



Carolyn Lee Boyd

# Creating a Spiral Spirited Future

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## Opening Words

# Welcome to My Kitchen



In our current western society, women — more than half the population — do not see someone who looks like them when they view images or hear stories of the Divine and are not, in many traditions, considered to be equally sacred and therefore inherently valuable. We all spend every day in a culture in which nurturing, compassion, and peace- and justice-seeking are perceived as weakness. Our once-beloved Mother Earth is now treated as a lifeless resource good only for wealth and power-building.

But what if images, stories, and celebrations of women's sacred lives and goddesses were commonplace in our world? What if our society really acted on the values of harmony and positive relationships, creativity, equality, peace, and justice that are a part of many cultures that honor deities, including

Mother Goddess figures, who focus on nurturing and nature? What if everyone had grown up with the assumption that all beings are not just equally, but infinitely, sacred?

When everyone can experience the sacred in ourselves and our daily lives right now, and visualize and articulate what a future world would be like in which this was affirmed everywhere and expected — and especially when this experience and perspective begins to be shared by the larger population of the people we meet everyday on the street, in the market, and in our schools and neighborhoods — we can all take bold and effective steps towards creating what I am calling a “Spiral Spirited Future.”



Spirals are everywhere in nature and are a symbol of goddesses and Divine creative energy all over the world. They move in a circle — a shape that is egalitarian and inclusive — but yet move forward, bringing the best of the past into a future that meets the needs of those who create it.

But, we can only make this future happen if we all work together. When I say “we,” I mean people from all walks of life. And sometimes the best place to start is by gathering right in our own kitchens.

So, I hope you will think of your time here as if we were sitting down together, having a cup of tea, and dreaming big about the future. This e-book is meant to inspire all different kinds of people — from all over the world, of all ages and backgrounds, with a variety of religious affiliations and beliefs as well as spiritual practices, from many eras — to come together to create a blueprint for a future that we want to leave to those who come after us.

My contribution will be this book while yours will be whatever you choose to do after reading it, whether that is art, writing, or other creative endeavors, community service work, research, or anything else that uses your unique gifts to make a difference.

In this and succeeding pages you will find some memoirs and some fiction, essays, and poetry I have written over the years. These are my thoughts about how the female spirit, whether that is expressed as goddess myths and stories, the ways we have lived their spiritual lives throughout history, or the activism and hard work of generations, can make a better future for ourselves and our descendants.

I hope you enjoy the book and find it both enjoyable and thought-provoking. If you have ideas to share, I hope you will contact me via my website, [www.goddessinateapot.com](http://www.goddessinateapot.com).

Let's get started thinking together about how to make this new world come about.

## Chapter 1

# What Do the Goddesses Say?



Ancient myths and stories about goddesses and spiritually powerful women have much guidance to offer us all in these challenging times. By bringing these stories to light and exploring what they have to say to us, we can help infuse their wisdom into our present and future in two ways. They can give us the perspective and inner strength to envision the best future and work hard to make it happen. By incorporating their messages into how we think, we create the inner changes in ourselves and others that will be the basis for the kind of world we are striving for.

**Myths and stories can help us identify and draw on our own strength and power that is already within us.**

Some years ago I was treated for cancer. Two myths helped me find the strength within myself to thrive instead of just survive, and also to show me my own sovereignty. Read more about them below:



## ***Survivorship to Thrivership in Sedna's Ocean***

*Appeared on Feminism and Religion, July 22, 2014*

During the time I was treated for cancer learned the wonderful, important word “survivorship.” At the cancer center where I received care, “survivorship” means life’s physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, economic, social, and political aspects affecting the quality and quantity of life after treatment.

“Survivorship” also perfectly describes what I have seen over and over working with older women, especially those who have made their lives masterpieces of this art. The deaths of loved ones, the loss of home and country, devastating illness and lifelong disability, violence from family and discrimination and hate from strangers – through it all they have found a strength and power that they have used to make their lives and that of others more meaningful and impactful. In fact, almost all older, and many younger, women I know have been transformed by their own kind of survivorship into someone beyond who she imagined she would ever be.

Survivorship also describes the courage, persistence, strength, wits, guts, intelligence, and wisdom of the global community of women necessary to overcome the trauma, violence, violation and repression of at least the past several thousand years. It is what has brought women through to where we are now. Women’s spirituality as a force and a movement is also a heroine of survivorship. Through millennia of being repressed and dressed up in the garments of patriarchal practices to suit their needs, the traditions and spirit of the Female Divine have survived and we now see Her reclaiming Her place in our spiritual lives, theology, and world history.

Often in troubled moments I seek guidance in a Goddess's story that has resonated with me. One such is Sedna, the Arctic Goddess of the ocean. Since I am not of Her tradition, I can only express what the universal elements of Her story have meant to me.

This is Her story as I have heard it, most recently in Patricia Monaghan's *Goddesses and Heroines*: Sedna was a young woman who married a seabird after he promised her a happy, easy life. When she instead found her home to be squalid, her father came to fetch her home in a kayak. Her husband's flock attacked the kayak and, fearing all would die, her father threw Sedna overboard. When she held onto the sides of the boat, he chopped off her fingers, then her arms. At the ocean's bottom, she transformed into a goddess, always dragging one leg behind her, and her mutilated arms and fingers became the fish and sea mammals that fed the people. She gave the people laws they must obey if the sea creatures were to sacrifice themselves to the hunters and she received the dead into her realm.

What happened to Sedna on her way down from the boat to the ocean floor to turn the abused young woman into the Goddess of life and death? She survived. To me, her journey is that of survivorship with the message that I must find my way through it with the knowledge and hope that transformation is not just possible, but inevitable.

During treatment, I was perhaps still holding onto the boat of who I was before diagnosis in some ways, perhaps watching my fingers and arms being flung over the side as surgery, radiation and chemotherapy make me feel as if I have lost the sense of wholeness I once took for granted. But, I also looked down to the ocean floor, and began to envision how this experience might make me into someone beyond previous imagining. I vowed to not only survive, but also to thrive. Perhaps we should find a new name for this time of life when are not just survivors, but thrivers.

It seems as if this liminal falling-to-the-bottom-of-the-ocean moment is not just happening for individuals, but is also a historical time for the global community of women as we continue our awakening and movement towards equal rights, peace, and safety and for the spirit of the Female Divine as She arises and emerges.

We are profoundly conscious of the traumas and tragedies, of the losses and betrayals that have woven through our lives as individuals, as the global community of women, and as the human component of the Female Divine. Yet, we can see the bottom of the ocean, knowing that we can bring what we have learned there, even when it seems a bit dim and unfocused.

Much of what will be needed for our transformation is already underway. First, we need to expand our vision of who we are, what we can be, and what we can achieve. We must ask ourselves, who would we be if we had never heard any of the “shouldn’ts” and “couldn’ts” that all women are subjected to from the moment of birth? What if we had always understand our essential being to be sacred and divine?

We have to acknowledge that what we have survived is hard. Maybe future generations will wonder how we came through it all in order to bring them the world in which they live. Like Sedna, we have wounds, but it can be the wounded pieces of ourselves that can be turned into food for the people, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual nourishment and nurturance. I suspect that many, maybe all, of us, don’t truly comprehend how wounded we are because so much of what wounds us is taken for granted as a part of life, but in recognizing our wounds, they can be transformed.

We need to envision what our ocean floor, the place where we express our transformed power and wisdom, looks like

and who we will be in it. This is a task for the artist in each one of us to free our imaginations and dream as big as we can. Then we can put our visioning together and know where we are going.

Finally, we must take action, whatever that must be, to bring our vision to fruition. We must honor each woman's contribution, knowing that everyone's talents are essential and unique.

May we all, someday, stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart, in thrivorship in the ocean realm we have made together.



### ***Seeking Our Sovereignty in the Land of the Dead: A Journey with Inanna***

*This article first appeared in SageWoman, Issue 93.*

*Perhaps a Goddess of Death need not be fierce and murderous with skulls and knives, or a soul-weighing judge of our fate, or a ghostly wind who spirits us off in the night. What if the Underworld, the ancient and shadowy land of the dead where She reigns, is not only a place of mystery where our shades dwell when our bodies no longer inhabit the Earth, but is also a temple we can visit while living where our thoughts and intentions become clear as a drop of water on a rose petal, where we boldly shake off the self-made chains binding us to our past, where we gratefully receive the fortitude and will, like Goddesses, to rule ourselves? What if the Great Below is where we must venture to gain the power to be fully human that we seek and that lovingly seeks us?*

Thirty years ago, in a small theater in New York City's American Museum of Natural History, after closing time

when the galleries were abandoned and eerie, author and storyteller Diane Wolkstein performed the myth of Inanna. She made those ancient verses of the great Goddess of Sumer come alive with her inspired tone and gestures just as they may have been experienced by ordinary people like me millennia ago.

I fell in love with the Goddess at that moment, overwhelmed by the deep reverberation of those mighty words in a space within me that I had not known existed. “From the Great Above, the Goddess opened her ear to the Great Below... Inanna abandoned heaven and Earth to descend to the Underworld” (Wolkstein and Kramer, 52). In the very marrow of my bones, I knew that this story of metamorphosis was also my own.

In the myth, Inanna travels to the Underworld to witness the funeral of the husband of her sister, Ereshkigal, Goddess of the Underworld. At each of seven gates she is stripped at Ereshkigal’s command of all the clothes and jewels that are symbols of her station as Queen of heaven and Earth. She is condemned by the judges of the Underworld, then killed by her wrathful sister. After her rotting corpse is hung on a meathook for three days, she is rescued when the God of Wisdom sends two tiny beings to find her and bring her back to life. Inanna ascends to her own realms healed, strong and confident, wise and fearless.

In my own life, portals to the the realm of the Goddess of Death are not grand and gilded gates that I will pass through once at the end of my days, never to return. Rather, they have been small openings that I fall partially into now and again, unawares, only to be ejected back into the world of the living just as unexpectedly. These descents have been sometimes dramatic and often just a bit odd.

Skipping over three just-in-the-nick-of-time emergency surgeries, a gigantic, ancient tree that recently fell a few

yards from where I was peeling onions in the kitchen, and other relatively mundane experiences, here are a few of the most memorable escapes. As a teenaged au pair in London in the 1970s, I decided at the last minute not to get on a train that was later bombed by terrorists. In my 20s, now living in New York City, I once calmly walked home from work in the middle of a violent hurricane, learning later that at just that time the eye was passing over the city, keeping me safe in its peaceful, windless silence.

A few months later, a skyscraper's gigantic plate glass window shattered only a few inches away from me when it was blown in by a powerful gust of wind, sending dagger-sharp shards that somehow missed me entirely all over the tiny room. Some years later I walked away unscathed after an airplane I was on barely missed surprise lightning bolts that hit the runway just as the plane was coming in for its landing. "I can't believe we made it," said the heroic pilot who had somehow managed to fly the plane almost straight up and out of the way of the storm. A few years after that I again survived without a scratch when a car, spinning wildly on ice, came within inches of smashing head on into the car door next to where I sat.

When the first of these experiences happened in my teens, I came to believe that I was just a little immortal, that nothing could harm me. More importantly, I experienced a sense of freedom that I was, as a result, no longer bound to the expectations and demands of life as a young woman in late 20th century mid-America. If I had actually died, then there would be no Carolyn to act, believe, speak, and live according to what was expected by society. So, since the world should have been bereft of the benefits of my existence anyway, I was now liberated to be exactly and only who I chose. I remember saying to myself "No longer must I justify my decisions, answer the call to be someone I never wanted to be. I can now do exactly and only as I please." Like Inanna, I

had shed the trappings of my station, but for me this meant I could now make my new life however liked.

I became my own Goddess of Creation, taking my sovereignty to not only own and live my life as I desired, but also to create it. I began to dress up my soul, now naked like Inanna, in whatever life circumstances took my fancy. Like an artist creating a masterpiece, I started with a vision of what I would like to look like in this version of my life, what a day would be, what my environment would be like, and how I would make a living, and then set about fashioning and stepping into it.

So, at aged twenty-two I left my staid, secure, suburban midwest home to recreate myself as a punk poet in the East Village of New York City. I inhabited what was to me a delightfully squalid apartment, dressed in a black velvet opera cape and dyed my hair red, and engaged in street poetry performance art. A few years later, taking on a completely different persona, I married, moved to a pristine history-soaked small town in New England, renovated a ramshackle Victorian house, went to grad school and got a professional job, and raised a family. Since then, I have remade myself in smaller ways as often as I wish — changing my hair and wardrobe to fit whatever part I am playing, taking up hand drumming in my late 50s to explore thinking like a musician, being an herb-growing hedge witch on the weekends and a suit-wearing manager on weekdays. To my youthful self, sovereignty was the ability to make my life be exactly as I wished, and to change it whenever I had a new whim. I have learned over the years that this power to re-create oneself is a gift that is much harder won for many other women who are forced to patch together their existences after violence, illness, or other misfortune steal everything they know.

I once spoke to a woman who had lost her family, her village and her country through war, had grown up in a refugee

camp and had eventually found her way to the U.S. where she married and now struggles day to day to feed and clothe her family. “I keep on and don’t get angry, what good would that do?” she says, meaning not that she is resigned to the harshness of her life, but that being angry would be an obstacle to making her own fate for herself and her children. Unlike my younger self, who only played at this shallow form of sovereignty, she survives by wresting her own sovereignty out of nothing every day.

Once Inanna had shed her clothes and jewels and entered the Land of the Dead, she was judged and killed, truly facing death. As much as I had thought about my own death over the first 55 years of my life, I was far from prepared to actually confront it. Nevertheless, one bright winter day I found myself unexpectedly lying in my upstairs hallway, slipping into and out of consciousness due to loss of blood from a sudden hemorrhage, wondering if the ambulance would arrive in time. I was oddly calm, as if this would be just another quick trip to the edge of the Underworld. But, instead, in the emergency surgery that followed, cancer was revealed and I, too, had to face the possibility that I would right then be subject to Inanna’s mortal fate.

At first, I desperately clung to my belief in my immortality, trying unsuccessfully to convince myself that I was different from everyone else there in the cancer center waiting room, that I would surely survive because had I not always walked away? Was I not the creator of my own life, sovereign over my fate? However, over time, every infusion bag drained into my body, night spent awake from drug-induced bone pain, radiation burn, emergency ultrasound due to a symptom that could indicate recurrence, and dinner out spent sick in the ladies room wore away my hubris. Like Inanna listening to the charges against her, knowing that her conviction was a foregone conclusion,



I finally accepted that I, too, would die one day. My death may not be from cancer, and it may not be soon, but it was inevitable. Not able to simply change my wardrobe or house and overcome this challenge to my sovereignty and life, I became overwhelmed by panic and was not living the days I had left — whether weeks or decades — well. I recognized that I do not have absolute sovereignty over what happens to me, but I also gave away what sovereignty I had over how I would live the years I had left.

For the first few weeks, when I walked into the cancer center where I was treated, I imagined I would be entering a true-to-life Land of the Dead, where everyone would be grim and hushed, resigned, and depressed like me. Yet, most of the people around me who had been in treatment longer than I did not behave as if they were anticipating soon being denizens of the Underworld. Many had large families with them and would sit during the long hours of chemotherapy infusion lunching on pizza and chatting. No one was crying. Most were talking and even laughing, reading magazines or scolding fidgety children. They were acting as if their lives were not on the edge of annihilation. What did they know that I did not?

I thought again of Inanna and what made it possible for her to rise up from the Underworld. Her rescuers were two small beings, tinier than fleas, who had been sent by the God of Wisdom to brave the terrors and dangers of the Underworld to bring Inanna home. They won her release by moaning empathetically with Ereshkigal in her absolute and unrelenting misery, moving her to offer them whatever they wished in gratitude. They asked for Inanna's corpse, which they brought back to life. Inanna's ascent to a deeper, wiser divine existence was made possible by the same kind, simple caring for one another that is repeated by humans and other living beings all over the world billions of times a day.

In the days following my diagnosis, I was inundated with love — from my husband who came to any appointment I wished, my sister who travelled 800 miles to weep with me, my work colleagues who banded together to cover for me so I could take the time to recover, and friends and acquaintances who sent cards, letters, and lots of advice. My own rescue into remission was made possible by the hundreds of medical researchers who dedicate their lives to labs and data so they can find cures and my doctors and nurses who carefully devised the right treatments and delivered them in a way that let me know I was more than my disease.

Like Ereshkigal, I was eventually more overcome by the kindness and compassion I was shown in my suffering than by the fear of death. The new trappings of my life — the pain, exhaustion, and uncertainty — were still real, but not what defined it. My sovereignty transformed from the ability to dress up my soul in new lives like a doll, to the deeper, richer power of being part of a web of human connection. I could not determine what would happen to me as an individual, but I could choose to live in a loving way and be part of a human community that has sovereignty over what kind of a world we will all live in. Perhaps those other patients had experienced a similar kind of epiphany, too.

I have received from the Underworld the gift of the understanding that, for mortals, sovereignty does not necessarily mean being always regal like the Goddesses who rule over all the Earth and its beings, the cosmos, and the universe herself. Speaking and acting with the authority we deserve for the wisdom we hold; demanding what is right for ourselves, others, and the Earth is part of our divine mission; honoring and insisting that others respect our spiritual as well as temporal power is how we must go forth if we are to do what we need to in this world on the brink of catastrophe. However, an essential element of our human sovereignty is also finding our real power in quietly nurturing each other in

everyday ways, in treasuring each dawn knowing that we have it in our power to make the world better together before we go to sleep again at night, in being grateful for our flesh and blood bodies even as they become more fragile because they are necessary for us to be alive together and relate to one another through speech, touch and other means.

We have a sovereignty beyond that of mere immortal Goddesses. We are human. It is easy to have sovereignty when you are a Goddess, but it takes a deeper courage, caring, and wisdom to be sovereign with others, to determine that we will choose not what trappings of life we will have, but who we will be as people to one another even in the face of vulnerability and an inevitable end to our current form of existence.

I'm now a number of years into remission, with the chance of recurrence remote and a new immunotherapy for my type of cancer now available. While I no longer contemplate death daily, I still hope to have more visits to the Underworld before my last journey there. But I believe I have come to a time when I no longer need to stumble into the portals because I can find ways to go through them voluntarily — in meditation, in making creative works, in assisting others as they transition to Ereshkigal's realm — not forever but for just a moment to gain a needed insight, clarity, or understanding. The Underworld is not, I have learned, the place where the last remnants of our true selves go when we are annihilated from the Earth, but is instead a place that is as close as our imaginations and our legacy of Goddess stories, found in the American Museum of Natural History, a hospital room, a street or office, or anywhere we may happen to be at this moment. It is a place that holds the keys to our special human and mortal sovereignty if we will only journey there to seek it.



## **Stories Can Give Us Boldness and Strength**

Stories about goddesses who demanded change by turning the Earth into a wasteland when their rules are not followed showed me how to be bold when the times require it. We are definitely living in such a time.

### ***From the Wasteland Rises Hope***

*This first appeared in Feminism and Religion, April 7, 2018*

For millennia, humans have told stories of goddesses who have decreed that, because terrible crimes have been committed against their female loved ones or those under their protection, our world would become a desolate wasteland. They withdrew their spiritual power that made life possible so that no fruits or vegetables would grow to nourish us or no sunlight would warm our bodies. Only when justice was done did these goddesses heal the wasteland so human life could continue.

In ancient Greece, the youthful daughter Persephone was kidnapped from her idyllic wildflower meadow to the Underworld where she was raped by Hades. Her mother, the great Earth goddess Demeter, wandered the world in great despair seeking her daughter while the crops withered and the people starved. Only when Persephone was returned to live on the Earth was it again abundant. Amaterasu, the Shinto Sun Goddess, hid her life-giving light when she was angered by her brother's desecration of her queendom that resulted in a friend's death. Finally, when her brother was banished from heaven and she was lured from her cave and saw her sacredness and beauty in a mirror, the sun's rays nourished the Earth once more. You may know of more stories from your own tradition.

Today we are experiencing a physical version of these mythical wastelands. Farmlands turn to dust, glaciers melt, wars and industry leave gaping wounds in Earth's skin and deep inside her belly. We now have the weapons to destroy in the most savage ways those whom we hate or fear. For the first time in human history, we can make the whole globe a real wasteland in all its forms.

These stories were not, of course, intended to describe 21st century devastation. However, I do find within them deep truths about the roots of our modern calamity and about women's spiritual power, which I perceive of as the force that heals and promotes life and wholeness on individual, planetary, and cosmic levels by acting in a way that recognizes and honors the sacredness within ourselves and all beings.

First, the stories demonstrate an essential connection between our own wasteland and a profound dishonoring of the spiritual power of women. When the inherent worth and wisdom of half the population is devalued and ignored, the world becomes so out of balance and disordered that only catastrophe can result.

When only a small number of people have all the power and do not respect the rights of other living entities to well being, exploitation is the inevitable result. The connection between disdain for women and all who belong to politically, socially, and economically disempowered groups and the trashing of the Earth becomes even clearer when we look at the aggregate effect of environmental devastation on the lives of women and so many other marginalized people.

These stories also speak to the nature of women's spiritual power itself. They tell women to never forget the importance of being healers for one another. Baubo's dance revealing her vulva makes Demeter laugh, igniting the beginning of the

rebirth of the world. The bawdy dance of Uzume, the Japanese goddess of merriment, caused the ruckus that brought an amused and curious Amaterasu out of her cave to witness her own beauty. Listening deeply in circles, encouraging each other's creative work, singing and dancing for and with each other; all of these and more are ways I see women giving each other the nurturing we all need to keep our spiritual power strong and fresh.

The goddesses in these stories have also been making the world harmonious and abundant forever, yet this is only recognized when they withhold the fruits of their power. This reminds me that we must never forget that women's spiritual work — what we do daily to bring harmony and well being to those in our families and communities whether part of our professional work, outside activism, or the hundreds of interactions we have each day — is often overlooked as essential to moving the world closer to beauty, peace and justice; these should be honored as most holy acts.

Finally, these stories give me hope that just as humanity has the power to create a wasteland, we, as women and as human beings, can also make our Earth a paradise. In these times when the end of our species and our planet as we know seems almost inevitable, these stories remind us that we have more power inside us than we realize and we have no choice but to try to bring forth the world we wish to live in for ourselves and future generations. By visualizing an Earth that is whole and sharing that vision with others by words, art, music, dance; working through the details of new models of governance and economics on a small scale in our own organizations and communities, running for office on platforms representing these values, and more we can all find ways to dedicate ourselves to make positive change on many levels.

Those who first heard these stories of the wasteland millennia ago perhaps never imagined that it could be

reality. It is our time now, and we must find our own answers to turning back the world's environmental and spiritual desolation. This task is, of course, not women's responsibility alone. But, we can each find our own unique place in this work by every day, in our own way, healing each other, recognizing and honoring all we do and have done, and contributing everyday to our own vision of paradise.



