a bright red rush of blood and what I saw was rusty brown stains), my mother soon noticed the growing line of hand-washed underwear hanging outside and assured me that my bleeding had, in fact, begun. I was thrilled at this news, despite the fact that I simultaneously experienced the first of many years of menstrual cramps. My father acknowledged my new status by coming to my room and talking to me about how girls in India traditionally experienced their menarche by moving to their husband’s home and beginning married life. I certainly couldn’t begin to comprehend that idea, but I was excited to think of myself as a young woman.

My relationship to the Divine was the most important aspect of my life. As a child and teenager I imagined God to be a beneficent Father to whom I would pray often during the day and each evening before I fell asleep. I loved to attend the small Church of North India on Sundays where my father led the worship services, my mother was secretary, and my sister and I frequently read the Scripture lessons and took the offering.

Feminism entered my life at the age of fourteen, when we were on a one-year furlough from India and my mother decided to finish her college education. During that year she took several classes in women’s studies and I eagerly absorbed as much as she could share with me about what she was learning. I became a feminist Christian, looking within my tradition for other words and images for God that were more inclusive of both women and men.

After graduating from high school in India I returned to the United States for college, where I had a difficult first year adjusting to living in New England. It wasn’t until I moved into the international dormitory on campus with an Indian roommate the following year that I thought I could adapt. I majored in ancient Greek and spent my junior year in Athens, exploring the ancient ruins and visiting as many islands as I could on the weekends and holidays.

No sooner did I graduate from college than I took off again, this time to teach in a *harambee* (self-help) village school in Kenya with a boyfriend whom I later married (and to whom I am still married). I felt myself come alive again as I returned to walking the Earth (until both pairs of shoes turned the same deep red as the soil) and to living in a

community where everyone would stop to greet and shake hands with every single person they met along the road.

After my time in Kenya I spent five months on a kibbutz in Israel before heading to New York City to attend seminary and pursue my spiritual quest by getting a theological education. My favorite class there was on the Old Testament with feminist scholar Phyllis Trible. In studying Old Testament exegesis with her I learned a great deal about working with narrative texts—lessons that have proved valuable. She taught us to treat the text like a love letter by reading it over and over again in order to become aware of all the nuances and subtext and to use many different translations and commentaries to look at the structure, the choice of words, the context, and its application to people today.

As I studied feminist theology I developed a much more critical attitude toward the Church. Feminist New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, points to the problem of how the Christian scriptures are based on androcentric thinking and explains that biblical religion has been rejected by many feminists because “it ignores women’s experience, speaks of the godhead in male terms, legitimizes women’s subordinate positions of powerlessness, and promotes male dominance and violence against women.”⁴ Another difficulty lay in the paucity of affirmative images of the female in the Bible. Theologian and psychologist Christine Downing says,

We are starved for images that recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness, and nurturing power of female energy. We hunger for images of human creativity and love inspired by the capacity of female bodies to give birth and nourish, for images of how humankind participates in the natural world suggested by reflection on the correspondences between menstrual rhythms and the moon’s waxing and waning. We seek images that affirm that the love women receive from women, from mother, sister, daughter, lover, friend, reaches as deep and is as trustworthy, necessary, and sustaining as is the love symbolized by father, brother, son, or husband. We long for images that name as authentically feminine courage, creativity, loyalty, and self-confidence, resilience, and steadfastness, capacity for clear insight, inclination for solitude, and the intensity of passion. We need images; we also need myths . . .⁵

Very few, if any, of these kinds of stories or images are in the Bible, I realized. Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that we embrace both the God of the Exodus *and* God/dess as Matrix, “the source and ground of our being.”⁶ Yet I found it difficult to harmonize the two when the former is so overwhelmingly present and the latter so minimally celebrated in the Church. The *Inclusive Language Lectionary* is one tool that

4. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “In Search of Women’s Heritage,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 34.

5. Christine Downing, “Artemis,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 120-121.

6. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Sexism and God-Language,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 161.

was developed in order to attempt to embrace both sides of God by trying to avoid male-specific language in speaking of human beings and including female and “impersonal” images for God.⁷ But for me this attempt was not sufficient, although it certainly represents a step in the right direction. The *Lectionary* tends to be used only in very liberal congregations and even there (in my experience) the usage is somewhat self-conscious since everyone knows what the “real” words are.

For a number of years beyond seminary I tried to be like other Jewish and Christian feminists who have chosen to remain in their faith communities and struggle both to reclaim their true history and to re-create tradition, taking on Jewish feminist theologian Marcia Falk’s attitude that she “must help bring into being” that which she wants to see happen.⁸ I used inclusive language consistently and tried to bring feminist concepts into my work in the Church, but it always felt like a great effort. I did not give up because I could not imagine living in the world without the only God I knew. My faith was still the most important thing I had to truly ground me in my life.

A number of years later I moved to Guatemala to adopt my two children and I began writing a column for an English language magazine on the theme of women and spirituality. The column started out with a feminist Christian perspective, but as I continued to write, people began to seek me out to offer me books to read such as *The Chalice and the Blade* by Riane Eisler⁹ and *When God was a Woman* by Merlin Stone.¹⁰

The moment when my realization of the Goddess struck me most forcefully occurred when I read Merlin Stone’s *When God was a Woman*. It was one of those moments such as Alice Walker describes when we know, as it is happening, that we will remember it always.¹¹ After trying to explain the book to my partner, I said, “Imagine how different that would feel—to think of God as female.” As I said those words and let my imagination wrap itself around the concept, I felt a surge of power run through my body. I suddenly had a brief glimpse of what it *would* feel like. It would mean transforming my whole perception of myself into a powerful and beautiful one. In that instant I realized that if I truly thought of God as female, my body would be sacred. I would know myself to be strong, creative, and daring. *I would be whole*. It was an experience for me such as Christine Downing describes:

To learn about the Goddess is in a profound sense a remembering, a recollection of something we know deeply within about our own power, and a re-remembering, an act which gives us back the power of our bodies, the power of our female sexuality.¹²

7. “Selections from The Inclusive Language Lectionary,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 164-165.

8. Marcia Falk, “Notes on Composing New Blessings,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 130.

9. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987).

10. Merlin Stone, *When God Was A Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

11. Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 198.

12. Christine Downing, *The Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 4.

I felt like I had been sleepwalking until then, and I began to wake up. I became greatly excited by the immense power and possibility for transformation that seemed to lie within a spirituality centered on the Goddess. As Betty DeShong Meador points out, “the lack the woman experiences is not of the missing penis. The lack is the absence of the vital symbols of the feminine and its sacred vulva.”¹³ Once I had a glimmer of these symbols and their significance, my mind was instantly gripped by the possibilities. If such sacred images *were* out there, then so much more was imaginable! I felt I was coming out of a cramped closet into open, infinite space. I was determined not to let go of this new awareness, but to pursue it until I came to know myself and my own possibilities as fully as I could. Award-winning author, Sue Monk Kidd, writes in her spiritual autobiography,

Initiation is a sacred disintegration. Despite its pain, we carry the conviction (often only faintly) that even though we don't know where we'll end up, we're following a soul-path of immense richness, that we're *supposed* to be on this path, that it's required of us somehow. We move in a sense of rightness, of lure, of following a flute that pipes irresistible music.¹⁴

It was difficult in some respects to release beliefs that I had held for a lifetime—ones I believed to be sacred and central to my being. It was also painful to put myself outside the community of the Church where I had always felt I had a permanent home. Nevertheless, that sense of “rightness” was so compelling I could not but follow where it led, even though I was not sure where I would end up.

As my partner and I went through a relationship crisis, my new sense of spirituality became not just a new idea to play around with, but a means of survival and of deep inner transformation for me. I felt that I had discovered a power inside myself that I had never tapped into before. I was finally unearthing a way to satisfy the spiritual hunger that I had entered seminary with and had not yet satisfied. I began to shift my perception so that I could move toward the wholeness I sought. I looked for the Goddess and talked with Her everywhere. I called upon Her power to fill me in moments of doubt and Her presence gave me security and confidence. I looked for Her in the faces of my friends and found Her beauty and wisdom there too. Her creativity flowed through me when I asked for it. I learned to trust Her guidance and my own intuition. My experiences became richer and the opportunities that lay before me more exciting. A new direction opened up in my life—one that would be focused on discovering more of Her and sharing Her with other women.

In a very special moment on the island of Naxos in Greece several years later, I dedicated myself to Her. It was the thirteenth anniversary of my wedding. In my journal I wrote,

13. Betty De Shong Meador, *Uncursing the Dark: Treasures from the Underworld* (Willamette, IL: Chiron, 1994), 134.

14. Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1996), 88.

I had rented a jeep and driven all over this incredibly beautiful island when I decided to drive down a steep, winding mountain road to a beach I saw marked on my map. When I first got down and stepped out of the jeep, I felt a little disappointed that it didn't look like a 'perfect' beach. It wasn't sandy or as secluded as I'd hoped. But as I walked toward the water I looked down and noticed how stunning the rocks were. Each and every one had beautiful colors and smooth shapes: reds, oranges, whites, and shades of black. Rings, circles, egg stones and phallic stones. I picked up one and then another and another, marveling at the beauty of each and unable to resist holding onto it.