### **Goddess myths and stories can help us overcome what is holding us back from our spiritual strength and power.**

Learn what I found out when I “danced with Kali”! This happened at a “Goddess Camp” in New Hampshire many years ago. After having dinner, everyone had to go through the woods to get to the evening ritual. We were all met in a clearing by a camp organizer (I assume!) dressed very convincingly as Kali who forced us all to figure out how to get past her. Some voice inside said that I needed to “dance” with her, and I did, and got safely past the clearing. Our whole lives are spent “dancing with Kali,” living in uncertainty and the knowledge of our own impermanence on this Earth. Experiencing a renewed sense of urgency and finding inspiration in the adventure this brings to life can make what we do that much more meaningful, fun, and effective.

### ***Dancing with Kali Gets Us to the Other Side***

*Appeared on Feminism and Religion, April 18, 2013*

Deep in the New England woods, Kali leaps from behind a pine tree, skulls jangling from her waist and an upraised knife in her hand. A band of women halts and the goddess

and mortals face one another. “What must you do to pass?” Kali demands. After a few silent seconds, I step forward and take Kali’s hands, waltzing with her until I reach the other side where I continue on to the moon ceremony that was our destination that night.

A decade ago I waltzed with a priestess dressed as Kali at a Goddess camp. When I stared at the recreated wrathful goddess blocking my way, I knew that I could not run past or fight her, so dancing with all that She represented was my only option. I cannot say that I encountered Kali Herself that night but, since then, I have experienced over and over the transforming power of choosing to engage the wildness, mystery, beauty, truth, and chaos of our dynamic universe and of expressing both creative and destructive aspects of this spirit in our everyday lives.

Over the years, in my own life and in those of so many people I have known, I have come to recognize how the decision, in its many manifestations, to “dance with Kali” remakes us for the better. Perhaps you respond to a tragedy by jumping into the thick of the trauma and chaos in a way that shows you your strength and competence. You take a chance on changing your life’s direction because of a surprise encounter. You give birth knowing that your life will change in ways you cannot imagine. If you look at a person’s years on Earth as a vast sky, these choices to dare are the brightest stars that shine amidst a life with millions of decisions.

Though “dancing” with this spirit offers much wisdom, I have seen that, most importantly for me, to do it has required giving up an illusion which insidiously pervades our culture: the notion that we can and should be in control of all aspects of our lives, of ourselves, and of all that may affect us. For after all, the spirit I met is as uncontrollable as a volcano or hurricane, the abundance of life on earth, or the seeming randomness of death. How many years and opportunities have I wasted not making full use of my gifts,



but rather choosing the safe path, and constraining my true self in order to feel for a fleeting moment that I am somehow in control and therefore able to ensure a life free from catastrophe? What would my life have been like if I had been brought up in a society that taught everyone to embrace life's wild dance rather than chase after a control that can never exist?

While at one time I would have found “dancing” as a way of life stressful, now it is a relief. I no longer need to struggle to be in control all the time. If I am not doing what I imagined I would be at midlife, I am not a failure but rather someone who was able to change my idea of success in order to fulfill an evolving sense of mission. I understand that anxiety is an over-reaching for control rather than a reasonable response. I know that I am most likely strong and competent enough to cope with most of life's surprises—which I am finding is a much better and more realistic way of living in an uncertain world than trying to have an overly orderly, thoroughly planned life.

What is true for individuals is even more so for our societies. We think that we can command nature and make Her do our bidding—yet we end up with environmental disaster. Any hope of real love relationships dissolves in the belief that those designated the heads of households can and should rule the lives, behavior, hearts and souls of their family members. Too often the first response to conflict is to overwhelm with military force, and so we have a globe afire with constant wars within and between nations.

What if, instead, our global community chose to “dance” at key decision-points? I believe our society would look much more like matriarchy, with cooperation in reverence for relationships, and with each individual valued over conflict and coercion. We might come to respect nature's power and consider how our lives should be in service to the Earth. Movements towards justice and equality would no longer be

hindered by those afraid of a world in which those different from themselves have a say and in which change is an expected good. Cooperation would be encouraged when we realize that we can never rule hearts and minds by force. We would no longer hesitate to take care of each other knowing that we, too, could have been born in the circumstance of another or that we could have suffered the fate that brought another down. Once we remove the simple lie that total control is possible, so many obstacles to a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world begin to crumble.

As I ponder how to help midwife a society that “dances,” I think of that night in the woods when one priestess was able to embody so meaningfully the spirit of giving up control for the women who came across her path. Perhaps each of us can use our powers of creativity – whether through drama, poetry, song, dance, storytelling, painting or drawing – to remind others of the many encounters they have every day with this spirit. Maybe we can paint to evoke a sense of awe at a magnificent sunset, or make a poem about a green shoot coming out of the composted ground, or find a way to recreate the goddess in our business meetings and quiet conversations. Each of us, in so many ways, holds the spirit that cannot be controlled of inside us, and it is up to us to lead the dance, not only to a moon ceremony in the woods, but to a new way of being for all.



**Goddess myths and stories can help us see how we are already deeply connected to the infinite sacredness of the world.**

My grandmother first taught me to find the Divine in nature. She bought a number of acres of woodland near a large lake where our family vacationed to turn into her own nature



preserve where the trees would not be clearcut for lumber and the animals were safe from hunters. It was at this vacation spot that I first felt deeply connected to nature as a young child, and later recognized this as my bond to the goddess Mother Earth. I have ever since

associated large bodies of water with the creative force of all life. Here is a short story about that relationship.

### ***Our Souls Between Earth and Sea***

*Published in The Goddess Pages, Issue 23*

If you stand on the shore long enough, the ocean's waves and the pulse of the blood in your veins will synchronize. Go to the water's edge. Wait and be mesmerized by the ancient unstoppable rhythm until you no longer hear the waves as separate from yourself. That moment is the beginning of the story I have to tell, and that of all of us.

Forty years ago, my mother came to this New England beach where I now stand because she had begun hungering beyond all reason for seafood. For weeks she had consumed pound after pound of fish, mussels, clams, shrimp and seaweed. She had sought the ocean's edge hoping for salvation from her compulsion, but instead she found that she wanted nothing more than to annihilate herself under the waves. Distracted by the sound of an ambulance siren just as she was about to take the first step towards the deep, she ran a half mile back to her family's vacation cottage, locked the door behind her, and vowed never to go alone to the shore again.

She and her father had finally decided to sell the cottage, and my mother was clearing away generations of summer vacation debris to get it ready to show to buyers. They had stopped coming there years ago when she was ten and hankered for more glamorous vacations. The two of them were the only family each had since her mother had died giving birth to her before having other children, so the cottage was abandoned when it no longer interested her.

The next morning, she began to toss out everything but a few small mementos from her own childhood. Among the bottles of long-expired aspirin, tattered life jackets, and sun hats, she found a battered box of fishing gear bearing her father's name with a photo hidden inside. The small, browned snapshot showed my mother at about four years old perched on the lap of a woman with another girl a bit older beside them. The woman had one arm around each child as they cuddled into her and stared smiling at the camera. The little girls were both wearing swimsuits, one black and one pink with bows, while the woman had on a 50s style sundress. My mother could not remember ever seeing the woman or girl before.

As mysterious as the photo was, the fishing gear was equally puzzling. She remembered her father talking often about the cruelty of fishing yet here was proof that he had once been an enthusiastic fisherman. My mother tried to imagine her father fishing and, as the bob hit the water in her mind's eye, a memory came back to her whole and certain. She was a child, wearing the photo's pink swimsuit with bows and a white straw hat. She was intently considering whether this should be the day she would plunge into the water and swim away. She had always been certain that she could become a fish anytime she wanted, but she simply had not chosen to do so. She also suddenly knew beyond doubting that the woman in the photo was her mother and the girl was her sister, that her father had lied to her, and that somehow she had forgotten everything.

In her memory, my mother was about to begin walking into the water when her sister broke from my grandmother — her mother — and ran up the beach, waggling a small fish. “Look what I caught! It’s all mine and mom’s going to cook it for me for dinner!” My grandmother grabbed the pole. She carefully detached the fish, blessed it, and threw it as hard as she could to make sure it cleared the shallow water and swam home.

The three of them began the sandy walk up to the cottage when my mother asked my grandmother, “When I become a fish and go into the ocean, could I become dinner for you to eat?”

My grandmother stared at her. “Why do you think you can become a fish? Who told you that?”

“No one. I’ve just always known it,” my mother said, and she began to cry, though she did not know why.

The next day my grandmother gave both little girls the black swimsuits in the photo. My mother immediately put on hers and ran towards the waves. She had never before been allowed to go into the water without her mother being within arm’s reach, but on this day her mother stood on the beach holding her sister’s hand, just watching. And there the memory ended.

My mother did not mention the photo to her father, afraid of what she might learn, but simply told him that she had reconsidered selling the cottage. She did not return there until a number of years later, after she had married, moved to Arizona, given birth to me, and began bringing me out each summer to spend time with my grandfather, who had become too frail to travel.

My mother might have spent her life convincing herself that her odd memory was a fantasy if I had not been enthralled by a balloon on the beach at age three. As the merry red globe blew over the ocean, I threw my head back in joy and began running towards the waves. My mother screamed as my head disappeared under the surface and she dove underneath the waves. Without thought, she began to breathe underwater and swam in search of me down towards the ocean floor as effortlessly as she had ever walked or run on land. At that moment, all the rest of her forgotten memories returned.

Finally she saw me, swimming and breathing as easily as she. She grabbed me and began moving back towards the surface when my grandmother, now an old woman, and my aunt, now strong and powerful, waved us into a small underwater cave where we were welcomed with embraces, tears, and bewilderment. My grandmother and aunt were no longer human, but my mother knew them still, and also understood that we had also lost our human form when we began swimming away from the land and sun.

I wrapped myself around my grandmother, already knowing who she was without being told. She looked me in the eye and said “Yes, I can tell you are the same as your mother. You have the same love of the ocean, a yearning to be here, within the heartbeat of life’s beginnings.”

Then she turned to my mother, “We had hoped that if you forgot us, you could stay above, give birth to this little one, and pass on those traits to her. Then, when the time was right, maybe she would be grown and ready.”

She held me to her and looked into my eyes so that I would remember what she said. “You will come back, I promise, but not yet. Someday, maybe a long time by your reckoning, but only an instant by the ocean’s.”

My mother pulled me from my grandmother and woefully arched away from the family she had just rediscovered.

“Take this,” my aunt called after my mother. She swam to her and handed her a seashell. “In it you will always be able to hear your mother’s voice. Listen whenever you need to.” Holding the shell in one hand and me in the other, my mother swam back to the surface and returned to her human form, as I did also, as soon as we broke through the skin of the water.

Everything in our family changed after that day. My parents moved back to New England and we and my grandfather journeyed to the cottage for weeks in the summer and most weekends in spring and fall. My grandfather watched as my mother and father repaired the cottage, year by year, and filled it with neighbors, toys, dinner parties, and noise.

When I was about thirteen, my mother brought me to the edge of the shore and told me about the selkies. She showed me her selkie skin, that looked for all the world like a black, metallic bathing suit, and gave me mine. “We selkies look like seals in the water, our first home, and become human on land when we shed our selkie skins. In olden times, the stories said that we would venture onto the beach and be lured by human men who would hide our skins, marry us and father our children. Always, they said, we would eventually find where our skins had been hidden and return home to the sea.

“What lies!” she laughed. “In reality, we chose to come to land to see the sun-kissed paradise that above-the-waves must be. Then, when we realized what humans had made of the earth and saw how they treated women and the ocean, we retrieved our skins and went home.

Yet, we still loved the land and even the humans, so we waited until the time when we could be heard, when old,

oppressive ways began to be questioned, a time not so long off now.”

When I had put on my selkie skin, she told me “You can go visit your grandmother and aunt any time you want, but for now you must always come back on land.”

My mother disappeared into the ocean sometime around my 20th birthday, blessed by my nevertheless grieving father, who knew that her place was in the waves and that he had no right to hold her to the land. She gave me the seashell and told me that I could listen to it anytime I needed to hear her voice.

One brilliant summer day, years later, when I arrived for a visit beneath the sea, I saw many selkies, but not my mother. My aunt came to me and told me, weeping, that my mother had died some months ago.

“That can’t be true,” I said. “I spoke to her just a few days ago. I had heard her voice in the seashell!”

“Did you really think it was only her voice in the seashell?” my aunt said. “That was never just one selkie’s voice, it was the mother of us all” and she swept her gaze across the horizon of the ocean floor.

It was then that I knew what I needed to bring to the surface. I am now motherless. My mother grew up motherless. Now I can see when I look around me how people everywhere are behaving in a motherless way – feeling unworthy, abandoned, unloved and so defiling the ocean because they do not recognize it as the body of their mother who loves them and making war on others, not realizing that they and all living beings originally came from the sea and so are truly our sisters and brothers.



Our mother is all around us in the ocean, the rivers, the lakes and the water within our own bodies. No one is ever motherless as long as the ocean embraces the land and all of those who live on it.

And that is why I tell you my story, and that of my family and all the selkies. Hold your own seashell, whatever it may be to you, to your ear and listen. Hear the waves coming into synchronicity with your pulse. Feel the tides washing over you as they have since the beginning. Your mother is with you.



**These myths and stories can help us see everyday places in our lives as sacred.**

I found out when I was very ill that the small actions in life can be the most meaningful. Even when I was too tired from chemotherapy to do so, I always insisted on going to the supermarket with my family, though sometimes I had to sit on the floor in the middle of an aisle to rest. This story brings the sacredness of all those everyday places into consciousness by placing an ancient mystery there.

### ***Buying Pomegranates in Demeter's Supermarket***

*First appeared in The Goddess Pages, Issue 29*

For one glorious week each year, the rose and white-showered magnolia trees lining Main Street transformed the potholed, two-lane road into a processional as elegant in its own simple way as any gracing a medieval European or an ancient city. The town did festoon the street with flags and balloons for parades with the Mayor and town council, high school band, and Boy and Girl Scouts on special occasions.

“But, it goes nowhere,” Mary reflected as she drove home on a Friday evening during that magnificent week one year, and, indeed, it ended in an empty concrete courtyard of buildings long since abandoned.

As the sun warmed her arm through the car window for the first time that spring, an unexpected memory came to her of summer Saturdays when she and her mother would gather in her grandmother’s kitchen to make jellies and jams from the fruits of her grandmother’s farm. The thought “I’m almost the age my mother was then. She had my grandmother and me. How did I get to be so old and end up so alone?” came into Mary’s mind unbidden.

Tucked into a strip mall at the corner where Mary waited for a green light was Demeter’s Supermarket, a small grocery that had been established by Greek immigrants decades ago when the neighborhood was mostly families who had immigrated from there. Their children had moved out a generation ago, but a few of the original businesses still served the surviving elders.

Mary’s arms turned the wheel and she was in the supermarket’s parking lot even before she had finished thinking, “that’s what I’ll do this weekend, I’ll make jelly. But I need some fruit.”

When Mary entered, only one other woman was in the market, the shopkeeper restocking some pomegranates from a wooden crate. Mary examined various fruits, some of which she had never seen before, and asked “Which would you choose for making jelly?”

“Have you ever tasted a truly fresh pomegranate?” replied the woman, holding out one sliced open with a mound of the seeds inside. “Just try some of the seeds, it’s on the house.”

Curious, Mary picked out five or six of the seeds and ate them. She had expected them to be soft and very sweet, cherry-colored, tart and dessert-like, but the seeds were blood red, sweet enough to please but hearty and hard like a true seed, with all the nourishment inside that a plant would need to grow.

“They are different than I thought they would be, but I like them better,” Mary said to the woman.

“Did you know it’s the first day of spring today?” the woman asked. “Without pomegranates we would not have spring, or summer, fall, or winter. According to ancient Greek myth, Persephone went to the Underworld – some say she was kidnapped while others are sure she went willingly – while Demeter, Goddess of the Earth and Persephone’s mother, wailed as any mother would, unable to find her beloved daughter. Earth became barren in Demeter’s despair. Finally, Persephone was allowed to return to the Earth’s surface, but only for a few months each year because she had eaten the pomegranate seeds, the food of the Underworld. When she is below, winter reigns, and when she rises to our realm, spring arrives, then summer, then fall and winter, when it is time for her to descend once again. Persephone and Demeter together make all life on Earth possible.”

Mary stood quietly, a bit stunned. What kind of a supermarket was this?

“You can make a delicious jelly out of the seeds,” the woman said. Mary filled a bag with several pomegranates and headed for the bread she would need to spread the jelly on when it was ready.

Just as she set off in search of the bread aisle, the lights went out, conjuring a darkness more absolute than any Mary had ever experienced. “That’s odd,” Mary thought. “Even if the power has gone out, light should still be coming in the

picture window.” She thought she should go towards the window, but wasn’t sure of what she might stumble over, so she stayed in place.

“There go the lights again,” the woman said as she rounded the corner with a flashlight. “I don’t know why our lights go out so much more than anyone else’s, sometimes once or twice a day, always when there is a customer here who has never been here before. What must you think of us!”

Mary took the flashlight and thanked the shopkeeper, then shone it on the shelf in front of her, filled with bread of all kinds though she hadn’t remembered seeing it there before. Some loaves were the usual brands, others were special Greek varieties, but two others especially caught her eye. One was in a cellophane wrapping with very old-fashioned writing that said “Our Daily Bread” while the other had a drawing of a housewife from the 1960s.

Mary said quietly to herself. “I don’t understand. These were made by local bakeries hundreds of miles from here that closed decades ago.” The “Our Daily Bread” brand was her grandmother’s favorite but because it was more expensive she served it only on Sundays when the entire family would gather for dinner. Her mother used to buy the 1960s bread for the family when Mary was a child. She had eaten it with peanut butter and grape jelly at school for lunch every day for years.

She held one loaf in each hand and stared at them, then thought of how small they seemed compared to how she remembered them. As she held them up to her face and gathered the scent into herself, a memory opened. She and her mother were sitting at her grandmother’s kitchen table an hour or so after they had held vigil by her bedside as she died. They were sharing slices of the “Our Daily Bread” intended for the Sunday dinner that would now be a funeral gathering.

“I asked her how she had the strength to keep fighting, to hold on until the last possible day when life could no longer stay in that poor broken body and she told me that she was afraid to die because she thought she might go to hell,” Mary’s mother had told her. “What could she have ever done to make her think she would go to hell? She must have heard that as a little girl. Who would have told an innocent child that?”

Mary then remembered of her own mother’s death, with Mary at her side, so peaceful, “like kicking off an old shoe that doesn’t fit anymore,” the hospice nurse had said. Her mother had only regretted not being able to do one thing after she became too ill to live her normal daily life. “All I want is to be able to walk into a supermarket and buy an orange, just get out of this wheelchair and pick up an orange, take it to the counter, buy it, and then eat it right there,” she had said. “Maybe that’s why I have liked oranges so much since then,” Mary thought, “maybe I’m enjoying them for my mother.”

The darkness veiled the tears that began to run down Mary’s face. She walked quickly to a restroom she had seen by the entrance. She set the flashlight down so that it lit only her face as she splashed water on her eyes. As she looked in the mirror, for the first time she saw both her grandmother’s and mother’s faces in her own. She stopped seeing herself as she thought she was and instead, in the dimness, saw herself as she really was, and there they both were.

“But the line stops here,” Mary thought to herself. “I have no daughter.”

The lights had come back on when Mary came out of the restroom. “I can check you out now if you like,” the woman said, heading over to the counter. “But no hurry. Browse around as much as you like.”

“No, I’m ready,” Mary said. She first put both loaves of bread back on the shelves, then changed her mind and added them to her cart.

“Do you make jelly often?” the woman asked Mary as she weighed the bag of pomegranates.

“No,” Mary said. “But still, I guess it makes me an old woman that I know how to do it.”

“Well, I think it’s too bad that people don’t pay attention to what older women did in the past. They might learn something,” the woman said. “In ancient Greece, when women were done raising children, they became doctors and midwives, they literally birthed the next generation just like Demeter and Persephone rebirth the whole world every year.”

“What exactly kind of supermarket is this?” Mary asked again at this astonishing information, this time out loud.

“It’s just like any other supermarket, with maybe a few more Greek foods for those in our neighborhood who enjoy them. Lamb, bread, pomegranates – nothing here you can’t find in any supermarket, or anywhere in daily life, if you just look. Why do you ask?” The woman replied.

“No reason, no reason,” Mary said as she took her bag of pomegranates and bread and headed for the supermarket’s door.

“You know,” the woman said, “even though Demeter and Persephone were goddesses, with all the fancy trappings that ancient Greece gave them, in the end it was their love for each other and their courage that saw beyond what they were born into that rebirthed the world, the simple love and courage of a mother and daughter, no thunderbolts, no

chases across the heavens, just two people with love and courage.”

“She’s right,” Mary said to no one but herself as she drove out of the parking lot. “My grandmother rarely knew the sweetness of life, her own life was so hard. She was one of nine children in a family with never enough food on the table then living homeless through the Depression. No wonder she was worried about going to hell after she died, that’s what she must have thought her Creator had already given her.” She remembered a photo she had seen of her grandmother’s family, one child without shoes and everyone too thin.

“But she must have taught her own daughter something about rising out of the Underworld because my mother lived her life to the fullest, leaving home to find adventure when she was still a teenager, learning to fly her own airplane, finally finding happiness in her family for decades, even after her own poor childhood. And my mother must have taught me to fly in my own way, because I’ve made my own way in the world, doing what I want to do, living life the way I want. I may not have everything she had, but I have what I have chosen for myself. Maybe that’s what they were trying to tell me all those Saturdays making jelly, that with all its harshness, life is still sweet, life is still worth rebirthing, and how to do it.”

As she walked out the door, the sun hit the picture window just right and Mary saw a reflection of her face, this time exactly as she remembered it. It was only her face, but her face never alone, a face whose turn it is to love the next generation of women, maybe not her daughters, but all the next generation of women, and rebirth the world again.





I lived in New York City in my 20s and always had the belief, for no apparent reason, that it was the Beautiful City, a mystical place where miracles happened and where I would always be safe, protected by what I now recognize as the Spirit of the Land. I lived in the East Village, the only place I ever

wanted to live when there, for six years without ever coming to harm, so maybe it was true. The only clue I've ever had as to why I felt so bonded to New York City and the East Village was that there was once a Lenni Lenape village near the East Village. A branch of my family is Lenni Lenape from New Jersey. Perhaps I had ancestors who had a wonderful life in that village and wanted to share it with me some 400 or more years later.

This story, about an urban garden in a forgotten part of a city, comes from my memories of life in the East Village in the 1980s.

### ***The Blue Lotus and the Butterfly***

*First appeared in The Goddess Pages, Issue 37*

*Art by Nanri Tenney*





Just at dawn, the lotus pushed its way up through a crack in the concrete lot where an abandoned tenement building had burned to the ground and been forgotten. Nearby, a butterfly hatched in a rusty tin pail. After drying its wings in the smoky city air, it gently landed on the lotus, waiting to be seen.

Eva, her arms full of groceries from the all-night supermarket, was the first to spot the lotus out of the corner of her eye, but she walked on without her mind acknowledging what it knew could not possibly be. Halfway down the block she turned back for reasons she could not name and was soon staring at a bloom that could not exist, yet was the one lotus she had most longed to see since she had immigrated across the ocean as a young woman thirty years ago.

As Eva tenderly touched the velvet of the lotus petal, in her memory she was back in her home village, as a child, with her grandmother in a sacred grove. They stood in front of a gilt and jeweled statue of a woman holding a lotus just like the one she now caressed. Eva sucked the love of the goddess deep into her bones. “She is your Mother,” her grandmother said, and Eva understood that she had two mothers, the woman at home who cared for her and Creator of All standing in stone before her. Afterwards she and her grandmother had taken off their shoes, feeling the Earth beneath their feet, and her grandmother had said “wherever you are, you will always find Her here.” The day before she stepped onto an airplane on her way to her new country, the grove had been razed to make way for an office building. Eva she said to herself “never again.”

The butterfly flew onto Ana’s arm as she hurried past on her way to yet another early morning work meeting. Ana batted at it, but then stopped and gazed — she knew not why — and saw the bright green over a field of fuchsia on its wings and the delicate azure of its body. “I cannot be seeing what is

clearly in front of me,” she said to herself. A naturalist by profession, she knew that this butterfly could only survive in a tiny region thousands of miles away. She had fled from that very place some months before, running for her life from her country’s militia and the injustice she had fought so hard for so long.

Maria remembered the last time she had seen a butterfly like this, only a year or so ago, before the final coup. She and some friends had been kayaking and had let themselves be led by a butterfly from a calm and narrow tributary into a much larger, raging river that was its source. Maria had, even then, been considering her escape, and realized that if she could just stay in the kayak, eventually the river would flow into the ocean that would lead to another ocean and touch the shore of every continent in the world. If only she could row forever she could reach any place of sanctuary across the globe.

The two women could not stop themselves from returning to the lot each day. For weeks the lotus was in full bloom and the butterfly always settled on it at the exact moment either of the women arrived. Eva tried to find out who owned the lot to tell them that they must protect this miracle, but no title to the land existed in City Hall records. “It’s up to us, then,” Maria said.

Soon after, Eva constructed a wire cage to cover the lotus and secured it to the cement around its stem. Maria brought a birdhouse in which the butterfly could hide if it were chased and shooed it inside.

The next day the cage was torn apart and the birdhouse ripped to shreds, though the lotus and the butterfly were unharmed, sitting peacefully together. Eva brought lumber and closed off the broken fence across the opening of the lot. Maria painted the word “toxic” on the door to convince intruders it would be better for them to stay away. But by

morning the lock was broken and the door ripped off its hinges. Still the lotus bloomed and the butterfly warmed its wings in the sun.

Maria was the first to weep. “Beauty is always destroyed,” she said. “Love is always annihilated,” Eva moaned. They took down the wire cage, the butterfly enclosure, and door to the fence, and left the lotus and the butterfly to their fates. What else could they do? They were defeated. They told each other they would never come back to the lot, that they would walk miles to avoid passing by so that they would never see their beloved lotus and butterfly senselessly destroyed, as they knew they must be.

For a year they stayed away. For four seasons, twelve months, thirteen lunar cycles, three-hundred sixty-five days neither one of them came to witness the inevitable destruction. They never knew that more lotuses bloomed, and butterflies of every kind and color were drawn to them and that a symphony of flowers from all over the world blossomed in the lot. They never felt the shade in the summer from the tree that grew as tall in that year as it would have in a decade elsewhere. They never drank from the spring of cold, pure water that somehow rose up in a corner.

No human created the garden, and yet, while the lot was beautiful, it was haunted by the despair of the women. There was a dolorous air to the place. The lot was in the shadows, even at noon when the sun was directly overhead. The blooms were deep blue or purple and their stems drooped. Whatever had placed the lotus and the butterfly in that place could not emerge from the chrysalis of sadness built around it.

“They are still here,” Eva and Maria said together, as they both arrived when a year to the day had passed, drawn there again by what they could not say. The lotus and butterfly were still in their accustomed places. Their wonder deepened

as they wandered through the lot, realizing that it was as impossible for each of the flowers, insects, beasts and trees to be there as it was for the lotus and the butterfly. Each came from some place around the planet far away, from a climate much different from the city where they now lived.

But this year they were not alone. Sitting beside the lotus was a mother holding her child as she slept. On her face was the same beatific smile that Eva treasured from the grove statue. Beside her was an orange juice bottle that she had used to bring water to the lotus every day for months. She had overwatered today and Maria noticed the rivulets running away from the lotus towards her. As her eyes searched for the butterfly, they saw that she had alighted above a graffiti mural of a fantasy forest with one word written above it reading simply “be.” “Be the Mother,” the lot said to Eva. “Be the water,” it told Maria. And they became the Mother in the grove and the Earth beneath their feet and the water that surrounds and connects all the world.

Ana picked up some chalk that had been left by a child who had been playing on the sidewalk and crossed out “toxic” and wrote “Welcome.” She then set up the sign so that it could be seen by anyone wanting to enter. What would happen? Would more people notice the lot and come in to destroy it by picking the flowers to take home? Or perhaps someone would simply rip out the plants for no good reason. Or maybe sometime someone would step into the garden and have their life saved by the joyful exuberance of the fragrance and rainbow hues before going on about their day.

The women crossed the street and watched to see what would happen. Over the next few hours, the lot filled with people. Some brought chairs, others drums and guitars. Some tables appeared and, on them, people laid out food to share from the many countries in which they had been born. People sang and children danced in a circle around the lotus.

For the first time since their arrival in this alien city, Eva and Ana knew that they were home.

*Now, you may ask, who planted the lotus? Who hatched the butterfly? Who broke down the cage and birdhouse and then made the garden grow? Who whispered in the ears of the neighbors to come at just the moment the “Welcome” sign was finished?*

*It was Me, of course. I am the goddess of the land beneath the lot. At one time the people who lived here knew me. They left me touching and devoted offerings of flowers and honeyed food in exactly this place. I cared for them and made sure that they had what they needed to live and they sang me songs, dancing on my belly and bringing me great happiness.*

*Then the people began to create what they called “borders.” Some borders were walls made of wood or cement while others were just imaginary lines that commanded where people could travel, live, work, and love, keeping some people in and more people out. Worse, the borders separated the people from the spirits of the land who inhabit the mountains, rivers, valleys and every landscape and who know no boundaries and never choose one living being over another to love and protect.*

*It has been many centuries since anyone said My name, but that matters not. I have lain quietly waiting beneath the concrete and gravel, the bricks and mortar, the refuse and the fences. Finally, I could abide no more and I sent the lotus and the butterfly. I am the goddess of this place, but I am also the goddess of everywhere, for all the places are made One through our beloved planet. I am what binds together Eva and Ana and all those who have wandered the Earth in search of a new home. I could do no other than rip out the borders that have no reality to me. Fences, walls, cages, lines on maps — none of these really exist on the Earth I have created. I will no longer allow them in this lot. I gathered beings from all over*

*the Earth and brought them here. They will flourish and they will be a sign to all who venture in that they belong to not just where they were born, or where they now live, but everywhere. Just as Eva and*

*Maria wondered what would happen when they wrote the word "Welcome," I now will be anxious to see what all living beings do with this new worldview. I have faith in My Creation.*



## **Myths and stories can help us find hope in times of stress and despair.**

When I wrote the article below about the winter crone goddess, I was quite a few years younger. I am now growing into the crone that I found outside my door.

### ***Solstice Gifts from the Winter Crone Household Goddess***

*First appeared in Celebrating Seasons of the Goddess, Edited by Helen Hye-Sook and Mary Ann Beavis, Mago Books, 2017*

Outside the doorstep of my New England Victorian house is a hemlock tree with branches grown heavy over the decades, drooping almost to the ground, gravity gathering her towards Mother Earth. In the winter, wet snow clings to her,



sculpting the frozen white shadow of a face, arms, and body of a crone Goddess that can last for weeks when the cold sets in for the season.

Over the years, she has become my own household winter crone Goddess, usually appearing in late December after the first storm when the heavy flakes bring down power lines and stop civilization's turnings for the day. As I imagine it may be in those times and places where every house has its small statues of the Goddess who tends to the family's spiritual and mundane needs and is, in turn, tended to by the family, having my household winter crone Goddess nearby gives me a sense that she is with me in my everyday comings and goings yet is also a manifestation of the Great Goddess emerging into Earthly form for my comfort and illumination.

In younger years, my winter crone Goddess was simply a Goddess who represented the abstract death aspect of endless cycle of life/death/rebirth. To earlier inhabitants of the land I live on in New England, winter's destructive power to take life was a constant presence. Food might not hold out until spring brought early crops. Being caught in a storm or running out of fire wood might mean death from the cold. Disease could wipe out entire families in a week. Even in my own time, in my own family, death always seems to come between the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox when winter's mortal grip is so unwilling to let go.

For many years as my winter household Goddess and I dwelled next to one another, I thought about all these things without really experiencing them in my soul's belly, without welcoming my household Goddess into the household of my own self. Then, on one of the coldest days of late February some years ago, an unexpected medical diagnosis poured over me the truth that I might be at the end of my time here on Mother Earth. After that shock, and months of ingesting death in the hopes of grasping more years of life, my body and soul integrity that had been so instinctive in early years

was lost. I was a ghost, mere bones and shadows. I was halfway between struggling to remain alive and keeping my eye on the door to death. All my life I had perceived that door out of the corner of my eye while focusing on my everyday life. I had not seen enough of what lay beyond the door, if anything, to find peace in my new knowledge that it had been with me always but that I had chosen not to see it.

For a year I lived in panic that the future might bring more medical disaster. Spring arrived, then summer, then fall, then winter, and with the snow, the winter crone Goddess appeared at my doorstep again. Each day as I passed in and out of my house, she was there, reminding me that I was not alone, that every human being who has ever lived has experienced at one time or another this same confrontation with the certainty of passage from this world.

More than that, as I learned more about death by reading book after book by doctors, hospice workers and others who have attended hundreds of deaths, my winter crone Goddess transformed. It seems, while certainly some deaths are painful and violent, when death comes naturally and in its right time, often our last moments are peaceful and happy as the spirit kicks off a body that is now like an old shoe that no longer fits. I came to understand that the winter crone Goddess's true power is purely destructive only if we look at her actions solely from the viewpoint of our culture's fear of death. While the winter crone's power of death can be like an avalanche or volcano, it is also like a spell cast on us so that we might make a journey joyfully to a place we need to go. In truth, from another perspective, she is like a blessing mother lovingly lulling her child to sleep.

As I gazed out my window during that time, I came to respect Her as a Goddess who gives great and profound, frequently previously unseen, truth. Without the cover of green leaves and blossoms, the winter landscape is bones and sticks and hides nothing. When you see the trees and plants wither, and



the life-giving waters freeze over, you are reminded that you will not live forever either and suddenly your life, your actions, your beliefs, and those of others, can become very clear. I came to view myself and my life through a crystal-sharp lens, seeing truly the value of each day as well as how cloudy my vision had become as I had tried for so long to peer past assumptions that my life would continue as it was forever.

As nature's voice spoke to me through the winter crone Goddess, she also brought the amazement of the beauty of the snow, billions of flakes each unique and exquisite, existing for just a moment on a finger or windowpane before melting into oblivion. She heralded the profound music of the silence of a winter's evening when birds, animals, and humans are inside and quiet and only the inaudible hum of the planets and stars surrounds us. Truly, she is a Goddess of infinite love to provide these for us.

I began to notice that in rare moments, a quick remembrance of joy began to come upon me. A sense of expanded horizons, of tranquility and wonder, would break into my worries and the coldness of my days. These were like the first green shoots of spring, which, as for those who lived on this land before me and whose survival of winter was never sure, were the essence of grace.

After some weeks passed beyond the Solstice, I began to move my focus to the other side of my house where there is another tree, a large maple, perhaps a century old or more. From late spring to early fall, it reigns over the garden, protecting with shade and a home for birds, squirrels, insects, and other life. At times, when the light is just right, you can see the lovely face of a Goddess emerging from the bark. It becomes my hearth, the center around which my outdoor activities turn. I came to see that it was also a household Goddess, but that of the other side of the year, of summer.

I stand in the center of my home and, with the seasons, turn like the Earth as it moves around the sun, to face the summer Creator Goddess. As I do, I see yet another aspect of the winter crone Goddess, that of rebirth. Without withdrawal of life into the womb of the Earth for a season, there would be no new life. For many of the plants of New England, without winter's cold and the insulating snow, they would not grow up through the soil again in spring. In the eternal cycle, spring always follows winter and the winter solstice, when the light begins to grow again, is the true season of coming back to life.

Those moments of joy are signs of my body and mind also coming back to life like the buds and first tendrils of spring, recovering and renewing. Like all of us, I do not know what the coming year will bring. Yet, when snow ushers the winter crone Goddess back to my doorstep, I will be reminded again that each day must be cherished and that someday, maybe decades into the future, I will jump on the back of Her broom and fly away with Her to another realm. But when the Solstice comes back around in the circle, I will also remember that, long after I am no longer here to tend to my garden under the maple tree in the garden side of the house, the winter crone Goddess will still bring the springtime.

Each year, as I rush past my winter crone Goddess with my arms full of presents for family in the weeks leading up to the Solstice, I think about the gift-giving traditions of this time. Besides Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa, gifts are also given during the Hindu Sankranti, and in ancient times, Saturnalia was also celebrated at this time and included gift-giving.

My winter crone Goddess also brings Solstice gifts — power, truth, grace, and rebirth. My challenge as a human is to take those Solstice gifts and make them part of my every day life, the realm of the household Goddess, and then, in turn, give

them to all I meet. May we all, as we celebrate the Solstice, be winter crone Goddesses for one another.



## **We Can Make Our Own Myths for Our Own Time**

Myths and stories of goddesses and heroines/sheroes have been created over millennia. Our own time is just as spiritually important and those times. We can make our own stories that not only speak to us, but will also speak to the future of what wisdom our lives in this challenging epoch taught us, even if they are set in the deep past.

### ***Women Invent the Wheel***

*First Published in Matrifocus, Lammas, 2002*

In a time when women were the first and all else followed from them, a council of women gathered to invent. For the first time, their tribe had to move from their motherland where every generation in memory had been born, lived and died. Finally their land had worn out and they were seeking refuge elsewhere until the fields were again fertile. Homes, clothes, crops, and tools could all be recreated from what the new land would sacrifice, but how could they bring with them their Goddess whose essence was their ancient homeland itself? How would they remember Her sweet breath on a summer's morning, Her hands cradling them with leaves and feathers as they lay exhausted after giving birth, or Her tender rains that bled one season into another?

“We will make an object that is like Her, the best of all that we are and we will bring it with us,” said the wisest woman.

“What is the best about us?” the youngest woman asked.

“It is us when we are together, talking, as we are now,” the wisest woman responded. She stood and walked behind them with a stick, marking on the ground the shape they made. They carefully moved away and saw a circle on the ground.

A wood carver among them spent the next month cutting away at a slice of a tree until she had a perfect circle. When the women gathered again they looked at the wood, but knew that there was more about Goddess they had to remember.

“She is at the center of our tribe and equally close to all of us.

“She connects us all,” said a weaver whose webs were the finest in the tribe.

The women thought about this and drew with soot a second circle in the middle of the wood piece. They connected the center to the outer edge with ray lines. The carver took the circle and carved away at it again. When she was done she brought it to the women and they passed it one to another and were pleased with what they had created. One dropped the object and it rolled away until it fell against one of the women. She playfully rolled it back and each woman rolled it in turn to her sister across the circle when it came her way. Finally the women agreed that they had created the perfect symbol of Goddess to take with them.

“We have been given this object to remember all about Goddess no matter where we may go,” said a grandmother.

“But what about other women, those who will come after us in many generations, who will move to other villages and beyond and will not know that they are meant to keep Goddess in their memories?”

“We have forgotten one important thing about Goddess,” said the wisest woman. “She is not just air above our heads. She is here with us as we plow the fields and bake our cakes and graze our herds. She touches the same ground and labors at our tasks with us.”

The women pondered this and decided that their symbol must be both practical enough to be used for generations and cover the same earth as they did. They asked the carver to make another circle just like the first. Meanwhile, their engineer who was their chief inventor designed an axle and a platform. The women assembled the pieces and found themselves with the first cart made from the first wheels.

“Now, in future times, whenever the tribe must move, they will load everything they have onto carts and by that act will be reminded that Goddess always comes with them, mingling her dust with theirs as her wheels labor together with them,” said the engineer.

“Our first cargo should be one that not only brings her with us, but into us, since the most important thing about Goddess to remember is that She dwells within. If we bring in our first cart the oven to make the cakes for the Queen of Heaven we will always remember Her sweetness and how She nourishes us,” said a baker.

The women hauled the oven and grain and honey and other ingredients onto the car and pushed it to their new village.

When their temple was rebuilt and their oven was baking they sat in their circle. Someone from a nearby tribe, one that had a different kind of Divinity, came by and asked what they worshipped. The women detached one of the wheels, now muddy and patched from carrying the heavy oven many miles. “This is not Goddess, but it reminds us of Her,” the wisest woman said.

“But that object is not a remembrance of a Goddess worthy of adoration! It is filthy with earth and has been hard used by you!” the other tribeswoman said.

“But She is eternal like the circle. She brings us all together. She labors with us in our hardest times. She brings us that which is sweet and nourishing. This is the perfect reminder of Her. What do you have of your Diety?” the wisest woman asked the tribeswoman.

The tribeswoman brought out a golden statue encrusted with jewels. The women gathered around it, passing the statue from hand to hand, forgetting the wheel and all its virtues.

The wisest woman shook her head, then said to herself, “I will travel all over showing the wheel to everyone and when they see how it can carry them over to wherever they need to go they will make it the most used object in their village. It will be passed down as a simple tool for generations but each time a woman sees it something in her will remember.”

By the time she died no one in any village was without a wheel of their own. For a time the statues of gold and jewels replaced the wheel as the reminder of the Divine, and many of the most important aspects of Her were lost. Yet long after the last statue was melted down and the jewels made into sheaths for swords, wheels have brought their message of Goddess from that inventing circle of women to us and we are once again remembering what they knew so long ago.



### ***In the Cave of the Clay Goddess***

*First published in The Beltane Papers #30*

My hands roam across my altar, seeking, but not knowing what they seek. My fingers light on a replica of a Goddess statue made thousands of years ago. It almost seems to tremble as if it were a living being. What is this pulse that is molded within the very clay of the statue? This replica made by modern hands merely imitates an object found in the commonest of rooms after many thousands of years. Still, from it I can almost hear a voice speaking to me from its first creator's world that is so strange, yet profoundly familiar. I cannot understand the words, so I strive to listen to the language of the clay.

I wonder, who made the original of this statue, maybe the first Goddess statue? Did she know what she was creating? Did the first statue maker believe she was granting a body to Goddess Herself? Did she share our idea of time and ponder whether women in a far off age would behold her statue in bewilderment?

Perhaps she never intended to mold a statue at all. Maybe art was not yet necessary. It could be that our sojourn on earth was so young then that the realities of Goddess and human, of cities and civilizations, of individual minds, had not yet diverged and so no need existed for representations to bridge being to being.

Perhaps this is how the first statue was made. I imagine a woman, the first artist to be, digging her fingers in the muddy clay beside her bake oven while waiting for her bread to crisp. She only wanted to feel the wet coolness of the soil against her skin that had lately been parched by an unrelenting sun. Yet, she found her hand gathering up the clay and squeezing it. She first rolled the clay between her hands to warm it and infuse it with herself. Then, without looking, she created a pleasing roundness. Next she pinched off small pieces, modeling them into different kinds of shapes, some long, some knobby.

She was about to toss away her clay creation when her arm stopped and thrust it deep into a bin of grain instead. The next morning, when she was scooping grain from the bin for the day's baking she found the clay figure again. Looking at it with the freshness of the new morning she saw it for the first time as not simply a molded piece of clay, but an object. When her mother, the priestess of the village, came to visit at noon the first artist was still sitting, staring at the statue.

"What is it?" she asked her mother. "Have you ever seen such a thing?" Her mother took the clay in her hand and turned it over and over, trying to determine what kind of a tool it could be. It was too fragile to cut or dig with. It had no apparent use as a cooking utensil. It had no hollows for carrying grain or water. "Never, ever create one of these again! Forget that you ever saw it and never tell anyone about it!" the first artist's mother shouted at her. She held it out from her and looked at it, then dropped it on the tile floor of the bakeroom, shattering it into pieces that scattered against the walls and under furniture.

The first artist waited till her mother had gone, then decided that this clay must hold some great mystery. If it was an enigma she had somehow brought into being, she wanted to know what it was. She waited until everyone was asleep, then crept out and again dug her hands into the clay by the grain bin. She carefully fashioned another object that looked exactly the same as the first. This time as she molded she observed herself and her relationship to the object.

It began to have life. As the moonlight danced off the figure's shape the first artist realized that images of women were coming into her mind. She stared at the object and squinted till it looked to her like a tiny dancing woman, but no woman who had ever been seen before. The shifting beams gave the figure movement. The first artist moved the figure to see what else it could do, then cupped it lovingly in her arms as she had her own babies. Was this some kind of clay baby that



would begin to cry? Had she found a new way to bring people into being that did not involve pain and blood and death?

She heard her mother's voice from behind her. She had returned to ensure that no pieces of the object remained that could be melded together again. "In our most secret wisdom we speak of a time when we will no longer be of Her as we are now, like infants nestling close to their mother. This time will begin when humans learn that they can create just as She can. We could never understand how humans could create, but you have done so by making a piece of clay that is like a body for Goddess. When the people learn that they can create, they will be like Goddess and so will no longer listen to Her. For why should they obey Her when they, too, have Her greatest gift?"

"You are the first to take this step and, now that you have, you are destined to make these images for the rest of your life. You have moved beyond where I can ever go and you cannot come back. However, perhaps we can hold off this prophesied time until your children and theirs have had a chance to live their lives knowing Her as we have. Beloved daughter, you must leave our village. You must go where no one can see what you make.

Perhaps if no one else sees the objects, no one else will ever make them."

The first artist packed her few belongings – her clothes and cookpots and tools – and began to walk away from all that she was and knew. By morning she was far enough away from the village that she was sure no one would find her while foraging or seeking water. Her mother cared for the first artist's children, giving up her priestesshood without a single word of explanation. The first artist made her way into a warren of caves, intending never to see another human again. She found a chamber with a spring for water and a tunnel to a nearby forest that could provide her with the

nuts, berries, and greens she needed to survive. She began to create clay figures.

Over the next few months she made thousands of them. She was careful never to bring one out of the cave on her forays for food and fuel lest it be found. However, one day a figure that had dropped into her gathering basket fell to the forest floor.

Within hours another woman who ventured far from the village to find a special herb came upon the figure. She discovered that she, too, was not able to stop looking at it, though she also could not fathom what it could be. She brought it home and hid it in her grain bin. Not knowing that what she had was forbidden she showed it to the other women of the village who then began to flock to the forest to encounter figures of their own. One day someone saw the first artist return to her cave and followed her, begging her to make more statues.

The first artist would not show herself, but could not deny her friends from the village the figures. So, each morning she would place a basket of figures outside the cave. By noontime the basket was always empty.