When I got to the water I slid all the stones I'd picked up into my bag and proceeded to step gingerly over the rocks into the water. To my delight, the rocks quickly gave way to light, powdery sand, like confectioner's sugar beneath my feet. I danced lightly on the ocean floor, then spread my body on its surface and let it hold me up, gently lapping all around me as I gazed up at the sky and cliffs above. I felt ecstatic, like I was being truly embraced by the Great Mother and that she had opened up this space of treasure for me to play in. Then I felt a strong desire to stretch myself out where the water met the stony beach. I lay with my body half-submerged in water and half-lying on the stones—my face down in the rocks and my arms outstretched above my head. Above me both the sun and wind caressed my body and I felt connected to all the elements of Nature simultaneously—the water lapping around me, the earth/stones beneath me, the sun/fire above, the wind/air around me. I called upon the Earth Mother, asking her to accept me as her daughter. I felt such love, such bliss, and such connection. I felt alive and joyful. I danced back into the sea laughing and singing with gratitude and happiness, thanking the Earth for being part of me and allowing me to be part of Her.

I have been walking the path of the Goddess ever since.

Although I am critical of the patriarchal institution of the Church, I have not rejected my Christian roots altogether. I believe that the essence of Christianity, which to me is love and service, still guides my life today. But I have found great empowerment, enrichment, and enchantment in returning to much deeper roots than those found in the Bible. In returning to the Goddess, the Mother of us all, I have found that I have truly come home—home to the primordial womb from which all of creation was birthed.

WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

Women's spirituality provided the context for my dissertation about women's menstrual stories, both as a field of study and as a spiritual path that all women who tell their stories share in some way. Women's spirituality as a field of study owes much to the feminist movement (especially to radical and cultural feminism) and to the field of women's studies, which emerged in the early 1970s in order "to challenge the silencing,

stereotyping, marginalization, and misrepresentation of women prevalent in historical, social, scientific, and literary/cultural scholarship, whether theoretical or empirical.”¹⁵ Women's studies has offered women an extremely valuable intellectual space in which to explore and discuss their lives, histories, identities, and experiences in a scholarly way. It is an interdisciplinary field that both looks at the place of women across the disciplines, including, among others, sociology, religion, literature, history, and psychology, and challenges those disciplines to address their own biases in terms of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Feminist research methods that were developed within this field are central to the way I have done my research.

The women's spirituality movement is also interdisciplinary and encompasses a wide variety of perspectives, possibilities, and practices. Central among them, for many, is the image of the Goddess or Divine Feminine: Earth Mother, Universal Matrix, female energy, life force, Spirit of Nature, as well as the possibility of many individual goddesses, sacred women, and grandmothers. She may be seen as the Earth (or the Universe) and all that is within it, the energy that flows between all living beings, femaleness, female power, the life process with its cycles of birth, death, and regeneration, or a specific female deity. Feminist theologian Carol P. Christ defines Her as “the power of intelligent, embodied love that is the ground of all being.”¹⁶ She is an extremely powerful symbol for women who are ready to look beyond patriarchy for new ways of perceiving the world and their place in it.

The Goddess represents the organic wholeness of life. Instead of being only about light and life, for example, She represents the light *and* the dark, life *and* death, fertility *and* decay, order *and* chaos. She is both creator and destroyer,¹⁷ giver and taker of life.¹⁸ She is a holistic, rather than a dualistic presence. She incorporates the entire cycle of birth, death, and regeneration in Her being. The darkness in Goddess theology is not necessarily a negative force or fearful place, but another aspect of life, one that holds immense potential for transformation.¹⁹

Since the Goddess is inherently female and manifests physically in the form of our planet Earth, She affirms the female body and, with it, female sexuality, the erotic, the capacity to give birth and nurture new life, all phases of the life cycle, and the love women have not only for their male partners and children but also for each other. Instead of feeling the shame and guilt about our bodies that most Western women experience growing up, women who love the Goddess are encouraged to love our own embodied selves, too. As women, we learn to appreciate the ways in which our bodies reflect the processes of the Earth and Cosmos. We know the Universe to be beautiful, so we come to know and appreciate our own beauty in new and (potentially) deeply healing ways.

When we affirm our female sexuality, our erotic energy bubbles to the surface. Audre Lorde reminds us that although we're taught to distrust the erotic and may have

15. Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard, “Doing Things Differently? A Context for Women's Studies in the Next Decade,” in *Women's Studies in the 1990s*, ed. Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 2.

16. Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), xv.

17. Paula Gunn Allen, “Grandmother of the Sun,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 22.

18. Marija Gimbutas, “Women and Culture in Goddess-Oriented Old Europe,” in *Weaving the Visions*: (see note 4), 68.

19. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, 30.

suppressed it within ourselves, it is “those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.”²⁰ It is the “yes!” to life, the seed of creativity, the longing for connection that lives in every woman. The erotic brings us to our greatest sense of fulfillment, awareness, and joy. As the character Shug, speaking of the erotic in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, says, “God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did.”²¹ Diane Mariechild and Marcelina Martin, authors of *Lesbian Sacred Sexuality*, say,

Sexuality and spirituality are facilitated by a deep intimacy with one’s inner nature, with the physical body, and intimacy with the natural world. This intimacy brings a quality of loving connection and sensitivity to life. It is energetic, spontaneous, and joyful. Sexual or creative energy radiates through all life. Erotic, creative, divine, Goddess energy. Fertile, rich, passionate, abundant energy. It is life itself and as such is sacred. The sexual act is but one expression of this energy. We make our sex sacred, in the same way we make any life experience sacred, through our intention.²²

The power of the erotic is so strong that once we become aware of it in ourselves, we are no longer willing to put up with the things we were previously (in a more deadened state) willing to accept. In touch with the erotic, we are willing to say “no!” to injustice, cruelty, and despair. We no longer are willing to settle for less than wholeness and beauty in both our own lives and the lives of those who surround us. If we let eros flow through all our relationships, instead of only our sexual ones, we increase our sense of interconnectedness with each other and realize more clearly the unity that binds us together in the web of life. That realization may lead to activism on behalf of the Earth and those who suffer from injustice when it is no longer possible to separate our own experience and quality of life from that of the other living beings with whom we share the planet. All aspects of Nature become sacred—the animals, trees, rocks, flowers, ocean waves—all are manifestations of the Goddess and imbued with Her Spirit. As long as the Earth or any part of Her suffers, we suffer too. She is us and we are Her. As ecofeminist poet Susan Griffin says,

I know I am made from this earth, as my mother’s hands were made from this earth, as her dreams came from this earth and all that I know, I know in this earth, the body of the bird, this pen, this paper, these hands, this tongue speaking, all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long

20. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 208, 210.

21. Alice Walker, “God Is Inside You and Inside Everybody Else,” in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 103.

22. Diane Mariechild and Marcelina Martin, *Lesbian Sacred Sexuality* (Oakland, CA: Wingbow Press, 1998), 56.

to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen *as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us.*²³

Goddess spirituality celebrates not only the love of women for their children and male partners, but also for other women in friendships and in sexual relationships. The experience of making love has been described by some lesbians as one of reuniting the self with the world.²⁴ It is a very intimate way of recognizing the Goddess within oneself and one's partner, and in so doing, the female energy of the entire cosmos. As poet Elsa Gidlow expresses it,

In the blaze of love it is known:
We are particles each of each
We are cells of the Mother of all
We cannot be cast off
From sister cells or from Her.²⁵

My own personal perception of the Goddess is that She is the energy of love that permeates the universe—that exists in earth, sky, sea, stars, plants, animals, rocks, people. She is an expression of the life force of the Universe—an energy that can be called upon to protect, to forgive, to love as fully as possible. The Goddess manifests Herself physically in the natural world—in the beauty and the darkness—but is also Spirit, present everywhere and within every sentient being. She moves all beings through the cycles of their lifetimes, exchanging energy given out and received in ways that we, as people bounded by space and time, can not fully understand. Her desire for us, as for all of creation, is that we attain wholeness, live in harmony, act always out of unconditional love, recognize Her power within us, and use it for the highest good. Yet She gives and takes according to our choices, until they lead us back to our Source. I believe Her to be a divine presence that is both transcendent and immanent, an energy “out there” that also dwells “in here,” who embraces from without *and* empowers from within.

Love of the Goddess is expressed both in solitude and in community, where circles of women may gather to celebrate and perform rituals together. Women come together to find a space apart from the rest of the world where we can bring our concerns and feel our connection to each other and the Earth. In ritual we can speak the words that affirm our womanhood, our bodies, the Earth, and the Goddess. By entering into sacred space we leave the mundane aspects of our lives behind and “bring the Goddess to consciousness.”²⁶ Starhawk, one of the Goddess movement's most well-known ritualists, says that ritual acts trigger altered states of awareness, allowing new insights to be

23. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 227.

24. Mariechild and Martin, *Lesbian Sacred Sexuality*, 56.

25. Elsa Gidlow, “In the Blaze of Love,” quoted in Mariechild and Martin, *Lesbian Sacred Sexuality*, 115.

26. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, 25.

revealed and awakening forgotten powers of the human mind.²⁷ Rituals change the focus of the participants so that we can both become more aware of ourselves and more receptive to information coming to us in new, non-verbal ways.²⁸ In ritual, women become more aware of our connection to the natural world, more able to let go of old patterns that no longer serve us and to create something new in our lives. Ritual also connects us to our ancestresses and all the women who have preceded us in space and time. It helps build community and gives us an avenue through which to celebrate common values and concerns that may not be shared by the world at large. Ideally, in ritual we come together in a circle where all women hold an equal place, where each woman's voice is heard, and where we can offer our creativity to express our spirituality in communion with our sisters. It is a place where, as Starhawk says, "our Deep Self" is evoked²⁹ and we come into authentic existence in a space apart from the other concerns of work and family life that fill up our daily lives.