For each woman who found a statue for herself the experience was the same. She would hear of the figures from some whispering friend, then after several days find that she could not stop herself from leaving behind her day's work to venture to the forest. She would be drawn to the basket, perhaps meeting another woman. Neither one would speak as they were choosing their statues or when they saw each other after returning home.

Each woman would bury the figure deep in her grain bin and that night would have a dream. In it she would awaken as always, but instead of immediately setting out to warm yesterday's bread for breakfast she would discover that she

was waking up to a great nothingness where she was accustomed to seeing earth and sky. She would look up and see a great blackness of fertility awaiting her command. She would imagine a turquoise sky and it would come into being. When she wondered where her village was it would appear.

She would look beyond her village to where the river should have been and think of its cooling draughts and water would come into being, in oceans, brooks, and wells. When she had wished the entire world into being her night's sleep would be at an end.

During the day she would forget the dream, but would begin to gather clay and make her own figures. As she did so she would feel a great aloneness, but also a great freedom. This is like the moment of giving birth, she would think, yet a hundred times more exciting. One woman who served as the village midwife and so had seen a thousand births considered what being able to make the figures truly meant for those whom she served. "Before now women were vessels for the acts of creation of Goddess but now women are like Goddess Herself," she thought. "Now we can do what we like with what we make."

Soon the village was filling with thousands of the figures and they could no longer be hidden. The grain bins were overflowing with them and they were being buried under sleeping platforms and in the fields. When the women were not sculpting they were painting on the walls of their homes, singing poetry at their work, and carving designs on the theaters and temples they built.

Only the first artist's mother had never been to the forest. Still, once it was clear that nothing she could do would stop the figures from coming to the village, she, too, ventured to encounter her daughter's work. She came to the basket and chose a figure.

The mother took the statue home and had the same dream as all the other women and in the morning made her own figure. But, she was not like the other women who were doing what they had to do. She was doing what she chose to do. She gathered stones from each corner of the village. She built a small hut, the first that had ever been built without a purpose for feeding, sheltering, or clothing. In the middle of the hut she built a table so that all the people might come and gather around it to ponder what they had done. On the table she set a statue.

Perhaps this is how the first Goddess statue, the first altar, the first temple came into being. I stare at it and do not believe that Goddess would give us the grace of creation without the means to gain the wisdom for a new kind of women's creation. This creation would be as Goddess creates, without the need to own, to control, to destroy.

I observe my altar and see that it is really a map. Its objects are those that mark the land of my underworld and my upperworld, my journeys bidden and unbidden. The stones from places I've been, photos of those I love, images that remind me of who I wish to be are all signposts. In the center is my Goddess statue, standing like a beacon.

Perhaps She understood that before we could be truly create as Goddess, we must make the same journey to the worlds below and above that She did to become the Goddess She is. We must descend our souls into the caves and the deserts, then ascend into the mountains and clouds. In order to do that, She first gave us the gift of creation, knowing that we could do no other than use it to descend to the depths of all that is. But then She gave us stories of Herself, the first story, that of Inanna, to go with the first statue in order to show us how to ascend again and so that both may grace our altars.

As I think back to my own life and that of other women I have known I realize that it has always been so. Once women have made their Goddess journey their creations become strong and clear. Perhaps our descent has ended. Perhaps the time to create like Goddess, like true women, has come.



## ***The Cave of the Great Womb***

*First published in The Beltane Papers #27*

At this time of the turning to the Goddess, She waits for us in the sanctuary of The Cave, the only dwelling of the Goddess blessed with no name. The Temple of Isis, the Delphic Oracle, the Well of Mary, and all other homes of the Female Face of the Divine own names of affection and power to welcome, enlighten, and enliven us. The Cave is the place where we bring not sacrifices of food or wine, as in ancient days, but of ourselves.

You, too, are a pilgrim to The Cave. Your journey to The Cave is made in the moment it takes to pass beyond life into death, for the balance to tip between waxing and waning on the solstice, for panic to take over where your soul once lived. It is that instant when you close your eyes against those special horrors that you cannot make yourself see and open them to find that you are in the dusk of aimless and alienation.

After wandering down a long passageway, first strolling then running in terror when it seems it will never end, you arrive at the center of The Cave. At its core is a pit with embers casting amber and scarlet onto the faces of hundreds of women hovering around a circle. The women stand, kneel, or lie prostrate before the pit which overflows with vessels. The exiles do not breathe but instead take in despair and grow

more invisible with each exhale. You turn from them for the more you gaze at them the more they become simply shades in the ether. Instead, you stare at the vessels. Some are porcelain, some pottery, some hollowed stones, and some are made from human organs tossed away from the surgeon's table. Some are very, very ancient, some have not yet hardened. Many seem so familiar they could have been created by your own hand.

"In that one is my breast," whispers one woman into your ear as if divulging a great secret only you can know.

"The metal one is made from the knife that my attacker held," another says prayerfully.

"The gray pot is made from the clay that holds my child's grave," a third weeps though her eyes will give no more tears.

When each has formed her burden into words all are silent until the woman closest to you pleads "Will you be the one to bring us out of The Cave?"

Only at that moment do you notice that you, too, hold a vessel. Look at it now and see what it is made of, what color it is, what it smells and tastes of, with what images it imprisons your mind. What childhood memory, what blackmail, what grief, what is in your vessel?

When you know your vessel, bless it for truly it is now your best and only friend, your only ransom to buy your escape.

"Have you asked the Goddess to take away your pain? Maybe that is the way out," you ask. One of the inmates will always reply, as she has a million times before, "Yes. We have all asked. We are still here."

Perhaps, you wonder, you can now simply walk out of The Cave and leave your vessel behind. You turn from the pit and

slip away from the women, retracing your path until you are once again outside the Cave. As you place one foot in front of the other to carry you away your arms begin to ache. Your find that you still carry your vessel, but now it is too heavy to hold yet you cannot set it down.

You return and wearily lay it on the pile once more. Why did you not see that you are here in many forms? Each time you have come you have left part of you here to tend the burden and so you meet yourself as a child, as a young woman, in the guise of women you had forgotten you had ever been, mourning the loss of things you no longer desire.

“So, She has abandoned me. After all the ceremonies, after all the prayers, after all the faith, She is gone when I most need Her.”

“No, I am here,” a voice responds. The least of the women steps forward. She is tiny, bowed, covered in ashes, so demeaned that no one even noticed Her. “I have always been here. But I cannot take your vessel from you. You are no longer a child. It is yours and I would not steal it from you. I am holding it for you, can you not see?”

When you look more closely at the vessels you see that, indeed, they are being upheld by Hands that endured burning, weight, and blood to keep them safe.

“In the vessel is not nothingness, but a sacred space of transformation. Enter your burden and you will find the greatest gift I can give.”

You retrieve your vessel from Her Hands and it begins to surround you. You step inside it and witness all you have endured as if you were the Goddess Herself watching your devastation in infinite sorrow. You see yourself rising each day to face a world that has beaten you, that has poisoned you, that has abused you until you no longer know who you

really are. You know that you have survived all this and that, yet, each morning, you rise again. What more have you to fear? What greater gift is there than to know that you need have no more fear?

“This is not only a place of falling away, but also of forging,” intones a voice that you do not at first recognize. It is not the Goddess, it is not any of the women, it is your own. The place where your vessel was is smooth and reflects the light of the pit back up to you as you truly are. You now understand the secret that belongs to all Earth women. The Cave is not nameless because it contains the nothingness of Goddesslessness, but because it is the Cave of the Great Womb, the inner space of life-giving. But even that name does not begin to speak its powers and so it must remain nameless.

A chamber deeper within The Cave is now visible with a pit full of vessels, but no one tending them.

“They are mine,” says the Goddess. “In them are all the rivers that no longer flow in my veins, the animals that no longer roam on my skin, the air that chokes me, all the violence that has been visited on my daughters and sons since time began.”

“What can I do? These are not mine! They are too many!” you protest.

“Look at the hands holding them,” the Goddess asks. The hands are yours. “As I held yours, so you must hold Mine.”

“What shall I do?” you ask.

“Blow life into them. Only a human woman who has chosen to dwell this planet still after all the sorrow that has been visited upon her here, who has gained her magical powers by transmuting despair into life, can free them and herself from



this place.” You inhale, ready to breathe onto the vessels and you see that the darkness of the pit in your hands is deeper than you ever imagined.

“It is the richest shadow; it is the fertility of deep space, the evergreen renewal of the soil of your plainest backyard garden,” Her voice says.

After a time another woman enters and begins also to blow, then another and another. The burdens in the vessels begin to simmer and metamorphose.

“The time has come,” the Goddess says. “The Women of the Earth have finally arrived in the Cave of the Great Womb.”



## ***The Oracle of Women Sings***

*First published in Issue 34 of The Beltane Papers*

Delphyne is the Keeper of the Oracle of women’s voices. She calls each woman to the Oracle’s altar, treasuring the voice the woman brings more than the woman herself does, devoting herself to evoking every hue and grace note of each celebrant’s song. Only Delphyne knows that each life completes the Oracle’s symphony. When even one voice is lost Delphyne keens as if for a thousand millennia, seeks to obliterate a billion planets as penance, vows that She will resurrect the one who has become mute.

For thousands of years rich offerings left on the Oracle’s altar honored the words of women. Delphyne wove the women’s voices into a single chord and pronounced answers to the frenzied questions of all, whether queens, shopkeepers, mothers and grandmothers, nuns, or hermits.

Then, without warning or reason, the women lost the power of the elements one by one, and so the force of their voices faded. Fire crumbled into ashes when the altar's flame was doused for the last time. Water's vitality was stolen when birth was ripped away from the hands of the midwives. Earth's soul was sold and took with it into deathly servitude the key to the song of the women. Only Air escaped, snagged by Delphyne as she gathered up the whispering voices and entrusted them to this element, begging it to cloak them in its dreamy ether.

Air hid the voices in fairy tales told by mothers to their children, in gossip over a quilt or teapot, and in the humming of ancient tunes by the kitchen sink. When even these last vestiges could no longer be heard, Air's breathy currents swept the voices from the mountaintop and clouds into the tiniest corners of a mouse's nest or a crevice of a tree or the curl of a seashell for silent safekeeping. In these sanctuaries the voices would cower until the time when they could again sing in safety.

When the last voice became mute Delphyne at first thought that a burden had been lifted from her. She felt herself freed from all that had bound her. Then she realized that the women's voices had not been a weight, but had been instead a blood cord connecting her to all that she loved, the earth, music and beauty, the infinite shadings of each woman's story, and herself.

Just as it seemed that her atoms would disperse, held together with nothing, she was lifted up and carried on Air's wings. Air held her as if it were a human body, its warmth penetrating her belly and inviting her to stay earthward. Its bones became a frame on which to bind herself to herself until she could carry on. The women's voices in speech and song were the dance between Air and flesh. So, for the love of

those by whom it had been caressed for so long, Air had transformed itself to offer Delphyne the strength of human touch. Air demanded only one thing in return for its labors. Delphyne must be three times as strong as she thought she was capable of being and truly see and believe what the loss of the women's voices had wrought. Only then would she have the will to do what must be done. Air and Delphyne began a trek of the earth's orbit.

Delphyne saw that the planet had begun to slow so minutely that no scientist or technology had perceived it. Once it had danced and spun, whirling to the rhythm of the women's hums and verses. Now, the earth merely plodded along, turning its own dead weight so that the last pulse of life would not cease.

As the earth became anchored, the fire in its core turned icy and began to sputter. The ocean was troubled as the tides abandoned their appointed times and discontent sullied its purity. When they had circled the globe Delphyne raised her arms to howl, but the cry strangled her as it caught in her throat.

She was alone, no longer in communion with the women whose voices she had once conjured or with the rocks that had soaked in the notes she sang and glowed in the pleasure. She no longer joined in the turning of the seasons or the journey from yesterday to tomorrow. Oracle had lost her voice. It had left her so that she would know the abyss of voicelessness. Her voice had sacrificed itself so that Delphyne must seek it and in doing so rediscover all the women's voices.

Again Air carried Delphyne to search the silent, still landscape for some echo, a familiar turn of phrase, a whisper leading her into some unexpected place where reunion could take place. The ground was littered with women who had ventured out of their houses to seek voice one last time. They

now lay on the grass with no will to move or crawl out of the sun. Even the clouds were motionless, stopped dead in the sky. The prairie's golden sheen dried to gray and rhododendrons dulled to a dirty pink before the petals dropped and melted into the dirt, the only movement on earth.

Just as Delphyne knew without doubt that the women's voices could never survive in hiding and must surely have perished despite all Air's efforts, she heard a sound that was not so much in her ears as in her bones. Delphyne and Air pursued the murmur into a canyon, then through a tiny hole opening into a tunnel, finally arriving at a small room of a cave. A woman was inside who, Delphyne thought, looked as if she had been starved for centuries but had forgotten to die. She was dressed in torn cloths kept in place by a frayed cord. The room was bereft of all evidence of human habitation except for a fire in the center, rotting food tossed by the walls, and piles of clay pots.

Beyond where they stood was a line of rooms filled floor to ceiling with the pots. The woman had begun to store them in the farthest room and moved closer to where she was now as each room filled. She was now trapped in the last room. The only space not occupied by the pots was a small circle around the fire. The woman danced in this path, chanting the same sequence of animal sounds over and over. Finally she spoke, breaking the chant but dancing on.

The voices are in the pots," she said, "That's what you are here for, aren't you?" "The women's voices?" Delphyne asked. "I thought they had all died." "No. I collected them. They are all here." Delphyne knew where she had seen the woman before.

In the time when few women could speak anymore and none could sing a legend grew up of only one voice left. It was a voice that no one could get close enough to steal, that no one

would accept as an offering for a bowl of rice or wheat, that could not be abandoned as worthless. It belonged to a woman who refused to give up her madness. She cherished her voice as the instrument of her lunacy, as her child, as her very soul. As she walked and chanted she picked up tiny pebbles from the cracks in the stone walls, under rocks, in the space between the face of the clock and the hands.

Rumor had it that she molded clay around the pebbles as if she were making tombs in which to bury them. The woman again took up her chant and, as Delphyne listened, the sounds rolled over and over in her mind. The vowels and consonants rounded and slid into themselves, separating into words, the words snaking into a sentence. It was a sentence from her own oracle that Delphyne hadn't heard for centuries, but she knew it was what the woman had been hiding in her babble.

"In seeking you create anew what you would find." Delphyne danced behind the woman and began to chant her sentence alongside the woman's sounds. After many hours the two voices became one. After a waterfall of weeks the pots began to break apart and the voices were free. The woman had not created the clay pots to be caskets but to be wombs from which the voices could be reborn.

At first each voice keened in despair at its severance from the woman who had sung it. From its howling came all the tenderness and torments unsaid, all the tears swallowed back, all the woman's names that had been lost. Then the moaning tempered to human words as the voice flew from the cave to reunite with its owner.

Delphyne searched the clay pots and knew that she had found the one that held her own voice when she began to dream: ...She relived the day she was playing in the deepest grove of the woods when her mother brought her first pair of shoes so she could go to school. Her feet were blinded by the

barrier of leather between her flesh and the soil. She could never again find her way back to the grove nor could she sing along with the wind in the trees' branches.

She experienced again the day she was summoned by a woman on horseback who brought her to the Oracle to begin her apprenticeship as the Delphyne, but only if she could recognize her voice. In her initiation she found herself surrounded by a swirling crowd of beings, some of smoke, some of wind, some of rock, some of mist. Some screamed and hummed. Others were mute. A few spoke a stream of nonsensical words. How could any of these possibly be part of her?

She drew the smoke to her to try that voice but found herself instead in a flaming pyre. She called on mist to quench the fire and was soon drowning in the ocean. She cried out to the dryness of the rocks to rescue her, and was desiccated into a skeleton. She pled with earth to bring her to life. And so each voice came to her in turn, both demon and savior, and each was hers.

Finally, she remembered the day the people stopped coming to the shrine and no young women asked to be priestesses and her voice wavered for the first time... And so her dream ended, and she knew she had found her voice, because only her own voice would remember so many of the moments of its giving and finding and losing and rediscovering again. She embraced her voice like an old friend. She bade farewell to Air, blessing it with rest after serving the women's voices so faithfully for so long. Still, she bid herself to never allow her voice to be carried by another no matter how fragile it seemed to have become. She held the face of the madwoman in her hands and breathed onto her to blow away her confusion and isolation.

Never again would the women of Delphyne's Oracle allow fear to coax them to hide their wisdom in the language of

madness. Each woman called upon herself earth, water, fire, or air to renew her voice. Orchestras of trees, of oceans and galaxies; speeches of births onto the earth and back into the soil at death; all this and more was created by the women in their first instant. Others found their voices in digging in the earth, firing bread, or easing pain with laughter. These were not mundane chores but statements as fine as the most revered masterpiece or symphony.

The elements themselves were revitalized by the women's voices, once again revered and loved and joined by the women partners they had left behind so long ago. The women dismantled the oracle temple, not because they lacked respect for women's voices, but because each woman was now the keeper of her own oracle of her life and words.

Gone are the doors that kept the women outside from the priestess's holy of holies and the priestesses from the touch of the world outside. No longer do the supplicants wait for an answer instead of listening to their own revelations. On the oracle's altar is placed a clay pot in which the voices that have been lost are kept until a woman comes seeking reunion.

Delphyne dwells at the pot's side. She knows that all women lose their voices thousands of times in their lifetimes, maybe hundreds of times in a day, but she is always present to reach into the pot to give yours back to you. She will remind you that you are not only one insignificant voice that can fade or not, but that without your voice the earth will stop spinning, that life and death will cease their endless rounds, and that time itself will wait for you to find it.

She will not be your voice for you, but she will hold it for a moment if you need to catch your breath. She is there for you, do you need her?

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## Chapter 2

# Finding Women's Spirituality All Around Us



We needn't feel as if we need to create an entirely new world. Aspects of the long and proud history of women's spirituality — the honoring of goddesses as well as the celebration of women's spiritual power — are all around us. All we need to do is identify them and incorporate them into our everyday lives. These are some I have found in my own life. What others can you think of?

### Everyday Vessels

This blog site is named Goddess in a Teapot because of the symbolism of cauldrons, chalices, bowls, and teapots. Some years ago I did a collaborative project with artist Nanri Tenney. Nanri created the beautiful image and wrote the artist's statement and I wrote a short story. Here are both:

***Woman with the Bountiful Bowls: Artist's Interpretation by Nanri Tenney***



Woman with Bountiful Bowls, a symbol for forward movement and positive feminine energy in our times. This spiritual woman on a teapot lid is offering bowls of food to all. She is holding the world in balance with her nurturing creativity and sustainability.

The round teapot represents the world in the process of returning to a healthy state. The spout and handle morphs the globe into a peaceful serpent dragon, a vehicle for positive transformation. The cut-up dead snake below the teapot is the shadow world and represents the transgressions that are done to the earth and its just peoples.

The woman's generous, wholesome work is victorious over these dishonorable exploits. May this creative endeavor of words and image bring kindly awareness to all who read it for the benefit of all sentient beings.

***The Spirit in the Teapot, by Carolyn Lee Boyd***

Lucia poured water into the tea kettle and set it on the stove. She then measured two scoops of tea leaves into her

grandmother's century-old teapot, not noticing their tangy aroma or curling beauty, before replacing the lid. Only rarely did the teapot leave the battered, heirloom cabinet where

Lucia kept her most precious family mementos, but today she hankered to touch its round and inviting belly, admire the delicate designs winding around in a never-ending circle, and savor again the hours that she and her grandmother had spent chatting while drinking tea from the pot when she was a little girl. It was a simple teapot just like hundreds of others that must have been made by the same factory in 1912, but to Lucia it was a gateway to all she had lost and did not know how to regain.

Lucia's grandmother had passed away a week before. Now Lucia was contemplating her own life compared to that of her grandmother at her age. As sales manager of a busy advertising agency, for years Lucia had spent ten or more hours a day poring over client lists and sales statistics. Friendships made earlier in life had dimmed and she had never had time to make new ones. At her grandmother's funeral Lucia had met women of all ages and backgrounds — some lifelong friends of her grandmother, some acquaintances who had been touched by her kindness in some way — there to comfort each other in their loss of someone who had inspired, encouraged, and been there for them in times of need. Lucia's grandmother had lived an everyday faith in which she cherished every flower in her garden, every human being she met, every day as being made up of moments of grace while Lucia had increasingly had come to see her hours and all she experienced in the world as tools for improving each month's sales report. Her grandmother had always seemed content and where she knew was supposed to be, doing what she was meant to do, even if she were just washing dishes, or, in her last months, sitting quietly in the dayroom of her nursing home. Lucia realized that she never felt happy anymore and that each

sales report seemed less important even as she spent more time improving the figures on it.

Lucia's reverie was interrupted by the whistle of the tea kettle, so she waited a moment for the water to stop boiling, then poured it into the teapot and the tea began to steep.

The faint whistle awoke one of Spirits Goddess had assigned to Earth as a caretaker of the world's women and their component of human spirituality. The Spirit had taken a short nap, only a few thousand years, merely the wink of an eye in terms of human history. Other sister Spirits had continued on during her rest, answering the cries of those in despair, gazing down with compassionate eyes, always offering just what was needed even if the humans thought they wanted something else. The whistle reminded her of the delightful hums, chants, and music that had come from all the Goddess sacred sites around the world when she had first fallen asleep. She wiped the mist of time from her eyes and looked around the see where the sound could be coming from. She wanted fly down there immediately and perform some miracle in appreciation.

Instead of a globe full of caves, temples, shrines, groves and other sites sacred to the Goddess, the Spirit found that so many had been abandoned and razed that entire communities existed without a single image of the female aspect of the Divine. The places that had once been so holy were now silent, bereft of human hearts and minds. The Spirit, first puzzled, then troubled, sought out the humans who were so dear to Her and searched their souls. She found that in many places, the names and images of the Goddess were now reviled or forgotten. Her hymns and stories were no longer told and her music no longer filled the air. Women, who once saw themselves as the sacred givers of life and served as shamans and priestesses, now no longer knew that Goddess was within them and their voices were banished from holy places.

As a Spirit, she could see both what was manifest in the outer world of physical reality, and what was also true within the people expressed in the language of symbols. All over the world she saw the sacred snakes cut into pieces, made into objects of fear and revulsion. For millennia, snakes had been symbols of the renewal of life and transformation and had accompanied the priestesses in their ceremonies. Many names of Goddess called her a serpent. In some places, the serpent was the symbol of wisdom and enlightenment. In others, it was the life energy within all humans, ascending upwards when awakened. Could the sacred serpents be made whole and once again bring their life-giving power to humans, the Spirit wondered? Could women as isolated from one another as the pieces of the serpent find each other and their own sacredness within themselves?

A voice, that of Goddess Herself, whispered to Spirit, “look again.” Spirit looked not only at the sacred sites and practices that were no longer, but into the homes and hearts of women and saw where Goddess had hidden Herself. Spirit saw tea parties, beauty salons, and quilting bees where women had gathered and shared themselves with one another for generations. She stood by women all over the world who were risking their lives to educate girls and delighted in the young ones devouring the knowledge. She smiled at dance teachers showing young women how to love their bodies and to be strong and expressive with them. She experienced billions of acts of kindness in which one woman helped another woman in need feed herself and her children, leave an abusive home, or find a caring space to grieve. She saw women gather to heal the Earth Herself. It was not in the palaces and processions, but in the ordinary days in which Goddess still dwelled.

It was time for Spirit to act, to rise from her slumber and once again serve the women of the Earth. But, how to manifest herself? What door could she find to enter their world? She followed the whistle to the kitchen of one woman

and spotted the teapot. She noted the Earth that had grown the tea leaves, the water that would make them into tea, the fire that heated the water, and the air that made the tea kettle sing as it boiled. She witnessed how the teapot was transforming the woman who drank the tea by its memories of the grandmother who had been the embodiment of Goddess on Earth. She saw how teapots and tea had been the center of so many gatherings of women and how tea-drinking is something that women all over the globe have in common, and she knew what she must do.

Spirit entered the teapot and it immediately transformed. It glowed with light and the spout became the snake, ready to do its part to bring about the needed changes. The Spirit popped out of the teapot, the blooming top her new headdress, and she made a transforming tea that she handed out to every woman on Earth. Whether it magically appeared in a cup of tea they were holding, or it rained down on them as part of a monsoon, or became part of their bodies in some other way, each woman received her share.

Lucia suddenly tasted the warmth and sweetness of the tea. She began to think not of her own sadness and loss, but of those women who had made the tea she was drinking. She thought of those who had grown the tea, those who had picked it and packed it for shipping, those who had worked in offices selling it to the tea company, and the cashier who had sold it to her at the supermarket. She realized that each of those women had lives and cares just as she had, they had families who they were working to feed, and, like her, they wished to live long and healthy lives. As soon as Lucia thought of those people, they thought of her and they realized that she was just the same as they were. Lucia, and all the other women, began to live in community with all the women of the world. Her decisions — whether she walked to work to avoid contributing to the global warming that harmed women in lands far away, or choose a small women-owned business as a vendor at work, or buy a dress that was

fairly traded — were all made with the women of the world in mind.

As soon as she felt herself a part of a worldwide gathering of women, she realized that she was more than she had believed herself to be and the light of the sacred within herself was relit. She knew that she, too, was a manifestation of Goddess on Earth and she had a divine place that only she could fill, and so it began to be with all the women of the world. In time, a millionth of an instant to the Spirit, she looked again through the eyes of the soul and saw the pieces of the snake beginning to come together again, shining, powerful, and joyful. The Spirit, her work done for just that moment, poured herself a sip of tea from Lucia's pot, surveyed the world, and smiled.



## Home

Our feelings of bonding to the small part of Earth where we dwell can be the portal to a greater connection to all of Mother Earth and a reminder that in the future we need to be attached and work locally as well as globally. I have always had a longing to create “home,” whether my actual home, or advocating for community centers in the towns where I work, or in making spaces for wildlife in my garden. I now understand the sacred nature of this impulse. Here is a blog post that talks more about the sacred nature of “home.”

### ***Coming Home to the Sacred***

*An earlier version of the appeared in Feminism and Religion, September 27, 2018.*

In the late 1920s, a young woman wrote the word “HOME” in resounding letters across the bottom of a photo of a herself and her husband smiling lovingly and confidently, with their infant propped in between them on a rattan chair. I recently came across that photo and was immediately struck by the writing on it. It was not an identification of the address, but a declaration that this family, whoever they were, had come HOME. I always wondered what happened to them a few years later when the Depression hit. Were they able to keep their home? Were they among the millions made homeless? Did they put all their possessions in their car and drive west, hoping for a better life?

As I looked at the photo, I thought of humanity’s ancestors for whom “home” was a sacred place. As discovered by Marija Gimbutas in Europe and elsewhere by others, small statues of the Goddess were frequently found by the ovens inside family dwellings, and temples included rooms for both sanctuaries and workshops for making bread and weaving cloth. Houses and temples were extensions of one another. Clearly, the photo showed that the yearning for a revered place where one experiences belonging, is accepted and loved, and feels a connection to the land, is among the deepest in the human soul.

For some “home” may mean their shelter and surrounding land, or be a whole village or city, or, for some, be many places they have lived or visited. Ultimately, the whole planet is our common home to be revered and loved. I hear this longing in the continuation of ancestral ways for centuries after a family or community has migrated as well as in so many expressions of love for the whole Earth.

Yet, today, millions of people are living for years as refugees in camps, crossing treacherous seas in tiny boats, dying of thirst in the desert, and sleeping cold and hungry in our streets, or living in houses while knowing that any moment they will be beaten, humiliated, or killed there. The



importance of hospitality has been forgotten, for if home is sacred then it is a place of sanctuary that must be shared with those who come to our doors in need. “Home” has become “housing,” a commodity increasingly only available to the wealthy. “Home” is a prison for those women who are confined inside its four walls by the idea that women should not work or be seen in the outside world.

If these are the results of the devaluing of “home,” how do we bring back the sacredness of these places of safety, celebration, and nurturing for all? How do we again make “home,” whether our family dwelling, community, or the Earth Herself, central to the order of the universe and right relationships among all beings?

To take that first step towards realizing a world where “homes” — personal, community or planetary — are sacred, let’s go beyond simply thinking about what a planet without the catastrophes mentioned above would be like and contemplate about *who* we, ourselves, might be in such a world. Real transformation, I have found, happens from the inside out, as long as it is followed by effective action. How might **you** be different if...

...you had never had the fear and guilt of knowing that ours may be the last generation before much of the life on Earth becomes extinct. You and everyone you know have always lived in a balanced and sustainable way.

...you have always had comfortable shelter that has been an oases of harmony, peace, and nurturance and where you felt you belonged. Domestic violence is unthinkable and unknown.

...you have never worried about someday being homeless or knew that, while you are warm, fed, and safe, millions are not.

...if you choose to migrate, you know you will be welcomed for who you are and what you can bring to your new community.

However far away such a life might seem, you are probably already doing many acts to make “home” sacred. Maybe you are making your house or apartment more environmentally sustainable and simple to focus on the people rather than the objects within. You may have an altar or other spiritual practice space. You may work to end homelessness or to help house refugees. You may in some way protect our waterways and public lands. Maybe you have created rape crisis centers or domestic violence shelters where the trauma of others’ can be healed or community gathering spaces where people come together.

We must also remember the importance of those small, everyday acts that can profoundly re-value “home” in our own and others’ attitudes and beliefs. What can seem inconsequential to us at the moment may unfold over years and years, reverberating beyond our imagining. These acts happen when we truly have made the sacredness of “home” part of our souls and daily lives.

Outside my door is a lilac bush, perhaps the descendant of one planted by Sarah, who lived in my house when it was first built in 1870. For 150 years, everyone who has lived in the house, as well as the thousands of 19th century millworkers, 20th century factory workers, and contemporary commuters who have passed by, have enjoyed the delicate color of the flowers and inhaled their fragrance.

The lilac declares that this home is a place deserving of beauty and connection to the abundance of nature. It has, for all these years, been a stunning statement hidden in plain sight that this small house and yard are sacred. If that family did have to leave their home, I hope they finally lived in another home again and maybe planted roses or colorful

hydrangeas all around it, as they, too made their new home sacred.

We carry within us the wisdom and values we need to make our world the planet we need it to be. Sometimes we may find it in inheritances from our past, like the concept of “home” as sacred. But we must make their insights fit our time and birth our own ways, and help future generations do the same. May we together, make our whole world our global “home” and move our lives closer to our dreams.



An essential aspect of “home” is making a better life for our descendants. Many of my ancestors lived for generations in the mountains of Appalachia coming eventually to settle in a small town called Goodwater in Alabama. This is a poem about one of them dreaming about being able to give her daughter a secure home.

### ***Sunrise at Goodwater***

Newest daughter  
born last night  
with help from no one but me  
We are far too high on the mountain  
for midwives or witches.  
The youngest of a long line of family  
who came from Scotland to Pennsylvania to Georgia  
to Alabama  
Always hoping to be able to tell the next generation  
You will always have food on the table  
You and your children and grandchildren will live long lives.  
No one will ever take your home.

You will always live in peace.  
Newest daughter  
born last night  
with help from no one but me  
I cannot promise you that  
You will always have food on the table.  
You and your children and grandchildren will live long lives.  
No one will ever take your home.  
You will always live in peace.  
But I can give you this moment of quiet before the dawn  
And this song to remind you  
Of your first morning with the stars and the Earth and the  
sun.  
They are all you or anyone will ever truly have.  
Always remember their loving sound when all around you is  
cacophony.  
And that they are magnificent.



## **Art and Creativity**

Art is key to spiritual transformation and should be a celebrated part of everyone's life. In a better future, everyone will create art and everyone's art will be valued for the unique perspective it brings to the world.

In fact, art has always been essential to women's spirituality, from the time of the cave paintings till now, from elaborate temple sculptures and the folk art of embroidery and other everyday activities. More than other, more formal art, much of this art tends to be by and for ordinary women.

Music is especially powerful. As Layne Redmond demonstrated in her book *When the Drummers Were Women*

(Three Rivers Press, New York, 1997) drumming has long been a woman-focused art form with strong spiritual connections both in terms of women playing it to worship goddesses as well as its own transformative power.

“Entrainment” is when people spontaneously get into the same rhythm. You may have noticed that women who live together tend to get on the same biological cycles. This also happens with drumming, when drummers naturally start playing at exactly the same tempo. At these moments, music can immediately create a sense of profound connectedness to one another and also launch time into a sacred, eternal, non-linear dimension.

In the post below, I talk about my own experience with entrainment and drumming and how it relates to the greater sacred rhythm of the universe.

### ***Drumming to the Universal Pulse in an Out of Sync World***

*First appeared in Feminism and Religion, March 3, 2017*



Beneath all being is a universal rhythm that is as deep as natural law and as easy to find as the beat of a drum. I discovered it when, after giving up an early interest in percussion 50 years ago when a school music teacher told me “girls don’t play drums,” I recently began a World Rhythms hand drumming class at a local music conservatory. My fellow drumming students, our uber-patient teacher, and I were pounding away, practicing rhythms and counter-rhythms, when we were suddenly all embraced by the flow of a single central pulse and, freed from the constant task of trying to stay on

beat, created, for that moment, an entity of sound that was unique, beautiful and complex, and living.

I have certainly and frequently also experienced being “out of sync” while drumming. The class will be merrily drumming away and suddenly I will lose the pulse. The rhythm makes no sense to me now, as if I’ve been tossed into a cacophony of sound. I am disoriented and unable to function as a drummer at all. But, I’ve learned what to do. I stop. I listen deeply. I wait until my intuitive rhythm shows me a doorway back into the pulse. I jump into the groove, and off I go.

Just as we can be in or out of sync when drumming, we can be spiritually in or out of sync, too. I am spiritually in sync when, for example, I’m looking up at the sky feeling as if it is a map of my soul’s freedom and a bird will go soaring across the horizon, or I am with other women singing and our voices perfectly express what is happening in my life at that moment.

When I am spiritually out of sync, I am no longer connected to the basic rhythm of the world I live in or its people, as if I no longer have a foundational understanding of what is happening around me. I cannot thrive healthfully or accomplish what I need to individually or as part of a community. My spirit no longer drinks from the sacred well we all share and I wander, I despair.

What if, at these times, I could use the same method to re-align myself with the underlying rhythm that connects me to other people and the world? For example, sometimes I feel out of sync with a world that forces me to fight the same women’s rights and ecological battles over and over, in which it seems that the progress I have assumed all my life is inevitable will never happen. Then, I make time to step away from constantly checking the news. I listen to people with lifetimes of experience and the determination to act with both realism and hope. I begin to sense intuitively that I am

not out of sync with much of the world that reveres human rights and environmental sanity. I jump into the pulse in ways I might not have before, showing up at meetings and marches and interacting with people I might not have met otherwise. Eventually, I recover my footing and my voice.

But, being in sync with others is even more powerful than simply finding the strength to act by being in alignment with others. Consider polyrhythm, which is when many drummers play different rhythms to the same common beat, sometimes improvising in turn. Everyone is grounded in and supported by the same pulse, and so is freed to truly let loose with her most innovative creativity to compose on the spot, creating a masterpiece together. What is created in that combined rhythmic flow is essentially greater than any one drummer could have composed alone.

If we can recognize that spiritual pulse and learn to stop, listen, feel the beat, and jump in when we need to accomplish goals, we can move forward in ways we could not have imagined. We all have so many shared elements of our lives — whether those are phases in our life cycles, or an energy and commitment to a particular goal or cause, or something else — that help us be in sync with one another so that we can express our individual talents more forcefully. I think of the many women's circles I have attended when a deep resonance with something someone said inspired me to write an article or short story I never could have before or when our common sense of commitment gave us the impetus for a new joint project.

Truly being in sync means tapping into an underlying rhythm that connects and energizes our souls in ways that result in something truly new and transformational. What might we be able to do if we consciously called on that power when we need it most?

Perhaps in our gravely out of sync world – where people are divided, our choices continue to create an imbalanced environment, expressed “truth” may have little to do with reality, and so much seems to make no sense – going freely and courageously into the wisdom of a common heartbeat, whatever that may be for you at this moment, can lead us into a better future. May your drumming, in all its forms, be loud and strong, bold and brave.



The power of music is also expressed in a story I wrote about a Paleolithic bone flute that is refound in our own time and plays a song that connects the souls of all beings through music.

### ***The Bone Flute***

*First appeared in The Goddess Pages, Issue 34*

Like a womb readying itself to give birth, the cave opened. Victoria grabbed a tree to steady herself on the shaking Earth, the rocks tumbling away to reveal a small aperture near the ground. She stepped off the hiking path to peer in, drawn by the gaze of the mountain’s newly revealed eye. Once her eyes became accustomed to the blackness, she travelled deep inside, mesmerized by the beasts painted on the walls seeming to move in her phone flashlight’s roving yellow beam.

She stumbled over a pile of bones then fell, grasping an object that came into her hand as she caught herself. It was hollow, a bird’s bone, with holes in the top and one end carved with swirls and lines. She shook the dirt from inside the flute, for she realized that’s what it was, pressed it to her mouth and blew. She heard only a muffled gasp. She cleared



more dirt then focused her breath until the flute sang one low, clear note.

But what about the human bones surrounding her? She was not frightened, but rather comforted, as if she had discovered a lost sister or mother. It did not occur to her that the bones were not female. A few ornaments were scattered among them, but the body had not been laid out ceremoniously. This woman had simply laid down and died, Victoria thought.

When it was time to go, Victoria wrapped the flute in a crimson scarf hand-woven for her by her sister and tucked it into her backpack. She placed loose boulders across the mountain's opening to hide it. She was not sure if the woman within would have wanted to become a spectacle for archeologists and the media.

The flute lay wrapped in its shroud for three months before Victoria picked it up again. Her faith in her intuition that she was meant to play this invaluable relic had left her the moment she stepped out of the cave. Finally, one searing summer evening when the city was quiet, as if waiting for her to find her courage, she gingerly took the flute off the shelf. If the woman in the cave had wanted her to find the flute, what did she want Victoria to play?

Rose was named for the flower her mother loved most. But, like its blooms, she was silent, her larynx injured by a fall when she was an infant. Her favorite place was a room deep inside one of the caves near her family's winter home. Some thought the cave, like Rose, was voiceless, but if you listened closely, as she did, you heard the rocks tumbling in some hidden room far away, the drip of water from a spring just below, a mouse scuttling into a tiny fissure.

When Rose was thirteen, she found the carcass of a vulture in her room. One of the bones had a series of holes that had

been gnawed by hungry bears. Rose wondered if perhaps some marrow was left inside, so she brought the bone to her mouth and sucked, but it was empty. She blew out in frustration and was surprised to hear a breathy tone.

All through the next day and night she taught herself to make a song by covering the holes at first slowly and hesitatingly, then faster and more smoothly. The sun appeared on the horizon just as she walked out of the cave. The sunrise and her song both made her feel the same, as if her heart were expanding and might soon break open. She was stunned. Could she really be like the Goddess who created the cycle of time each day and gave humans joy at the sight of it?

She taught herself to compose and remember songs that brought her back to quiet mornings with her mother gathering berries and their sweet taste of them, her salty sorrow when she saw the returning hunters carrying her brother's broken body, and the sanctuary of her family's fire when the snow covered the herd's tracks outside.

She taught the women of her family to make the flute's magic. Her daughters grew up playing their own flutes and then began teaching women outside their small community. Soon women from even far away were making and playing flutes. They helped the Goddess play the day into being each morning, healed the sick, showed the dying the way home to their ancestors, and made the rain come.

Before, the sun and stars and moon, the great beasts, the storms and rains all had power, but the humans cowered before them all, weak and hungry. Now the women knew that the Great Goddess was not jealous of her power, but wanted the women to have some of it for themselves also. The magic of women was born.

One day Rose knew she would soon die. She wanted her songs, especially the dawn song, to be remembered in case

all those who now played them passed from life and the knowledge of the divine voice within each of them faded.

She brought her pot of ochre to her favorite room in the cave and decided that she must paint the music so that when the women of her family found her, they would always know how to play her song.

When she finished, she laid down on the cave's floor and breathed her last, still holding the flute. Her family never found her body and time covered up the cave entrance. Rose became silent again.

Victoria stared at photos she had taken of the paintings on the wall above the bones, the only possible clue to how the flute had been played. Her eyes came to rest on a picture of people dancing in a circle, women, men, and children. Some were twice as tall as others or were repeated. The woman might not have ordered everything in a line as we do, Victoria reasoned. To her, perhaps the voices of women, men, and children would simply be different, and a song might not start in one place and end in another, but be sung over and over till it was time to stop.

Victoria chose the tallest female figure as perhaps a mid-range note that would be held longer than the others, then moved from figure to figure, varying the tone based on whether the figure was a woman, man, or child, and the length by the figure's size. She thought that the woman would most likely move the song around the circle clockwise, the same direction as the sun. After several rounds, her playing was recognizable as a tune.

But what to do now? Victoria pondered as she walked home through a village between the mountain and her apartment. She stopped in front of a small temple, once the center of the spiritual life of the area and still used by some, but not many. She had never paid much attention to it, but now she

noticed that the goddess carved above the door was holding a small flute. She read the inscription inside.

The Goddess' music made the dawn return each morning until she had mysteriously disappeared, taking her flute with her, and from that moment chaos and trauma, injustice and evil, had entered the world, it said. The priestesses who had attended her, and all women, had been blamed for making the Goddess so angry that she abandoned the world.

Victoria knew that this story, whose origin lay in the cave woman's disappearance, had been used as an excuse to batter and berate generations of the cave woman's descendants. No one believed the old story anymore, but women were still blamed for all ills all the same. One lone priest inside was singing an ancient chant to the Goddess, beseeching her to return. It was garbled, but clearly the same tune Victoria had just taught herself on the flute from the wall paintings.

As Victoria walked away from the temple, she brushed past a young woman humming exactly the same tune. She passed by a store blasting the latest hits and she heard the tune again. Over the years she heard it many times, in sacred music by mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, in folk ballads and ancient children's songs, in orchestral concertos and operatic arias. When Victoria heard the tune, her soul danced, knowing that a sacred voice within her had been awakened, that the Goddess did not need to be begged to return.

The women still knew their stolen song, but they had forgotten what it meant. The world was so much vaster and so much more noisy than it had been tens of thousands of years before. Women were so burdened with work and the loss of their rights that they seemed to have no time for singing. Victoria wrapped the flute in the red scarf and

waited for the right time to play it again so everyone could hear.

That time never came, and decades later, it was Victoria's turn to learn that she would not live out the summer. There was no more time to wait. She unwrapped the flute and found that, in the warmth and humidity of her home instead of the dry cold of the cave, it had disintegrated into a handful of bits of bone and was again as silent as the voice of the Goddess had become within the world of humans.

Downstairs she heard Helen, her neighbor, let herself into her house and begin making breakfast as she did each day before leaving for work now that Victoria was too ill to care for herself. Helen hummed a folk version of the song as she set up the coffeemaker. After breakfast Victoria used her walker to go down to the park where she sat on a bench and passed away, the flute's remains in her hand.

As her body slumped on the bench, Victoria's soul recognized the soul of Rose, who stood beside her. "Listen, truly listen," Rose said as she took Victoria's hand. Victoria closed her eyes and, for the first time, heard the everyday lives of women going on around her, just as Rose had heard the music of the cave so long ago. Women walked by deep in conversation, truly understanding what the other was saying about her deepest fears and hopes. Young girls wearing "the future is female" t-shirts jogged by, giggling to each other. A mother sang a lullaby to her infant daughter that she, in turn, would sing to her own child. These all transcended their mundane sounds to become, to Victoria and Rose's ears, beautiful melodies that harmonized and filled the park with a symphony of women's song.

Victoria remembered her sister, spinning and weaving for hours to make the red scarf, and Helen, making sure everyday that she was fed, and all the other women who had made Victoria's life rich, deep, and sweet. All of these

actions became melodies that meandered in and out of the music of the cosmos she was now hearing.

Then Victoria knew. The flute did not give women the means to hear the voice of the Goddess within. The women were the voice of the Goddess themselves in all they said and did that affirmed the sacredness of one another. The Goddess who cares for each being through all other beings in the universe was singing through every kind word and action, and she would keep singing through all the tragedies, inhumanity, and trials women faced the world over until all women heard their own sacredness in the notes.

Victoria's soul found her way back to the room where Rose's bones still lay. She sat down next to Rose with the shattered flute in her lap and began singing, knowing that no second birth of the voice of the Goddess was needed. Her voice and Rose's harmonized with the chorus of voices coming from all around them, from all directions, and from past and future, and they waited for all the women to finally remember, note by note, the song that was their gift from the Goddess.



## **Time**

We are prisoners of the modern western concept of time as a non-sacred mathematical linear dimension only and thinking of our current generation as being the only one of importance. In a better future, time will be perceived as non-linear, sacred, and a source of connection between past and future people who give each other support.

Goddesses of time or who are involved with time (Kali, Juno who ruled menstrual cycles as an indicator of time, Rhea Cronia, the Egyptian Renpet whose realm was eternity, and more), reign in many different traditions. Western physics

now has begun to espouse their more non-linear and fluid concepts of time.

Modern western concepts of linear time have become a means of oppression against women in particular, as our work and family obligations mean that we never have enough time to do what is important. We can, to some degree, reclaim our time by not chopping it into pieces (hours, minutes, etc.) and prioritizing what is sacred. Here is a blog post I wrote about all this.

### ***Time for Change: What Do the Goddesses Say?***

*Appeared on Feminism and Religion, April 14, 2015*

From our very beginnings, women have danced with time. Our bodies' moon cycles have always been a human calendar. As the first agriculturists, we partnered with the seasons to feed our families and communities. When we served as midwives and carers for the dead, we ushered our species into and out of their Earthly lives.