For women in the women's spirituality movement, our roots in the past, as well as our family bonds, may inspire expressions of reverence for our ancestors, both those we remember and those whose names and stories have been lost to us. As Yoruba Chief Luisah Teish says, "Through reverence for [our ancestors] we recognize our origins and ensure the spiritual and physical continuity of the human race."³⁰ Finding out whatever we can about our motherlines is a particularly empowering experience of discovering our place in a line of women that stretches back to the beginning of time. We learn to honor the women that brought us into being at this time and place—their struggles, strength, and capacity for love. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Native American writer of Laguna Pueblo heritage, says that an important reason for telling our family stories is that they provide distance and perspective for our own experiences.³¹ Such stories tell us who we are; they protect and heal us.³² They may also inspire in us a desire to create a world for our children that will offer them their own creative opportunities and lessons. When we feel more connected to our history, we feel a stronger concern for the future. Our mothers' struggles on our behalf inspire us to offer whatever we can to those who will follow after us.

When we take into account not only the lives of our ancestors, but the places where they walked the Earth, we also come into a more profound appreciation of *place*. As Pueblo American Indian poet, artist and author Carol Lee Sanchez points out, European Americans have no sacred origin stories that are based here on this land where we now live.³³ Perhaps our disregard for the land comes from a lack of historical spiritual connection we have with the Americas. Instead of limiting ourselves to nostalgic

27. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 22, 27.

28. Lara Owen, *Honoring Menstruation: A Time of Self-renewal* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1998), 105.

29. Starhawk, "Ritual as Bonding," in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 326.

30. Luisah Teish, "Ancestor Reverence," in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 87.

31. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 52.

32. *Ibid.*, 152.

33. Carol Lee Sanchez, "New World Tribal Communities," in *Weaving the Visions* (see note 4), 348.

reminiscences about the countries our ancestors originally hailed from, we need to find our connection to the land where we are *now* living, (without usurping the traditions of peoples who have inhabited it far longer). As Silko says, *any* location can become a sacred place³⁴ because *all* places and beings of the Earth are sacred.³⁵ As a way of enhancing our lives, and ensuring the survival of our species, it seems imperative to me that we develop that sense of connection to land and place. If we regard the Earth as objective dead matter, to be used however we see fit, our attitude will bring about our own destruction. The realization of how deeply connected to the Earth we truly are brings us into a sense of enchantment with our bodies and the Earth. We see them as awesome, magical, and worthy of great care and reverence.

In women's spirituality we learn to value living in a world not of sameness, but of variety, harmony, and health, where all beings are considered sacred and unique. We learn to practice gratitude for all the Mother has given us, to make sacred all aspects of our lives, to see ourselves as all equally valuable, to take no more of the Earth's resources than we need. We learn to revere our ancestors and the land upon which we walk and breathe and die. We honor our bodies and our sexuality. We see the beauty and unique gifts of each individual. We become activists for the Earth and for all beings that suffer. Such a shift in consciousness requires a strong spiritual practice, as well as communal striving.

Carol P. Christ says, "the insight that all beings in the web of life are deeply connected is the central ethical vision of Goddess religion."³⁶ I believe that our actions, and even our thoughts, have consequences that reverberate, for better or worse, throughout the cosmos. We therefore have a responsibility to do our part for the web of life, which connects and ultimately unites us all in the Goddess.

Although this discussion has focused primarily on Goddess spirituality as a central focus of spiritual feminism, the women's spirituality movement also holds in its wide embrace all spiritual traditions that honor the Earth and the Divine Feminine in some form, as well as women who are seeking to reclaim the Divine Feminine within the context of more traditionally patriarchal religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

CONTROVERSIES AND CONTEXTS

The women's spirituality movement has been the cause of considerable controversy both within and outside the feminist movement, especially because of its focus on the importance of pre-patriarchal history. Much of this debate centers around the work of Marija Gimbutas, the Lithuanian-born archaeomythologist who, after becoming an internationally recognized expert on the Indo-European Bronze Age, then began to excavate Neolithic sites in Old Europe as well as read the field reports in a multitude of languages from archeological sites all over Europe. She then put together a theory about the cultural origins of Europe, which Mara Lynn Keller has succinctly described below as taking place in three main stages:

34. Silko, *Yellow Woman*, 133.

35. *Ibid.*, 94; Sanchez, "New World Tribal Communities," 344.

36. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, 165.

1. Neolithic Europe was a pre-Indo-European civilization that was socially egalitarian, communal, peaceful, highly artistic and primarily Goddess-worshipping. It flourished in Southeast Europe for at least 3000 years, from 6500 to 3500 BCE, and 2000 years longer in Crete and the Aegean islands, until c. 1450 BCE.
2. This civilization was overrun and dominated by patriarchal, horse-riding, Indo-European-speaking, Sky God-worshipping invaders from the Russian steppes in three successive waves: I c. 4400-4300 BCE, II c. 3500 BCE, and III c. 3000 BCE.
3. The subsequent cultures of Europe are the result of a hybridization of the Old European and Indo-European cultures.³⁷

Gimbutas found no evidence of weapons, except those used for hunting, or forts in inaccessible places. Grave sites and the outlay of villages did not indicate a hierarchy among the people. Neolithic peoples made use of both metallurgy and ceramics, creating temples, tombs, houses, pottery, and sculptures that were exceptionally beautiful and incorporated many symbols, such as spirals, circles, meanders, zigzags, triangles, and wavy lines. Underlying this incredible outpouring of artistic expression, Gimbutas believes, lay a belief in the Great Mother Goddess, who gives birth to all of creation. The earliest sculptures of female figures, made of flint, date back 500,000 years.³⁸ In the subsequent millennia they continued to be created all over Old Europe, many of them with exaggerated expressions of the life-giving qualities of women—huge breasts, buttocks, and vulvas. Sometimes the Goddess is represented as actually giving birth, as in the 7th millennium BCE Neolithic settlement of Çatal Hüyük in central Anatolia.³⁹ Sometimes the female form merges with that of an animal, especially with the bird and the snake. The Goddess was also represented as ram, deer, bear, rabbit, frog, fish, and butterfly, among other animals. Eggs, bucrania (bulls' horns that also resemble a woman's internal reproductive organs), triangles and other expressions of female fertility abounded in drawings and sculpture. The early peoples of Old Europe thus seemed to have celebrated the Goddess as the giver of life, as the Earth or the Universe itself. To them She seems to have represented a whole cycle of life, including birth, death, and regeneration. Not only was She depicted as a birth-giver, but She was also present in tombs and gravesites, accompanying people into their next phase of existence.

37. Mara Lynn Keller, "The Interface of Archaeology and Mythology: A Philosophical Evaluation of the Gimbutas Paradigm," in *From the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*, ed. Joan Marler (Manchester, CT: Knowledge, Ideas, & Trends, 1997), 382.

38. Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 222.

39. Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989), 107.

Gimbutas' theory of European cultural origins has been controversial for a variety of reasons. It first of all challenges the widely held belief that warfare, male dominance, class hierarchies, and a male god are necessarily universal and inevitable aspects of the human condition. It also belies the notion that humans have progressed in consciousness since Neolithic times. The artistic appreciation of the female body expressed by Neolithic artisans stands in marked contrast to "the anti-nature, anti-body orientation in Western philosophy and spirituality."⁴⁰ Gimbutas' research methods are often belittled for being unscientific and unorthodox, although she combined rigorous scientific inquiry with intuitive insight. Gimbutas' theory of Europe's cultural origins dramatically shifts the ways Western women's and men's spiritual-cultural stories will be told.

Another major area of contention in regard to women's spirituality concerns the issue of "essentialism" versus "social (de)constructionism". In their honoring of the female body, practitioners of women's spirituality have often been accused by others in the feminist movement of "essentialism" the belief that women have an innate feminine essence rooted in their biology that is natural and unchanging. Essentialism has often, unfortunately, been equated with biological determinism,⁴¹ a view that has long been used to oppress women by relegating them solely to a reproductive role. Biological determinism has denied women equal access to higher education and professional work, in addition to casting men in the role of warlike aggressors. It has also been used to justify slavery, colonialism, and other oppressive institutions on the basis of a belief in the innate superiority or inferiority of particular groups of people. It is little wonder that many feminists want to have nothing to do with it. Nonetheless, in the feminist movement there have been widely divergent ways of opposing it. Deconstructionists do so by asserting that all experience, including menstruation and even gender, is socially constructed. As Helen Malson and Catherine Swann put it,

Reproduction and women's 'reproductive' bodies, like every other aspect of sex/gender, must then from a critical, feminist perspective be considered as socio-historically specific, discursive constructions, rather than as 'natural' referents about which we have more or less accurate, liberating or oppressive knowledges.⁴²

Radical, cultural, and spiritual feminists, on the other hand, argue that this stance accomplishes the patriarchal goal of erasing the female body.⁴³ They choose rather to celebrate the female body and rethink its social and spiritual meanings, while still working toward equal rights and opportunities for women. Adrienne Rich, for example, says,

40. Charlene Spretnak, "Beyond the Backlash: An Appreciation of the Work of Marija Gimbutas," in *From the Realm of the Ancestors* (see note 37), 400.