Time is also embedded in the stories of goddesses worldwide. Like human gatekeepers of birth and death, goddesses are often the stewards of fate. The Greek Moirai spun the thread of life and cut it at death's proper time. The Balkan Laima, the ancient Arabian Menat, and the Etruscan Nortia are other among many fate goddesses. Some goddesses oversee change, the physical manifestation of time, including Anna Perenna, goddess of the circle of the year as well as all the seasonal goddesses. Kali, Rhea Kronia, and other Creator/Destroyer goddesses rule over time itself.\*

Now, however, time is often a weapon of oppression against women. Women overburdened with an unfair share of daily life's tasks were never able to create millions of paintings, symphonies, and inventions, make scientific discoveries, or engage in other endeavors at great loss to themselves and the

world. After just a few years of maturity, we are cast aside as being “old.” How many lives have been cut short by violence, human-made disease, poverty, and war? For how many centuries have we been told to wait for equality and freedom until another war or crisis is over or we die and go to heaven?

The goddesses of fate tell me not that the events of our lives are predestined but that we must again bring time’s sacred nature into the human realm. If each of our moments is goddess-spun, then everyday human time is also holy, eternal time. We must therefore examine each task we have taken on, willingly or unwillingly, and ask ourselves if it is really worth sacrificing hours that we might otherwise spend on something more essential to us, our happiness, and our life missions. As a feminist, I must also give my time and resources to restoring to the woman who works three minimum-wage jobs to feed her family or the woman across the globe who picks my coffee beans both her rights to basic necessities at a reasonable cost of time and the right to a life full of joyful moments.

If every year is part of our divine thread, every life cut short is not just a human tragedy, but a cosmic loss. For every day of life that is presentably lost to domestic violence, hate crimes, war, despair, or environmental degradation, the whole universe mourns. Therefore, even the smallest act towards a more peaceful, sustainable, life-loving world is of absolute importance. You don’t need to author major legislation or found an international organization to know you have done what is needed – answering a call on a hotline or teaching a class that opens one student’s eyes is of infinite worth. We also must not forget the importance of protecting our own lives and valuing our bodies enough to eat well, exercise, rest when we need, and take the time to find life-giving bliss every day.

In goddess time, aging is not just a stage of life, it is a divine gift. When so many women do not have the opportunity to



live out the full measure of their lives, greeting old age, even with its inevitable losses and challenges, with gratitude only makes sense. We must recognize and right the attitudes and institutional structures that make later life a time of poverty, ill health, and marginalization, especially for older women, and value and pass down our own wisdom that we have gained throughout our decades.

While the fate goddesses remind us of the sacredness of our lives, the seasonal goddesses offer the message “never give up.” They know that transformation is as inevitable as time itself; it is the physical manifestation of time. Heeding them means seeing that change must come, welcoming it, and working to ensure that it leads to a world we want to pass down to future generations. They tell us not to despair when change seems slow but to also have the wisdom to see when the time is right for change and we can no longer accept excuses for obstacles to progress.

Kali and other Creator/Destroyer goddesses do not simply work through time, but by conjuring the physical world into being, they are outside of time. What do they have to tell us? When we view our world from outside of our small niche of 2015, witnessing the hundreds of millennia humans have walked the Earth, we can see not only how long women have lived under repression, but also how far we have come in only a few generations. We realize that ancient egalitarian societies are truly not that far from us in the context of all human existence. We can see thousands of years of immense courage as well as the friendships and love for one another and women of the future that have sustained women and led to progress out of these treacherous times. Kali brings life and death to her daughters, but also hope.

Changing how we think of time doesn't magically create a world of equality, freedom, and sustainability, give an exhausted woman without a moment to rest more hours in the day, or restore to life a woman who is lost too young. But,

re-envisioning it and rethinking how we mold our lives with it can transform us as we go about our daily lives, making our moments richer, our commitment to moving forward positive change deeper, our vision clearer, and our faith in our future stronger. The wisdom of the stories of the ancient goddesses is ours to reclaim as we learn again to dance with time.



One way to change the way we perceive time is by thinking of it not as a straight line, but as a spiral, a prominent symbol in ancient Goddess spirituality – circular, but still moving forward while also returning to previous situations.

### ***Moving the World Forward on the Spiral of Life***

*Appeared on Feminism and Religion, January 17, 2015*



The wasp nest dwells at the edge of my vision waiting for me to notice what it has to show me. In my mind, I have come to this beloved circle of earth beneath the embracing branches of this tree to ponder because the need is urgent for all the world's women to have lives of peace, safety, equality, opportunity, and

enough prosperity to guarantee necessities, and to save our planet from ecological disaster. I seek new ways of thinking about my life and actions and those of the global community of women to inspire more effective means of progress.

wasps nest I finally spy the wasp nest.

I follow its spiral shape, beginning at one point and then expanding in circles ever-outward and upward. I wonder,

what if, in addition to perceiving my life as the more traditional journey or age-defined stages, I imagined it as a spiral like the galaxy, flowers, ancient sea creatures caught forever in fossils, swirling water, and so much else of nature? What if at my birth I was like a spiral's central point, perhaps me at my most essential or as an infinite potential, and then, over time, I spiraled endlessly into the cosmos?

When I envision my life as a spiral, I experience myself expanding with every circling. No longer bound by my own or anyone's notions of who I should be or what is appropriate for me to do, I am free to venture as far from my center as I choose to go, to explore every nook and cranny of human experience. I can move beyond where I am at any given moment by seeking new knowledge and pursuing new actions, friendships and family ties. I can dream for myself, for all women and our planet, goals and ways to reach them beyond what I had assumed was possible.

At the same time, spirals circle back to the vicinity of where they began. The center is not a starting point in which I will never again dwell, but rather a home that I keep rediscovering as I move ever-outward, but yet always come round to again. I may have expanded my focus beyond my ordinary life but who, where, and when I was born has meaning for what I can offer to these efforts for change. Whatever I do, I must remember the special gifts of my life history and bring its wisdom to bear on my actions. I must gain strength from drinking from the well of where I came from while also never forgetting that its waters are connected to the oceans that circle the whole globe.

Finally, I consider how spirals naturally encompass parts of other spirals as all expand in the same space, much like many circular lilies all arising from the same pond. I remember how this is true of so many of my relationships with women. Women don't just cross paths, as lines do when they meet, but we take each other into our lives, become part

of one another's being. I am not simply touched by other women, but transformed by them as each one, even if we only meet once, becomes part of me.

The spiral image can help us envision what we will do to forward a more just, equal, peaceful, and sustainable world, but what does a spiral look like in action? Perhaps it resembles the Seven Summits Team of young women from Nepal who recently reached their goal of climbing the highest mountain on each continent. The seven young women come from backgrounds that include fleeing forced marriages, child labor, and extreme poverty. Through education and determination they became not just independent but renowned for their climbs and other achievements. In addition, they have used their global acclaim to further the education and empowerment of women in Nepal and globally and to promote environmentalism by visits to over 200 schools, community organizations, governmental agencies, and more, as well as a planned book for young people. They have gained worldwide media attention and met with world leaders.

These young women seem to have an expansive view, with their lives on a trajectory that goes far beyond what they might have anticipated as a goal for themselves or what their families and community would expect them to be doing at this stage of life. They move upwards, both physically and metaphorically, with no limits in sight. Yet, at the same time, by their social action work, they have not forgotten their pasts or lost their centering memories of why they are pushing themselves to accomplish so much. Finally, their lives touch each other and women all over the world. They are not just a mountain-climbing team, but close friends who depend on one another, and they feel a responsibility to all the world's women.

Our lives are a succession of days spent doing what we can to make a life of meaning, joy, and love, and bring into being our vision of a better world than the one we were born into.

When we awaken in the morning, we don't know if we will lay our heads down again to sleep at night. When I look up and see the wasp nest and then up at the sky and know that I am traveling on our galaxy's spiral, I see that I, too, am a spiral made of days instead of stars, of thoughts and ideas bound into bundles of time instead of wasps nest glue. I come to know that while my life may be finite and I may perceive of myself as alone, in reality I have elements as infinite as the universe itself as I rise and circle, that my spiral can move in rhythm with those of all other women around me, and that, together, we can eventually reach the top of whatever mountains we choose.



Another way is to see time from above, past, present and future all at once. Here is a story of becoming a bird goddess and flying above the Earth and seeing what needs to be done from this larger perspective

### ***Through the Eyes of the 21st Century Bird Goddess***

*First published in Feminism and Religion, March 14, 2018*

When I raise my eyes to a bird soaring over me in flight, I am no longer bound to the Earth by gravity. I stop my round of daily tasks and widen my vision to view myself and our world from above through birds' eyes. For just a moment, as I observe beyond my usual narrow horizon, I perceive truths about myself and others that have been hidden and grasp wisdom that has previously eluded me.

From Neolithic times onwards in cultures stretching across the globe, as described by Judith Shaw, bird-shaped goddesses have embodied life, death, rebirth, and more. More recently, as noted by Miriam Robbins Dexter, these

beautiful winged beings were perceived of as monsters and flying through the air was one of the accusations made against the women persecuted as witches in the Burning Times. What greater demonstration could there be of the intense terror this powerful relationship between women and birds creates in those who demand dominion over women's bodies and souls?

Perhaps we now need a re-envisioned Bird Goddess for the 21st century to help us see ourselves and all beings, our planet, and even our cosmos anew through Her eyes. We would experience not only a wider panorama of space, but also of time, for flying dinosaurs have lived on Earth for 140 million years.

First, we would see ourselves as tiny, struggling beings on a huge blue and white ball. We would notice our fragile bodies and overworked minds and spirits and most of us would be amazed at how we have transcended the challenges we experience everyday to dream of a more peaceful, just, sustainable future and then to get to work each morning to make it happen. We would see ourselves imagining entire universes in our words, art, music, and bodies. Through the Bird Goddess we would see that we can be magnificent.

Yet, as we gazed across time, we would also be horrified at the many catastrophic actions — wars, conquests, oppressions, and other injustices — we as individuals, communities, nations, and a species have done over the millennia. Through the Bird Goddess, we would have to face, and begin to make amends for, what we have done and perhaps begin to heal these wounds.

Then we would move to a higher view, seeing our planet just as humans saw the entire Earth for the first time decades ago and were awestruck. We would understand what is at stake when we devastate our environment and that the primary characteristics of the world we were born into are beauty and

sacredness. Because we and all other beings are part of this world, we too, are sacred and beautiful.

Finally, we would go higher still and see the cosmos and the 95% of our universe that is dark energy and dark matter that we cannot experience with our meager human senses.

Through the Bird Goddess we would come to know that whatever conflicts we have with other beings, whatever anxieties and fears we have allowed to rule our lives, whatever miseries we dwell on, we are an essential part of a unity that is much more vast and endlessly delightful than we could have previously imagined. We could live a million lives and still never stop being fascinated by our universe. What a difference it could make in our own lives and our effectiveness as feminists and spiritual activists if we could see through the eyes of the Bird Goddess each day!

How mighty would we be If we could cast off the self-limiting images of ourselves we have been taught by our society when we face a challenge? How encouraging would it be if we could truly see that we are not alone but are surrounded by billions of women all over the world who want only the best for their families and communities and the world?

What if we could see the whole river of human history, as well as that of our individual ancestors, including the millennia of progress towards equality and justice as well as the acts of injustice and oppression done by our ancestors who came before us? Would we not have wiser and more comprehensive insights into how we came to live in a world that is ecologically unsustainable, unjust, and full of violence? Might we not think of solutions we never had before?

What if the Earth and all beings were considered to be so beautiful that their destruction was morally unthinkable?

What if our differences were thought to make us each uniquely beautiful to each other? Would we not be even more passionate and committed than we are now?

What if we were endlessly fascinated by our entire universe, including the tiny part we live in? Would we still be so susceptible to depression and despair as we went about our work to heal our world?

Seeing through the eyes of the new Bird Goddess, we can learn to perceive the world differently, which changes what we say, how we behave, and how we interact with people. When we do that, we can begin to transform our own lives and those of all whom we encounter. Like our women ancestors who found in a bird's flight all that is most profound in our universe, the Bird Goddess's gift may be just what we need most today. May we all be lifted on Her wings.



When we have a millennias-long view of time, we can see our challenges in perspective and also realize that we are not alone in facing our struggles and that we are part of a chain of past generations who can support us and future generations to motivate us to strive for a better future.

In at least one African traditional culture, healers are also genealogists who heal by reminding people of their place in the chain of generations, of who they really are and their responsibility as the living link in that chain.

Even if we can't speak to our ancestors, we can still find messages of hope sent by them, such as still living trees and bushes they planted, and to find ways to send messages of hope to future generations.



## ***Planting Roses for Our Daughters: Creating a Community in Time***

*First appeared in Feminism and Religion, August 19, 2016*

Outside my childhood home grows a yellow rose bush descended from one planted by my great-grandmother, Jennie, a century ago. That bush has given her descendants many gifts of spirit over the years— her love of beauty despite a life of tragedy and constant toil, her deep connection to nature persisting through four generations, her hope for the future inherent in planting anything that will take years to fully develop. When I contemplate my own fall garden and its plants sowing seeds for next year, I ponder the special responsibility we, as spiritual feminists, have for leaving to those who will come after us a legacy of inner resources that they will need to meet the challenges of the planet they will inherit and hopefully make into their own sustainable world of equality, peace and happiness.

In my mind I sit with a circle of spiritual feminists of the future. Around me might be a hairdresser or a President, a doctor, barista, poet, scientist, salesclerk, priestess, or elder. They could be old or young or in-between, from anywhere on Earth, of any spiritual tradition or practice. For one moment of time out of time, I can speak directly to them of what I have distilled from my life that I would like them to know. I say to them:

*You are not alone in your struggles to remake the world. You are part of a great and growing family of people from many times and places — from priestesses at ancient and modern goddess temples, to foremothers whose souls were at peace, or on fire, even as everything around them denied the value of women's spirits, to those grandmothers still beside you — who have all found sacredness within themselves, in nature, and in life and sought to make with that revelation positive change. The world needs your fresh eyes to see*

*what must be done in your own time, but always know you may draw on all our life experiences and wisdom and feel our loving arms of support around you.*

*At times, when you have worked for decades with little visible change, you may think all is hopeless. But when you look from the perspective of many generations, you will see a slow, but inevitable progress that moves always, with some stops and temporary turn-arounds, towards wholeness, freedom, and truth. Some of your goals for the world dearest to your heart will not come to be in your lifetime, but they may in someone else's, and you will have helped make them possible.*

*The Earth, in its natural state, is a beautiful, abundant planet and human beings have the capacity for immense love, compassion, curiosity, courage, and brilliance. Your birth is a gift to you and all who dwell on the Earth. Of course both natural and human-made tragedy exists, but we are reminded of those often and of life's joys rarely. When what you see around you makes you despair, remember the joys and be renewed.*

But the circle in my vision does not exist in space and time, so how will I, how will *we*, convey these legacies?

By how we live our lives. When my mother set her spirit free among the clouds by learning to fly planes in her 40s she taught me that women have always found ways to immerse themselves in divinity wherever they find it. My great-grandmother encouraged her daughter, my grandmother — and her great-granddaughters — to see worlds beyond her own by sewing hundreds of dresses and quilts for neighbors to pay to send my grandmother to college in the 1920s when few women pursued higher education. Each morning when we wake up, we are responsible for the stories our actions that day will tell.

By the art we create. When, as a young woman, I discovered a photo of Isadora Duncan dancing, in love with herself and her body, at one with her spirit, and a flower painting by Georgia O'Keefe, I witnessed divinity expressed in the beauty of the female body and physical manifestations of nature. When we write, paint, dance, act, play or compose in a way that reflects the shining that we see with our inner eyes, we affirm to all those who experience our creation the wonder of the world and that it is worth living in and striving to improve.

Like my great-grandmother, we are the gardeners of gardens we will never see, but of which we are an inextricable and essential part. We tend the soil that it may be fertile, plant seeds that we hope will become towering trees, create beauty for solace and renewal. In the center, the rose bush weaves its stems and blooms around us, uniting us into an unbroken line of generations through time. We each have our own messages and means, and what you say and how you say it will no doubt be different from mine. May we all be the rose's blooms, roots and stems for each other and for all those descendants of many families, times, and places who come after us.



## **Freedom**

In a future world, freedom will truly be a sacred and inalienable right. I have always been in awe of the power of some goddesses to inspire humanity to fight for freedom (Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Black Madonnas, and others). The stories of other goddesses (Persephone, Sedna, and others) who were held captive and became free also express this most intense human drive to freedom. This idea is

expressed in a short story of how experiencing true spiritual freedom can give us courage.

### ***Seeds on the Wind***

*First appeared in The Goddess Pages, Issue 28*

*In the garden of She Who Creates, tucked into a very remote corner, grows a small, water-blue planet whose inhabitants call it “Earth.” The soil is rich but most of what grows there appears on the surface to be only straggly stems fighting each other for a place near the dim light. But yet, somehow the most spectacular blooms emerge from the planet by the billions every day.*

*She Who Creates has planted Earth’s patch of the garden so that the breeze will catch its blossoms and carry them to the farthest reaches of all that is. “Like seeds on the wind,” she whispers as a cloud of them rises from the Earth to make their way across the cosmos.*

*Everyone elsewhere in the universe waits anxiously for Earth’s exquisite blossoms to drift for eons to come to their planet. When each one lands, it is enshrined and lovingly cared for, each drop of sap savored, every molecule doled out so that it will do the most good.*

While the baby was being born in the great field, the mountains enclosing on three sides like an embrace, the sun’s light was a more luminous amber and the petals of the flowers shone a deeper crimson than they had just moments before. The very soil on which Irini squatted vibrated as if the Earth herself were shaking with jubilation. She gasped with the last push, then sank to the ground and smiled in this one moment of contentment and peace. Her midwife, Melanie, finally cut the cord, then handed the new daughter to her mother.

“The soldiers will be here soon,” Irini said once she had recovered. “I know where we can hide till they have passed by on the way to the city. No one will bother looking for us. We aren’t military. We’ll just disappear.” Melanie, Irini, and the baby climbed back into their jeep and drove off the road and across the field towards one of the mountains, their tracks covered by the field’s wild Medusa-like brambles. They finally arrived at the cave’s opening at twilight. Melanie brought Irini and baby inside in a wheelchair, hid the jeep in a nearby ravine, and carried in the food and water they had hurriedly tossed in the back as they made their escape from a refugee camp when the first grenades fell.

Irini directed Melanie through the cave’s labyrinth of rooms until they came to one with a stream and small openings that let in just enough sun for them to see. Once they were settled they had nothing to do but wait, and so spent their hours talking. “I grew up playing in this cave with the other kids from my village just down the road,” Irini said. “I found this room when I was about thirteen and made it my secret sanctuary from the world.”

Irini pointed to a large, flat stone with shadowy objects against a wall. “That was my little altar like one dedicated to Mary in our church,” Irini said. In the center of the stone was a doll decorated with beads, ribbons and a crown made of aluminum foil. Around her were small offerings of toys, sparkling rocks, and twigs that had once held flowers. “You can clear it off if you need to.”

“No, I like it,” Melanie said. “There’s plenty of room on the floor to store what we need. Will you go home once this is all over?”

“I have no home to go to,” Irini replied. “A year ago I lost everything. One afternoon I had a sudden desire for an

orange, which had just come into season. I walked to the marketplace, bought my orange and ate it just as the bombs began to fall. It was a surprise. We knew the war was nearby, but we never thought it would reach us. Our city had nothing either side could want. By the time I got home to my apartment, the whole building was rubble. I had nothing but the clothes on my back and a little money in my pocket. I guess I was in shock. I walked until I came to the ruins of an ancient temple in the old part of the city. All that was left were three walls and the statue of the old goddess, thousands of years old.

“I looked up at her and realized that we weren’t so different. She had lost everything, too. No one worshipped her anymore and once the fighting came to this part of town she would most likely be destroyed, just like everything in my life had been. But, for right now we, the descendants of the people she had nurtured and given life to, were still alive. We had forgotten her but she still gave the grain, the fruits, and the beasts that kept us alive. I realized that what I had was what she had given me — my mind, my spirit, and my body that can give life. So, I decided to become a mother, and within a week or so I was pregnant. It all happened fast, for sure. I found out at the camp clinic, and from that moment I stayed there. Later the doctor told me that she didn’t know how that happened, that I shouldn’t be able to conceive, but I did, and here I am. And here you are.”

Irimi was silent, indicating that it was Melanie’s turn to tell her story. “I’m ashamed to say that I came looking for something that was in my own mind, adventure maybe, or the feeling of being part of something more important than my everyday life. When I signed up to spend a summer here after medical school, I knew you didn’t have fancy facilities, but, in all honesty, the war wasn’t supposed to cross the border and come into your country. I thought I’d spend a couple of months kind of camping out, then go home with stories to tell. Still, as I think about it, I guess I’m just doing

what women in my family have always done. My mom went to the big city to be a poet out of college. My grandmother joined the navy as a nurse when she was 20. My great-grandmother went to the wilderness when she was 18 to teach children to read in a one-room schoolhouse. I guess we all wanted to wander the world before we settled down into what we thought was real life. I just never expected bombs to be falling on me.”

“Maybe you should have read the travel brochures more closely,” Irini said.

“Maybe you should have gotten yourself born thousands of years ago,” Melanie replied, and they both smiled.

At first, the women hid during the day and ventured out for food and water at night. Soon they could no longer hear the sounds of battle as the war moved on leaving them uncertain what they would find if they left. So, they foraged for berries, nuts, and greens, eventually finding some fish in a nearby stream that they caught with a homemade net. The baby needed only her mother’s milk. No one in the outside world seemed to remember the cave or them.

Beyond the symphony of sounds that is night on the mountain, they sometimes heard a voice speaking as the wind blew through the openings in the cave. Without words, it left behind knowings to eat this or that plant for medicine, or to head deep into the cave because a storm was coming. Sometimes the voice would tell them poems that were half sounds and half shadows that would appear on the walls as the sun passed overhead.

Eventually, they left behind humanmade time except for the changing of the seasons and the growth of Irini’s daughter. They slept when they were tired, ate when they were hungry, worked when they need to replenish their stores. They

eventually named the baby Bella, for she was indeed the most beautiful creature they had ever seen.

One morning they once again heard gunfire in the distance. The war had turned around and come back to their mountain. They knew that their sojourn in the cave was over and that they needed to make their way back to the worlds they had left behind to try to find more permanent safety. Just before they entered the nearest town, Irini stopped.

“Take her, please,” she said, handing over to Melanie the sleeping Bella as her tears fell on the baby’s face. “This is no place to bring up a child. Take her home with you. Bring her up someplace safe. Say that you found her in the rubble somewhere and you want to adopt her because she has no mother. I will work here in this country, my home, so that someday she can come back and live in peace, with or without me.”

“What will you do?”

“I won’t make war, but I’ll speak out, I’ll organize, as long as I’m alive.”

And so, Melanie brought the baby back to her country’s embassy and told her made-up story. No one remembered that Irini had ever lived or had been pregnant. With no one else to care for Bella, the country of her birth cared not at all what happened to her and so she went home with Melanie.

Once Bella was safely Melanie’s legal child, Melanie made a recording of her laughing and posted it on youtube, hoping maybe someday Irini would see and hear it. She had no idea that millions of lightyears away, far in the future, beings she could not even imagine also watched and heard the clip and smiled.