41. See, for example, Sophie Laws, *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 14.

42. Helen Malson and Catherine Swann, "Re-producing 'woman's' body: Reflections on the (dis)place(ments) of 'reproduction' for (post)modern women," *Journal of Gender Studies* 12, no. 3 (2003): 192.

43. Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981), 122.

I have come to believe . . . that female biology—the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body—has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specification. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than destiny.⁴⁴

I see menstruation as both an important biological process *and* one that is partially socially constructed, rather than viewing these two facets as mutually exclusive. Menstruation has biological, sociological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. It is a biological phenomenon in that it involves the monthly shedding of the endometrial lining of the uterus. Yet even as a biological event, women experience menstruation differently. For some the flow is very light and lasts only a few days. For others it may be quite heavy and last a week or more. (My own experience places me firmly in the latter group.) Some women experience no pain; others may have severe cramps, nausea, and/or backache that make it virtually impossible for them to go about their normal routines. Some women experience pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS); others do not. The ones who do experience it find that it manifests in a wide variety of ways that may include food cravings, emotional sensitivity, irritability, and/or enhanced psychic ability. Menstruation as a bodily phenomenon is experienced differently by each woman, no matter what the social construction of it is.

Menstruation can also be said to be socially constructed to a degree because women's experiences of it are greatly affected by how their own culture views it. Some cultures regard menstruation in a negative light (as pollution, for example); others regard it positively (as powerful). Some have many rules and taboos surrounding its occurrence; others have virtually none. Women's sociological and psychological experience of menstruating varies greatly from culture to culture, influenced in many ways by how the people surrounding them perceive it.

Menstruation also has spiritual dimensions. These dimensions do not arise out of some fixed essence that all women share, but out of different ways that various women have found of connecting to their blood cycle and to the Cosmos.⁴⁵ Some of these experiences and narratives originate from particular forms of spirituality or are due to particular cultural attitudes and practices, but some simply begin to manifest themselves or are sought out by women *despite* the cultural attitudes that surround them.

44. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 39-40.

45. These ways may seem to reinforce the woman-nature/man-culture dichotomy that is the basis for biological determinism, but while I believe that women do have an inherent connection to the natural cycles of the planet through their bodies, I do not think that men have no connection to nature; nor do I believe that men are more naturally connected to culture than women are. All humans are deeply connected to the natural world simply by virtue of being embodied beings.

Another center of controversy within the feminist movement centers on the use of such terms as *patriarchy* and *matriarchy*. *Patriarchy* literally means “rule of the father.” Feminist historian Gerda Lerner defines it as “the institutionalization of male dominance over women and children.”⁴⁶ In the women's spirituality movement, patriarchy is usually believed to have begun at the end of the Neolithic/beginning of the Bronze Age in Europe, when warfare, male dominance, and city-states replaced the peaceful, egalitarian, agricultural communities described by Gimbutas. Gimbutas coined the word *matristic* (rather than *matriarchal*) to describe the Neolithic settlements of Old Europe, as she did not want to imply that they were the reverse of patriarchal—that women dominated men instead of being dominated by them. Gimbutas emphasizes that these were egalitarian societies, that although they were honoring of the female they were not ruled exclusively by women. Women within the women's spirituality movement have tried to use other terms to describe these societies, such as *matristic*, *matrifocal*, or *gylanic*,⁴⁷ but Gimbutas' detractors are fond of using the more contested term, *matriarchy*, to challenge her theory. Some women within the women's spirituality movement mistakenly use this term as well, unaware of its implications, while others, such as Heide Göttner-Abendroth use it deliberately to provoke and to bring attention to their research.⁴⁸

These issues continue to be controversial within the women's spirituality movement, the larger feminist movement, and the academy, where they are hotly debated. Feminists have strong opinions on different sides of the debate. One benefit to such controversy, however, is that it offers an opportunity for those within the women's spirituality movement to clarify their own thinking on these topics as they continue to put their work out into the world.

STANDPOINT

I am a white, middle-class American woman, who has nevertheless spent half my life living outside the USA. Although born in New York State, I was conceived and later raised for thirteen years in India. In my adult life I have lived in Kenya, Israel, Greece, China, Scotland, and Guatemala. I am what is known as a “Third Culture Kid” (TCK)—a term coined by social scientist Ruth Hill Useem to denote a person who grows up in a culture different from that of her/his parents, usually because of the parents' occupation.⁴⁹ TCKs tend to feel some sense of belonging to both the culture they grow up in and the one to which their parents belong, but not completely to either one. They also tend to feel

46. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 239.