Fifteen years passed before a fragile security came to Irini's small nation. Melanie and Bella never knew if Irini had survived the war. She brought Bella home for a visit, as she had promised Irini she would do. On their last day, Melanie and Bella visited the cave and found the altar with the small goddess still on it.

"Would you like to bring it home with you? It could be your memento of your mother," Anna asked.

"No, I think I'll just leave it here," Bella replied. "This is where it belongs. Maybe, sometimes, if she's alive, my mother comes here and she would miss it if it were gone." Bella did leave a note for her mother that was gone when they returned for another visit the next year.

*Sometimes Earth's blossoms are creations — a painting or song, a thought or idea, even a video of a baby laughing. Sometimes they are gifts humans give to themselves or one another bought with heartache and pain. They may be acts of courage that no one knows about or they may be memories passed down through generations as inspiration. The people of Earth each make the blossoms a hundred times a day without realizing their uniqueness, beauty, and infinite value across the universe, just as rosebushes endlessly create roses that are transported over oceans to grace palaces and museums.*

*When She Who Creates crafts the humans, She reaches into her own being and molds them from an infinitesimal piece of herself. Only She and the humans know all that the people of Earth sacrifice, more than beings on other planets will ever be able to fathom, to make the blossoms, but it is the people's nature and they can do nothing else. The stuff of the blossoms is what humans are made of. The blossoms go by many names on Earth, but the universe calls them "freedom."*

## Chapter 3

# How Do We Make a Better Future Happen?



So far, we've talked about subtle ways to make the Female Divine commonplace in a better future – infusing the wisdom of women's spirituality and sacredness into our own lives as well as finding these in every day aspects of life so that we can begin to change how we think and

demonstrate how they are already all around us.

But there are also other ways to bring the Female Divine more directly into our own life and work and that of others.

### **Art, literature, and the media can educate about the Female Divine and explore its meaning to everyday life**

Feminist artists have, for decades, been in the forefront of using images of the goddesses and heroines in their work that is seen by millions. Judy Chicago's installations such as the Dinner Party and her 2020 installation for Dior, "The Female Divine" with banners asking and answering the question "What if women ruled the world?" are perhaps the

best known. There are, of course, many, many others and exploring their work is always a joy.

Recent years have also seen many portrayals of women's spirituality, goddesses and heroines in literature, art and the media. Books and their movie versions by authors like Mary Sharratt, Sue Monk Kidd, and Alice Hoffman, especially, have brought some of this into general consciousness.

**We can bring passion and power to our social justice work by illuminating the female-focused spiritual aspects of what might seem to be purely political or social issues.**

Because I'm from Michigan and feel a deep spiritual connection to its land, and I know people who live near Flint, I had a visceral, physical reaction to the Flint water crisis. In response, I wrote a blog post relating the Flint water crisis to a devaluing of the Earth and women and their children, who suffered the most, and ultimately the Spirit of the Land and Mother Earth.

### ***The Great Mother Calls Us to Action***

*First appeared in Feminism and Religion, January 28, 2016*

When Flint, Michigan's water supply was poisoned by lead through a policy decision, LeeAnne Walters and Melissa Mays started an organization called Water You Fighting For in protest, emphasizing their roles as mothers of children suffering from lead poisoning. Despite continual ridicule from state and local officials, Walters, Mays and others, including Flint's new mayor, a woman, refused to give up until their voices were heard.

According to Ms. Magazine, it is largely due to Walters and Mays's efforts that the source of the water, which had been

changed to save money from fresh lake water to river water that corroded the city's pipes, was switched back.

Unfortunately, it is too late for the 100,000 residents of Flint, including babies and small children, who have already been exposed to the lead that can cause permanent and irreversible brain damage and other health problems. Lead poisoning is continuing because the pipes have suffered irreparable damage.

“Mother’s movements” have proven to be extremely powerful agents of change for decades. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America in the US and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina are just some of the many movements organized by women who relate their activism to being mothers. While the instinct to protect children is deeply ingrained in the human soul, could it be that another important reason that these mother’s movements are so powerful is because they tap into a sense of the sacredness of the Great Mother, the Creatrix of the universe who has been envisioned as a mother since the beginning of human history?

Some movements quite consciously create a connection to the Great Mother through associations with children and birth, the wellbeing of her great creation, the Earth, and concern for the oppressed as expressed in the title “She Who Hears the Cries of the World” that Great Mother goddesses frequently bear. Perfect examples of past “Great Mother’s” movements are those calling for justice and political freedom that invoked Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico and Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland.

Other examples are Native movements around the world that connect their goals to their sacred responsibility to the Earth. One such movement is again taking place in Michigan to protest use of an aging oil pipeline under the Great Lakes that could rupture and poison the lakes.

What if we, as feminists, invoked the Great Mother's spirit more consciously as we fight for equality for women and other essential issues? Those who benefit from the oppression of women and the destruction of the environment cite traditional religious authority and the cultural belief in the primacy of economic gain to justify their actions.

Can we turn to the power of the Great Mother to deepen the effectiveness of our own activism by citing the connection of specific situations to Her overarching themes of protecting future generations, our sacred relationship to the land, and the need for us all to "hear the cries of the world" in order to be fully human? When we invoke the Great Mother in our day-to-day activism, we do on an immediate, hands-on level what we are all striving to achieve in the global realm — bring the influence of the Great Mother back into the most essential aspects of our lives and culture.

In addition, feminists and others who have been fighting the same battles seemingly over and over for decades can easily fall into despair. When we relate our activism to the powers beyond ourselves, to the Great Mother, the source of all life, even just amongst ourselves, we are renewed and re-energized. We can more easily perceive the relationship of individual issues to the long history of feminism and to the matrix of attitude changes and progress that it has achieved. We can see our individual place in the global, millennia-old community of all those who have envisioned a more peaceful, just world for future generations.

While only some people are biological mothers, everyone is a daughter or son of the Great Mother, however we perceive of the universe's creator. We all have a sacred duty to future generations and to those who are oppressed, a stake in the fate of the earth, and many other connections to that well of power that is this force. As we do our difficult, yet essential, work to make our world a place we want those who come

after us to live in, She is there for us, if we will only answer her call.



What other political, social, or economic issues can you think of that can be made better by considering them in light of the female Divinity and sacredness?

Sometimes it is also important to relate current issues to what has happened in the past, and find the spiritual meaning in that. Here is a story about how witches persecuted hundreds of years ago can rise up, through us (or maybe in person!), to speak against current persecutions.

### **The Sunset on the Mountain Is Really the Dawn**

*First appeared in The Goddess Pages, Issue 30*

I was reborn on the mountain whose seasons I had loved for the fifty years of life I had lived so long ago. I knelt on its breast and breathed in the black, musky, fertile soil, tasted its bitter groundwater and sweet stream nectar, rubbed its skin into mine. Then, when I was ready, I washed it off my body, but not my soul, and walked into the village square whose sights and sounds I still remembered from 500 years before.

During my centuries as a spirit I had chosen to stay near where I had lived, still surrounded by those I had loved. The people had since turned to dust, but I could see their features in the faces of their great-great-grandchildren's great-great-grandchildren. I sat with them, unseen, under the same trees, turned their eyes with my thoughts to the same herbs I had given their ancestors so many years ago to make them

well, witnessed the wars and movements that came and went in the outside world and saw how they touched the village, and mourned and rejoiced with each new generation.

In time, when I found myself as a wraith not in the heaven or hell, but walking the same stony paths as I had before, I understood that I had to wait to finish my life. Most people live all in one time, all at once. For reasons I know not, I had a half-millennium interlude and then it was simply time to return. And I was flesh again, and I walked down into the village, having fashioned my 16th century garments into something like the women of your time wear. Near the end of my old life, I had buried some of our family treasures in the woods to protect them from the law and law-breakers. I sold them for enough to feed, clothe and shelter myself for a time, and took up my life anew.

Still, I was not sure what I was to do with this miraculous second chance. So, I began to do what I had done before, gathering and selling herbs and remedies, counseling and consoling, with word of my services spreading by word of mouth. Soon, one woman after another came to my tiny two rented rooms and we would sit and talk, and listen deeply, just as my friends in the old times and I had done over our daily tasks or when one of us gave birth or attended a death. Seven of us began to come together weekly and one evening one of the women brought a drum. In my other life, women never played drums, but I came to see how it was the perfect voice for women, a heartbeat beyond words when the language we had been taught so often oppressed us.

We began to meet in the village square and simply drum together each Saturday, being witnesses for ourselves and any woman who needed to hear the universal pulse that no one can perceive with her ears, but which is underneath every moment of each day. Sometimes other women would join us, bringing instruments or just singing. Many people would simply stare but, in time, we became an expected part

of the square's daily life, like the fruit and vegetable sellers and the school buses. I would never have been so bold in my old life, but having died once already I found myself almost fearless.

Always I wondered whether I was alone in being reborn in this strange time. Once I began to read the village's weekly newspaper, a pastiche of global, national and local news, I knew I had my answer. A flock of extinct birds was photographed flying over a wasteland abandoned as too polluted to be saved. A geyser erupted in the middle of an African nation devastated by drought. A group of new planets appeared rotating in orbits that had no explanation, upending astrophysics. Women from the past were returning not just as humans, but as birds, fish, plants, animals, elements, and cosmic bodies. The more my circle and I drummed, the more oddities appeared all over the world, or perhaps we were simply one of them but not the first.

Then, one afternoon a woman began watching us from the edge of the square, a tear coursing down her face. She was the mother of a small family, newly arrived in the village as part of a refugee resettlement program. She and her family had kept to themselves, busily remaking their lives, finding work and enrolling the children in school. We had been drumming, dancing and singing for about a half hour, when we noticed her as she held her daughter's hand tighter and tighter. I motioned for her to come over, to let her know that she was welcome to join us. First she shook her head, but then began to walk slowly towards us. When she came within the circle we stopped for now she was weeping.

We waited silently with her until she began to speak. "We used to drum and sing and dance like this in the village where I grew up, a long long time ago. I was just a child the last time the women gathered, just as things were beginning to change. My mother and my grandmother danced. My grandmother led the women around the circle and taught the



younger women what to do. If someone made a mistake, or was a little slow, it didn't matter. What was important was that everyone danced. I knew it would be years before I would dance, too, before I would be old enough to join the women. That time never came, but watching you, I remember or the first time in years how I felt then."

"Will you teach us what you remember of your village's dance?" I asked her. She began to slowly move, trying to focus her memories. One of the women matched her movements with the drum. She had to stop and begin again three times, but finally she said "That's it! These are the steps." We all stood and took her hand and her daughter's and learned the steps as two or three women stayed out to drum.

The square began to fill with people watching. The mother noticed the crowd gathering and stopped, remembering other, more menacing, crowds from her homeland.

"We must go home," she said. "Life isn't like what I remember. It's dangerous to pretend it is."

Her daughter stood firm on the ground. "I want to learn the dance," she said. "If I don't, who will teach it to my daughters?" She nodded to the drummers, who again beat their drums. She began to dance, and we joined her, moving slowly until her mother again took up the steps.

At that moment, I, too, began to weep. My mind could not conjure up the images, but my body knew that I had done this before. My feet were swept up in the movement and I was rounding the circle as if I could not stop. I remembered that I and my friends had been doing this at the end of our lives centuries ago. One evening we were walking home in the forest and the joy of being together in such beauty overflowed and we had danced. We were observed by the minister and others walking home from some late night

meeting. They described this at our trials, but made it into something evil when it was not.

And I then remembered how I had joined with women in dancing in times and places long since forgotten in this century. Over thousands of years we had all danced together so often that it had indeed become part of us, part of the lives we used to live when we were not afraid, when we did not always look over our shoulders to see who was judging us, when we did not know how quickly judgements turn to accusations and persecutions. The daughter was right. If not us, right now, then who? When?

The next day we were again drumming in the square when the mother approached us with a gift. "A broom!" I exclaimed, for it looked almost like the small whisk brooms I had used so often in my old life and that the witches had been accused of using to fly to their gatherings. However, the handle was decorated with beautiful beads in a traditional pattern. "One just like it was used by the healer of the village where I grew up in her rituals," the mother said. "With it, she whisks away the evil, the illness, and brings wholeness, love, and peace to the village. Now I make them as decorations to sell to support my family, but this one is for you, as thanks."

Today I again walked up to the mountain and fell on my knees to breathe her into me in gratitude for being alive in this century. We witches of so long ago, we remember so much from so many centuries, and now I knew why we had to come back at this time, why it had to be us.

The extinct birds flying over the wasteland give hope that nature can heal herself if we would only stop ravaging her. The geyser offered one last opportunity for humans to provide life for one another by bringing water back to the ecosystem in a way that slakes everyone's thirst. The planets changing their course caused all the Earth to gaze in

wonderment together towards the same night sky, one planet in unity.

I had waited 500 years for this moment to happen, for this woman to come to the village square where so much had happened to me so long ago, so that I could remember and invite her to dance, so that her daughter could learn to dance and teach women of the future. I waited 500 years because I, like so many other women, had through our hardships and sacrificed decades of life come to love the Earth and all those who dwelled on her so much that we were willing to give up our places in heaven and roam as spirits for centuries so that we could be present here when we were needed.

I lay down upon the mountain's skin. Now that I have done what was meant to do, will I turn to dust and disappear into the soil, as my body did where it was flung in a hole in the sacred ground so long ago? Will I live out my years as if I had been born into the 21st century? What will happen to all of us who have come back? Love is eternal, love for that woman and her daughter and her great-granddaughters, love for the land, love of my friends in this time and so long ago. So perhaps it does not really matter. Are you one of us? Do you know?

*With thanks to Julie Felix and her song The Burning Times which first sparked the idea for this story.*

## Chapter 4

# All Beings are Sacred



Perhaps the most essential way to bring about a better future is to begin to live every day consciously treating all beings, including the Earth, as if they were truly sacred, a unique and inherently worthy part of the cosmos.

Consider what a world would be like if everyone assumed that they and every living being, and the Earth Herself, were sacred — no violence, adequate resources for all, environmental sustainability, peace, and justice. Clearly, the lack of acceptance of equal sacredness is a public health problem, a social problem, a political problem, an economic problem, and an environmental problem.

Conversely, try to imagine a better world without a focus on everyone being sacred. It has no spiritual center, no underlying unity, no absolute reason why people should behave in a peaceful and egalitarian way that sustains the Earth and all members of the community.

Treating all beings as sacred on a daily basis isn't as easy as it sounds, even though I would normally say "of course I believe all beings are sacred." I find that I have to constantly

re-orient myself from thinking in narrow ways about people. I have to stop myself and remember, if someone is causing difficulty, “this person is sacred,” and almost always when I switch my perspective, the difficulty becomes much easier to resolve. It means taking real time, listening deeply, and not judging people for needing help. It means meeting people where they are and realizing that whoever I am interacting with may be carrying immense burdens and doing the best they can to be a good person, however they define that.

It also isn’t easy realizing that we are sacred ourselves. Even though I had grown up in an environment that affirmed my sacredness, it was only when I saw Diane Wolkstein perform Inanna that the reality that all of me, including that part of me for whom being female is essential, was sacred and participated in the Divine.

Knowing the sacredness of all beings, including ourselves, is not something that just comes from our upbringing or a one-time epiphany. It is a lifelong process and adventure to fully understand what this means.

## **Compassion**

Of course, compassion is deeply related to treating all beings as sacred. Here is a story about a burned out Goddess of Compassion who finally gets a little help from humanity.

### ***The Shining of the Sparrow’s Eyes***

*Published on: 12th April 2015 in The Goddess Pages*

A tiny ray of sunlight caressed the arm of the Goddess of Compassion as she lingered for just one more moment by the open window of her cottage. Though a deity universal and known by many names among Earth’s religions, she chose to dwell among the humans she served in humble places closest

to those most in need of her. She had only a few seconds to savor the solitude of her tiny one-room dwelling that was not quite in, not quite beyond the forest, wonder at the meaning of the sparrow's constant conversation with its companions, and lose herself in the pungent blooms from her herb garden before a human cry of despair filled the space between the walls and she once again rushed away to where she was needed.

Early in human history, the number of humans was small and her life was leisurely, but now the voices crying for help were so legion that she could rarely tell one from the other anymore, though each was still uniquely beloved. She was drowned constantly by the never-ending wail of despair.

Though she had been at humanity's beck and call during every catastrophe for millennia, whether it befell one person or the entire species, she was still perplexed by the essence of humans and their lives.

At first, she had answered their calls for help because it was her nature. Love and fruitful benevolent action flowed from her like water over a waterfall and its power was no less than that. But over time she also came to care for the humans and one question began to obsess her: Why do humans fight so hard to live when so much of their time on Earth seems to be full of misery and constant disaster?

Perhaps, she thought, because I only share their moments of despair I do not understand their real existence. What is it like to be them, day after day, when they are not sending their prayers for assistance to me? As long as she appeared to humans as a deity to be marveled at, she knew that she would never learn what she needed to know.

A sparrow alighted on her window sill and hopped here and there as she pondered, then it flew off with its flock, their numbers turning the blue sky brown until they disappeared.

Seeking the sparrows' freedom to wander the Earth among humans at will, she shape-shifted into sparrow form before beginning her investigation at the first moment when humans emerged onto the Earth.

Reaching her destination some hundreds of thousands of years in the past, she prepared to land on the ground to mingle with the humans on the Earth's surface. Instead the sky was filled with humans, alone, in couples, in flocks or families, all flying with wings attached to their shoulders. So many times she had heard humans say 'I dreamt I was flying' with a look that showed they believed that they could even if they would not say it. Yes, of course, it made sense to her now. Humans could once fly and sometimes, even in the 21st century, they remembered.

The Goddess of Compassion flew alongside the humans as a sparrow. She witnessed the earth in all its beauty below her. She experienced its glory through not just her own eyes, but those of all the people who were flying near her and viewing the same landscapes. They heard the ocean's roar as it crashed into the boulders at the horizon between land and water. They flew over forests whose tops shimmered in an array of green hues in the sunlight. They pierced the mists on top of the mountain peaks.

In those days, boundaries between the souls of the humans were thinner and they each carried the same worldview made of an amalgamation of their separate visions of an infant Earth fresh, new, and abundant with life's diversity and possibilities. The view from above was stunning and brought them together as one people, but they were too separated from the Earth's surface to truly embrace their planet. The humans realized that if they were to love the Earth, they must leave behind their wings and dwell close to the Earth's face rather than always over it. They must feel the soil against the soles of their feet and the water close in

around their knees to experience the Earth as the beloved being it must be to them if they are to live fully and deeply in her embrace. The choice lay with each human, and one by one, they laid aside their wings, weeping, and came to rest their cheeks against the skin of the Earth, laying themselves down on her breast.

The Goddess of Compassion watched over millennia as the humans and the Earth forged the spirit of the planet's living breath together. The people eventually forgot the pain of isolation from the Earth that had caused them to become landed beings. But, with time, for many humans, their vision narrowed without remembrance of the sight of the Earth from above. They no longer saw all the mountains and oceans and forests with everyone else, but only the tiny plot of Earth they lived on. Even then, they did not remember the importance of coming to cherish every inch of the land they tilled and hunted, but looked on other's fields with envy and thought only of how they could use the land for their own profit. The Goddess now understood the origins of much of the misery she had been called on to heal for so long.

But, she began to look more closely and witnessed something else. The farther away the people grew from the heart of the Earth that had made their bodies, the more they became creators themselves. This impulse to regain connection to their world by remaking it began with paintings of animals and humans on the walls of the caves and grew till humans had surrounded themselves in every element of everyday life with depictions of the natural world from which they were growing more distant. Finally some of the works bore no resemblance to nature at all, as if the Earth no longer existed and humanity was afloat in a bubble in the universe, surrounded by nothing.

Soon the world grew heavy with the humans' creations. Many were exquisitely beautiful but each was infused with the same desperate quest to find what they had lost. As the



Goddess of Compassion wandered over space and time, she discovered that on no other planet was creativity so omnipresent in each being, so much a part of everyday life. How could the loss of connection to their home be the source of so much misery, but also bring about such a Goddess-like outpouring of creation?

The Goddess of Compassion flew all around the world in her sparrow body, stopping whenever she found a human engaged in a creative act. She would sit for a few moments, quietly, near the person. The artist, for truly every human had earned that title in one way or another, would notice the sparrow perched nearby and think she was the most delightful creature the artist had ever seen. The artist would incorporate the sparrow into her work in whatever form that might take, seeing in the sparrow's eyes all she had longed for but could not name just as so long ago humans had seen Earth's transcendent glory through each other's eyes.

The depiction of the sparrow, a bird that for so long had symbolized the triumph of the everyday world that the artist shared with all other living beings, drew each artist deeper and deeper into the matrix of Earth's life forms in ways that she had never experienced before. Objects and beings – plants, animals, and humans – each shone with numinous warmth and, just as it had once seemed that the essence of each being was separate, now she could sense her connection with all as obvious.

The Goddess of Compassion had always done her work by setting humans into motion – sending a comforting friend into the path of a grief-stricken parent, prodding someone into a less lucrative, but life-saving, career, placing a peaceful thought into the mind of a negotiator to prevent a war. One by one, the humans began to do these things on their own, both sensing the needs of others and discovering that, like the Goddess of Compassion, it was in their very nature to answer the cries of the world.

The Goddess of Compassion transformed herself back into the form of a woman and returned to her cottage where she put her kettle on and waited for the next cry for help from the Earth. For the first time in a millennium, the Goddess had time to finish her tea before she was called away.

Over time, the cries were fewer and farther in-between. She was not seen less on the Earth, though now she knew that the answer to her question was that the human instinct to survive through all their misery came from their ancient vision of the bountiful Earth. On many days she became a sparrow and took to flight just to watch over the humans who, day by day, act by act, were not only finding their way home to the Earth but taking all they had learned about creating beauty during their exile to make works known throughout the universe not for their sorrowful yearning, but for their joy and love.



## **Friendship**

And friendship is another essential way we show others that we see them as sacred. This is a poem written in honor of a group of friends who have connected entirely by message board, telephone, email, and holiday cards for many years under the name The Bakery.

## **Hands Baking Bread**

*First published in Moondance, December, 2005 – March, 2006*

When my hands bake bread, I knead  
Ocean, rock, the flesh of beasts and flora then  
Draw down honey moonlight for alchemy's fire.  
My frail, mortal fingers unite all that was to create all that  
will be and  
I embed within each loaf this woman's power of touch  
That can halt the most merciless onslaughts with a caress  
That can melt centuries of isolation with a warm stroke.

My hands give away the bread,  
Nourishment for body and tinder spark for soul.  
Across a hostile desert, a woman's desiccated hands accept  
my gift  
In an act of graceful courage.

Once she eats  
Her fingers tingle in an awakening of the  
Sweet, invincible bond between women,  
The body of that connection between every element of the  
universe,  
We have created over and over, since ancient days,  
In the shared ritual of mixing, kneading, waiting, baking.

Each receiver of bread returns to her oven and bakes a fresh  
loaf  
The aromas rise, restoring the power of our touch  
Molecule by molecule, to all women who breathe in air  
Making of us one and also many, each stronger in herself for  
Being with one another, like grains of wheat or flecks of  
herbs in a loaf.

Such a simple act, baking bread, a daily chore.  
Women's hands roiling earth and sky together, one with  
another,  
Recreating ourselves as floury bakers of that force that spins  
every atom  
Binding us in joy with yeast and wheat

Feeding each other the miracle of one more day in each other's lives.

## Chapter 5

# The Ocean Refuses No River



If we are to move forward, we need to know where we are going. We have to have a clear image of what kind of future we would like to leave to our descendants. We then need to express it clearly so that we are understood.

This doesn't mean we all have to agree on one vision. Everyone's blueprint for the future will inevitably be different. This is a good thing because we need as many perspectives as we can get.

What we need is for everyone to think about what we do in ways that express as specifically as possible how they translate into a better future, whether it is research, community-building, ritual, artistic endeavors, or whatever we are currently involved with. Truly, as a popular chant used in women's spirituality says, "the ocean refuses no river." We are all part of this greater effort that can, together, bring about a better world.

It is also essential to bring into our future-making circle as many people as possible, to find commonality and share our experiences and insights. I have found that when I talk about the values that are important to me with people from all walks of life, generally there is agreement on the need for peace, justice, equality, compassion, and other elements of the better future we are all looking towards and working for.

If it looks as if I am saying that most of anyone reading this book, probably all, are doing some form of envisioning the future already, you are right. But, if we consciously speak of what we do in terms of saying “this is what a good future will look like,” we can be even more effective. My drumming teacher always says, “if you can say it, you can play it.” If you can articulate a future vision, whether in words or deeds, you can make it happen.

## **Being Inspired By Nature’s Renewal**

This is hard work, but there are some tools that can help: The Earth Herself has an impulse towards renewal. We can join with Her and gain strength from this force of nature.

### ***Renewing Our Spirits in the Wilderness of Our World***

*First appeared in Feminism and Religion, March 19, 2017*



In my garden blooming with native wildflowers, in nearby rivers and woods, across the New England landscape, the Earth is healing Herself. Two centuries ago, New England’s forests had been cleared for farms; myriad species of animals, birds, fish, and plants had

disappeared; the network of waterways had been dammed to make power for mills.

Now trees are reclaiming land abandoned by 19th century farmers seeking better soil westward and today's environmentalists are reintroducing native flora and fauna and hauling away obsolete dams. As a result, species not seen for generations are thriving, most of New England is again heavily forested, and whole ecosystems are reviving.

Creation is once more beginning to remake the landscape into a place of wholeness, life, and connection.

As I consider stories of Goddesses from various eras and places, I notice that Earth's impulse towards renewal, abundance and wholeness—her renewing spirit— seems linked with female divinity. Demeter and Amaterasu, after withdrawing their power and making Earth a wasteland, returned and brought the planet to life once again. Spring goddesses from around the world, from Ostara to Ma-Ku and beyond, oversee the rebirth of the Earth after winter's sleep.

If the Earth's landscape is one face of this renewing spirit that seems to infuse creation, and stories of Goddess another, then perhaps there is also a third face, our own. I can think of many instances in my own life when I was overwhelmed with illness, anxiety, or depression and suddenly I found a small seedling of determination, hope, and joy rise up, seemingly impossibly but truly, from somewhere unknown inside myself. Can you? I wonder if perhaps we can draw upon this spirit together in times of collective fatigue and despair.

When I contemplate this spirit, and how we can participate in it as we seek to make a difference in our many and diverse ways, what do I find? I witness that this impulse towards regeneration is beyond ourselves and this moment. It is as big as the universe. It existed long before we first drew

breath and will be on Earth long after we are dust. When we act in a way that encourages the re-creation of life we are a part of a force that is larger and better than our conceptions of ourselves. We are not alone.

At the same time, this renewing energy is deep within each of us. It is the essence of the most sacred element of our being, it is Goddess herself. Just as we are part of it, it is part of us. It is how we know that the basic nature of humans is, sometimes against much evidence, also yearning for wholeness and connection, wishing for what is benevolent towards life.

Yet, connecting with this spirit demands much of us. She demands the truth, whether it is facing the environmental devastation of what we as a species have done or the injustice that pervades our daily lives, that shows us what we must do to make it right, even when it is hard. She demands compassion, which is connection in action, whether in rebuilding an ecosystem or the reconciliation and trust that living in a society or community requires, even when we don't want to give it. She demands commitment over a long time, whether to nurture generations of a reintroduced species or to change attitudes and beliefs held for centuries, one conversation at a time, even when we are so tired of trying.

This spirit also requires hard work that has a real effect on what is happening in our own communities. New England's revitalization depended on the forces of growth of plants, animals, birds, fish, insects, and ecosystems, but also thousands of hours of hard physical labor done by human environmentalists. Just as it is the many small seeds sown that regrows the forest and each rock removed from the dams that frees the rivers, everything we do in our neighborhoods, in our daily lives to make the world better, no matter how small it may seem, is important.



Where might I find an example of people making significant change by working hard in collaboration with a spirit of renewal? I need only look to all of those working for the re-emergence of the Female Divine. In only 40 short years, our spiritual landscape has blossomed with new rituals and liturgies, art of all kinds, fresh theologies/theologies, the reconstruction of our history and exciting visions of better ways to live. All these exist because of the labors of doing research that unearths the history of women's spiritual power, building spaces for women's circles, making poems, songs, stories, dances, and art celebrating women's spiritual lives, working on committees to write new liturgies, joining together to develop rituals that truly speak to our lives and so much more.

This summer, the severe drought in New England dried up a pond near me, driving away the turtles I have watched sunning themselves for many years. Then later in the fall, after only a few inches of rain, the pond was once again wet and the turtles began to come home.

Given the smallest chance, life renews itself. It is easy to fall into despair when contemplating the many catastrophic situations at home and around the globe, the many severe droughts of all kinds in the midst of slow and hard won but real progress.

However, the only practical way to respond is to get up every day and do the best we can to move forward. When it seems as if a better future is far away, may we remember the turkeys and eagles, streams and forests, air and water that are returning to New England, greet the Goddess spirit of renewal within and outside of us, and know that what we need to do, we can do.



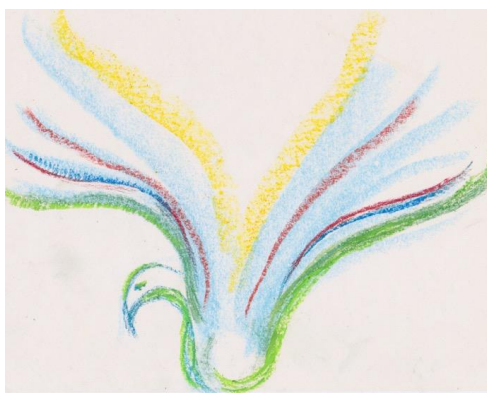
## **We Can Look to Generations Past**

We can be inspired by generations past who have worked hard for the same kind of future. Here is a story about how the love and support of these ancestors is all around us.

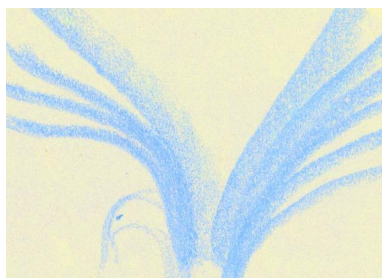
### **The Rainbow Birds**

*First appeared in the Goddess Pages, Issue 36*

*Art by Nanri Tenney*



I will always remember the moment when, just like that, the rainbow birds surrounded me, embraced me in flight, soaring on currents of air that made gliding effortless. Birds of such magnificence could not exist on Earth.



Each individual bird was arrayed in her own unique, luminescent hue and, together, they were a living, flying rainbow mosaic evoking the beauty of all the most stunning visions on the planet. My soul ached to be one of them. If I were, I wondered, what would

my own color be?

I caught a glimmer below me and gazed down into the reflection of a pond on surface. I saw my own face in the water's mirror, though the face of a bird, not a human, and I understood that I need yearn no more. I only remembered ever being a woman, but somehow I was now a bird, gliding a thousand feet up without fear or regret at the loss of my humanity. I was awed by my feathers that echoed the azure of the noonday winter sky and the delicacy of my shell-pink beak.

For decades I had walked on two feet, bound by gravity to the surface of the Earth. The memory of those years weighed on my spirit and I began to descend against my will. If my arms and hands were now feathered wings, how would I gather the herbs and mix them into potions to comfort and save life, or boil the tinctures to apply as I sat by the rasping shell of a loved one fading from the Earth? Who would care for the children I had midwived into life and nurtured with nature's healing plants through every illness?

When I was young, all summer I would wander the forests, letting my mind drift with the clouds, never wanting anything more than to simply walk on the soil. In winter I would sit by the fire and watch the blaze, entranced and at peace. But one day I could not help but notice the misery that was life within each small dwelling I passed on my way to the wild each day. Grief, disease, hunger, sadness, exhaustion from endless labor, one loss after another till nothing of value was left — into this ocean of suffering that was the every day lives of my family and neighbors I dove and never again, it seemed, looked up to the sun. For ten or twelve hours every day for half a century I toiled. Eventually my body and mind broke like the delicate shells of the birds eggs that would fall from the trees outside my window, spilling onto the stones below. My shoes had

become tattered, my larder empty, my body tired, and my mind forgetful.

Still, I never regretted how I had chosen to spend my life, as a connection between the bounty of the Earth and the people of my village, which was my only world. Often I thought of dying and wondered if I would be admitted to the heaven the priests talked about for it seemed not to be for people like me, who longed to be for eternity in the woods rather than a church. Perhaps, I thought, I have died and this flock of rainbow birds are people like me whose eternal reward was the freedom of the sky instead of a church paradise. I didn't know by what witchcraft this transformation had happened, but I was grateful.

In time, I recognized some of the rainbow birds, seeing something in their eyes of someone I once knew. Others, one by one, told me their stories as we would glide in our own paradise, admiring the resplendence of places we had never in life known existed. I learned that all the rainbow birds had been women healers, shamans, teachers, nurses, home health aides, family caregivers, and other life and spirit-givers who were never honored, remembered, or recompensed in their own time for all they did. Some were even persecuted for their craft, only escaping death by disappearing to journey here as the smoke obscured their rescue. These you can tell because they are arrayed in the most iridescent royal purple plumage.

What we all have in common is our deep need to heal ourselves by healing each other. We had all thought ourselves alone, especially at the end of our land-bound lives before. As rainbow birds we now know we are one of millions of women who, over tens of millennia, have made magic in one way or another for the benefit of others and that it has now been returned to us in the joy of our new being as rainbow birds. ...

You may wonder why you have never seen the rainbow birds if, as I say, there are millions of us. That is because we fly in a sky that is both of your Earth and not of it, in existence, but not within your horizon. The land we fly over has mountains and rivers, oceans and plains, endless forests and gardens.

We have everything we need to feel whole and fully embraced by the understanding that the world is good and all living beings are part of one spirit, one Goddess, and that Her breath enlivens every being.

In the twilight hours here you may recognize the goddesses of flight whose wheelings and aero-acrobatics make a luminous dance in myth and dreams. Brigid races across the sky as a winged being, now not provoking war, but simply to enjoy her grace. The wild Colombian owl goddess Huitaca soars overhead, reminding us to find exuberance in every moment. Her owl sister Athena holds court in the highest branches of trees. Many, many others, their names and stories long forgotten, offer endless enlightenment.

Yesterday a new rainbow bird, perhaps startled to find herself here, lost her air current and plummeted to the Earth, most likely to the place where she had once lived. Since no one knew when and where she had come from, we all swooped down to the place of our own origin to search for her and bring her home.

She was quickly found, dazed but unharmed, in a forsythia bush in New England. A flock of her fellow Americans carried her gently back to her nest and we all returned to our afternoon leisure in paradise.

Most of the rainbow birds thought nothing more of it, but I could not get all that I had seen in those few moments on Earth from my mind. I had not been to Earth in centuries, and saw every living being anew. The humans walked as if burdened by invisible chains. They spoke as if imprisoned in

a cage of hateful assumptions about life they had been taught as children and then carried till death. Their impulse towards freedom and instinct to experience life jubilantly had been stolen from them by angry rebukes and accusations, pointless fears, and threats of eternal punishment. The planet and her plants and animals had absorbed as much of this misery as they could, generation after generation, to try to liberate the humans, but were overwhelmed and became more and more poisoned.

As I contemplated all I had seen, my heart broke for the first time since I had become a rainbow bird. The connection binding me to the Earth's living creatures that I thought I had severed once again pulsed, filling my soul with sadness and a determination to make Earth the paradise I now knew it could be. I flew back to the planet's surface.

I found that in the weeks since we had descended to save our sister, the humans had begun to change. The humans themselves may not have noticed, but every few minutes they looked up as if searching for the rainbow birds to return.

And in scanning the horizon above over and over, a small crack in their prison had opened. Their speaking to one another was gentler, the words they said more hopeful, the sway of their bodies as they walked more joyful.

Even so long after our visit, I heard humans everywhere in the world recounting their experience to one another over and over. "The skies were instantly filled with flocks of birds in all the rainbow colors flying in such numbers and with such speed that all I could see was beauty and amazing life. Then after a few moments, they all flew high up above the clouds and simply vanished. Where did they come from? Where did they go? When will they come back to us again?"

I focused my attention on one woman who seemed not to have experienced this tiny mite of liberation. Her body,

mind, and spirit stooped towards the ground. Her eyes never left her feet. I could see around her a millennia of anguish experienced by her ancestors that weighed upon her fragile shoulders like boulders.

My reflection in a pond caught her eye and she spied me. I looped in the air and made circles and spirals just for her. She smiled and lifted her gaze to the sky beyond me, then imitated my movements with her feet on the ground, dancing in circles with arms outstretched and a smile on her face. She may have even levitated a few inches, but I cannot say if that is true.

I saw myself in the pond and noticed that I was no longer just blue but that my feathers had taken on all the hues of the rainbow. I was now not only myself alone, but truly one with all my rainbow bird sisters, of even the cosmos itself with its own rainbows made of water and light and the Earth with its infinite variety colors of land, plants, and animals.

When I first became a rainbow bird, I thought that paradise was the final reward for my labors that I would never find on Earth. For others it seemed like a sanctuary of sorts, a place to recover from the continual assault that their lives had become. But now I see that we were always doing the same work of healing in the sky as we had when we were human women, but in a different way. Our mission is now not only what we do, but more especially who we are, women or rainbow birds, inspiring and leading the way with our vision. We were rainbow birds long before we rose into the sky. We were rainbow birds from the moment we were born. We and all living creatures on Earth can be rainbow birds forever. We offer our paradise to you.



## **We Can Ask Bold, Sacred Questions**

We can learn to ask bold, sacred questions, the kind that illuminate the truths that have been right in front of us, but to which we have been blinded by assumptions and expectations.

### ***Asking Sacred Questions***

*Appeared on Feminism and Religion, April 6, 2014*

If you could travel over space and time to an ancient holy oracle, a manifestation of the voice of Goddess, what questions would you ask? Imagine you are there, at the gateway to where the oracle sits, and consider which questions are closest to your heart, near your soul, the ones you have been trying to answer your whole life. Humanity has a long history of ostracizing, marginalizing, prosecuting, and sometimes executing those who question, especially those who question established authority and doctrine. However, you need have no fear at this place of the oracle where questioning is celebrated. Here you are at home because you are a feminist.

Feminists have long known the power of questioning to liberate, to enliven and enrich, to enact positive change, to expose injustice: “Should not women live free from violence? Have the nourishment, shelter, and health care they need? Vote? Hold property? Have their labor fairly compensated? What would a world in which all women are respected and celebrated as individuals with infinite dignity and worth be like, and how do we bring it about?”

These are all what I call sacred questions: questions whose answers require radical change, within ourselves or society, and that come from deep longings for truth, justice, and self-respect. Sacred questions cannot be answered by deferring to a higher authority or by relying on assumptions that reflect



back to us only what we have been told we should see, think, or feel. A sacred question breaks down the walls that have protected oppressive assumptions about women, our worth, and our roles. Sacred questions illuminate the path to a better future that could perhaps not have been imagined before it was asked. Sacred questions expand our vision and reveal possibilities that have been undiscovered or hidden.

Sacred questions may be related to religion, politics, culture or any other topic; it is their transformative power to make our souls and spirits deeper, richer, stronger, truer, and bolder that makes them sacred.

The most important oracle to whom I asked sacred questions is myself: “What do I know from my own experience and intuition?” Sometimes, believing our deepest inner voice takes great spiritual courage, especially when we have always been taught to look to others for our spiritual guidance.

When we question and come to profoundly know ourselves, we give ourselves the unique and precious gift of our own souls. When we question others, whether directly or by heeding their words and deeds, we create for ourselves and each other a richer, truer, and more diverse understanding of the world. In the 1980s I worked for an agency that placed older volunteers in hospitals to comfort babies born with AIDS whose parents could not care for them. At the time, it was uncertain exactly how AIDS was transmitted. When one woman was asked if she was afraid she might contract AIDS, she said “We got through the Depression. We got through World War II. We’ll get through this.” She had answered the sacred question, “What is my true relationship to other beings?” with compassion, commitment to community, and a faith in the future whose powerful wisdom is a guide for what a mature, caring society for all should be.

Finally, we must ask those sacred questions that tell us about our larger place in all of Creation. To find the answers,

perhaps we need only look at the manifestations of Goddess all around us, in the fierce magnificence of nature that also sometimes destroys, in the glory as well as danger of the cosmos above us, in the essential yet fragile balance of life in the oceans. One such sacred question is “How does the web of life, of which we are a part, balance itself?” We recently lost a 100-foot tall Hemlock that had stood guard over our house for a century. The tree had been a focus of natural beauty to our family, home to many wild creatures, and a link to the generations who had lived in the house before us. The arborist who removed the remains of the Hemlock also reshaped a nearby tree, explaining that living in the shadow of the Hemlock had left it off-balance as it strained for sunlight. We mourn the loss of the Hemlock while nurturing its sister tree so it can grow straight, tall and strong. Renewing life, accepting the inevitability of death, healing, protecting, mutual stewardship among all beings — all these aspects of a right relationship to all Creation are literally in my backyard.

Sacred questioning is elemental to feminism, for without those first, most basic questions about society’s oppression of women, would feminism exist? What if we questioned not simply because it is our nature and a means to progress towards feminist goals, but because sacred questioning was a spiritual practice that was encouraged and supported, a skill we all gained as we made it part of our daily lives? What if you had been taught to ask sacred questions by everyone you encountered from the time you were a small child? Who might we all be and what might our world be now?

What power sacred questions hold! You do not need to go to a place with a holy oracle to ask your most sacred questions. Ask them here and now. What will they be? Their answers are within you, in the lives and actions of other women, in the wisdom of Goddess as She manifests all around you. What will you ask?

# About the Author



For about 40 years, I have written stories, poems, memoirs, features, reviews and other pieces for a variety of women's literary, art, and spirituality publications. My work has appeared in *The Goddess Pages*, *Feminism and Religion*, *SageWoman*, *Moondance*, the *We'Moon* calendars, *Matrifocus*, *The Beltane Papers*, and *Women Artists News*, and in a number of book anthologies, among others. I have also given readings and workshops.

I see my writing as a bridge between everyday life now and a world where all people believe that they and all other beings are sacred, everyone is respected for who they are, love is unconditional, and creativity is an everyday occurrence. I am also a student jazz/rock/funk/you-name-it drummer and plan to intertwine that with my writing in the future.

For 30 years, I was a public health and social services professional working with vulnerable people in urban, suburban and rural areas, an experience which has greatly influenced my thinking and writing.

I grew up in Michigan, but now live in New England.

## **A Few Words about How I Got Here**

The ideas in these pages have come about over some 35 years. I grew up in a very progressive church and family in which everyone was considered to be sacred and worthy of respect and dignity and my sister and I were encouraged to

think expansively about questions of theology. I have been blessed by this upbringing every day and I know it is rare.

In my 20s, I moved to New York City where I first encountered the concept of goddesses, and a spirituality of special relevance to women, as something other than long-forgotten stories. As a writer, I was interested in myths, and so when Diane Wolkstein announced an evening performance of her newly translated Inanna (Wolkstein, Diane, and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth, Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983) at the American Museum of Natural History, I bought a ticket.

Winding my way through the darkened galleries, a la “A Night at the Museum,” was the perfect setting for the mystical experience that awaited me.

As I watched Diane Wolkstein perform the story of Inanna, I had the epiphany that throughout most of human history, it was a common human experience for women to see their own faces in the Divine, to walk into temples and see statues of goddesses who looked like them and whose experiences may mirror their own. I had, of course, known that goddesses were worshipped, but I had never before understood at the most profound level, how seeing a deity in the form of a woman made me understand my own sacredness in a way I had not before. I realize that for many women, seeing an image of the Divine that looks like them is not important, and I fully believe that the Divine is beyond gender, but at that time, understanding that humanity had also seen the Divine as female was important to me.

I thought about this as I went about my work in New York City in a large municipal social services agency. As part of my job, I went to the various boroughs to raise awareness of and find ways to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable residents — frail, destitute elders, people with AIDS (at a

time when there was no cure or much understanding about how it was spread or could be managed), and others. I lived in the East Village and so met many neighbors who were homeless and hungry on my way home from work every day. I have continued to provide public health and social services in urban, suburban, and rural communities since moving to New England.

As I considered what was truly behind the suffering I was observing — not just the institutional issues but the fear, hatred, and devaluing of some people by others, and the lifelong abuse endured by many — I connected it to my epiphany at the Museum and the reading I had begun to do about goddesses and the matriarchal (meaning egalitarian, peaceful, and creativity-loving, where women and men are equal and neither dominates) cultures that worshipped some of them. I came to see that because only some people in our society are considered fully sacred; because compassion, gentleness and peacefulness are perceived as weakness; because the Earth is no longer our divine Mother, but just real estate, the despair I saw all around me was inevitable unless these perceptions changed.

I realized that maybe we can uncover those elements of the Female Divine that are hidden in our western society so that everyone feels celebrated and we can find models in societies that valued and still value peace, justice, and nurturing, including those that honor some aspect of the Divine as female. If we can do so in a way that is meaningful to the people who we see all around us — the person we meet in the supermarket, in school, at the neighborhood coffee klatch, at church, synagogue, mosque or temple, or wherever they may go and whatever religious beliefs they hold and spirituality they may practice— maybe we can begin to turn our world around.

These writings are my contribution to that effort.

# About the Artist

The beautiful art on pages 40, 74, and 138 is by Nanri Tenney. Nanri Studio (C) 2012-2019

Nanri Tenney is an international artist and graphic designer who has lived and studied in the US, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. She currently lives in Maynard, Massachusetts, and works as a fine artist. Her company is Nanri Studio. She holds a BFA in graphic design from the Rhode Island School of Design and is certified in Sacred Art and Yoga from Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health.

Photographs in this book are by Carolyn Lee Boyd, except for stock photos of spirals and photo of Earth from above, on page 124, courtesy of NASA