47. Gylanic is a term coined by Riane Eisler to denote an egalitarian society. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (see note 9), 105.

48. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, “The Structure of Matriarchal Societies,” *ReVision* 21, no. 3 (1999): 31. [Göttner-Abendroth's research is intentionally provocative to bring more serious consideration to mother-centered cultures – Ed.'s note]

49. David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2002), 20.

most at home with other people who have a similar life experience, no matter what the cultures are that each has inhabited.⁵⁰

Being white and middle class has enabled me to pursue my interest in living in different parts of the world with relative ease. Although I was a minority in each new country I lived in, I have always been visibly part of the globally dominant culture of the United States, which has made it easy for me to gain entrance to most places I have wanted to live and then to have people treat me well when I got there. I have always had sufficient financial resources to go where I wanted to go and to live simply, but comfortably, in each place. I have a second master's degree in linguistics and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), which has enabled me to find work in most places with little difficulty. These are privileges that I have been able to take for granted because of my race and class.

As a TCK living in and between a variety of cultures, I have always been aware that there is more than one way of looking at virtually anything and multiple ways of doing almost anything. There usually isn't a right way and a wrong way as much as there are different ways. Those differences (as well as my aversion to living for any great length of time in the United States, where I am supposed to "fit in" but don't) have always intrigued me and have sparked my interest in living in different places in the world as an adult so that I could explore and enjoy them. There is almost nothing I take more pleasure in than landing in a country where I've never been before and creating a life for myself for months or (preferably) years at a time. Whether I'm living in a mud hut in Kenya or a farm cottage in Scotland, an apartment in China or a kibbutz in Israel, I am most energized and at home setting out and learning about my new surroundings and the perspective, history, culture, spirituality, and language of a new group of people.

After several years in one place, however, I start to feel restless. I start to wonder about what other places there might be out there that I haven't explored yet that might be just as (or even more) interesting than where I am. I begin to feel drawn to a new country and move on—usually to a different continent altogether. It is the years I spend back in the United States for the sake of husband, family, and education that I tend to feel the least settled. I try to at least end up in different states in different parts of the country to provide some variety: western Massachusetts, New York City, Colorado, and northern California.

I have thus unconsciously been drawn to women who share in a variety of ways my experience of walking in more than one world. Each time I listen to a new story I can not wait to explore both the cultural and the spiritual context for what has been shared. As a woman inside the women's spirituality movement, I hold the belief that our bodies are sacred reflections of the Goddess's Earthbody. I also believe that the dominant attitude toward menstruation in the United States is immensely damaging to everyone. It means that women are denied a deep understanding of the processes of their own bodies. They do not benefit from the experience of other women, thereby learning how to enhance their own experience. Men and boys are usually completely ignorant of what their mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, and lovers experience on a regular basis and are, therefore, unable to offer support or understanding. Most of all, the spiritual potential inherent in the experience of bleeding is left largely unexplored.

50. *Ibid.*, 19.

As a woman who spends a significant amount of time menstruating, I am basing my work on the assumption that it is extremely important for me and for all menstruating women who have not yet done so, to begin to discover ways of enhancing our experience of bleeding. By doing so I believe that we can understand ourselves on a deeper level, strengthen our connection to other women, recognize how the rhythms of our bodies echo the rhythms of the entire Cosmos, and begin to reclaim all that has been birthed through this extraordinary process of our bodies. We thus enrich our lives immeasurably and are better prepared to enable our daughters to enter into womanhood with a more positive self-image and sense of connection to other women and the whole Universe.

As I journey into women's menstrual stories I am reminded of the traditional "Charge of the Goddess," as given by Doreen Valiente and Starhawk, for it is both an expression of who the Goddess is and an invitation to hear women's stories by seeking the wisdom within ourselves of what they each have to offer:

I who am the beauty of the green earth
And the white moon among the stars
And the mysteries of the waters
I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me
For I am the soul of Nature that gives life to the Universe
From me all things proceed and unto me they must return.
Let my worship be in the heart that rejoices
For behold! All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals
Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion,
Honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you,
And you who seek to know me
Know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not
Unless you know the Mystery
For if that which you seek you find not within yourself,
You will never find it without.

For behold! I have been with you from the beginning
And I am that which is attained at the end of desire.⁵¹

51. Doreen Valiente and Starhawk, "Charge of the Goddess," quoted in Jennifer Berezan, "She Who Hears the Cries of the World," in *She Carries Me*, Edge of Wonder Records, EW21, compact disc.

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