States of Grace

The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age

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Other books by Charlene Spretnak

Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths

The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement (Editor)

Green Politics: The Global Promise (with Fritjof Capra)

The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics

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Embracing the Body

On honoring the personal body and the Earthbody: the wisdom of Goddess spirituality

The universe unfolds through diverse processes that weave novelty and preservation. Some one and a half billion years ago, the creative possibilities on our planet were enhanced dramatically by the emergence of sexual reproduction, the uniting of DNA from more than one parent. For two billion years, bacteria, single-celled beings that propagate by dividing, had graciously produced such gases as oxygen and methane. These gases, interacting with the rest of the atmosphere, the oceans, and the rocky crust of Earth’s surface, created a habitat for the more complex cells that followed and, eventually, for a multiplicity of fungi, plants, and animals. Species became delineated as mating populations, and most organic life-forms were divided into female or male.

If we had gone the way of paramecia—single-cell organisms that can still reproduce the old way by cloning or by developing as many as eight sexes—imagine what cultural responses might have emerged. Instead of seeing situations as “black or white,” perhaps we would habitually perceive eight gradations. As it is, human societies have responded to the bodily differences between the two sexes in dualistic ways that shape the life experience of every individual. Born into a particular culture, most people regard that orientation as “the natural way,” or at least, if they become aware of other cultural choices, “the proper way.”

What is seen as the “natural” conceptual foundation for constructing culture seems to reflect a society’s perception of its relationship with nature. The anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday studied the cultural context of sex-role configurations in anthropological data on 156 tribal societies and found that they operated according to an “inner orientation” or an “outer orientation.” In societies where the forces of nature are sacralized, a reciprocal flow is perceived between the power of nature and the power inherent in women, a power dynamic in which men can participate through ritual. Mediating both of those forces with ritual is felt to be a function of women’s being representatives of nature’s power. Sanday labels such relationships an “inner orientation,” generally found in situations where most of a people’s food comes from the earth or water. Nature is regarded as a partner, rather than an opponent. There is a good deal of mingling between the sexes, fathers play a nurturant role in childrearing, and rape is a rare occurrence. In such cultures, which exhibit a ritual focus on female reproductive powers, the creation myth usually features a sacred female creator or a divine couple.

Where a society’s interaction with nature revolves around the necessity of migration and the pursuit of large animals, Sanday found an “outer orientation” to be prominent. Men hunt animals, engage in interpersonal violence as a norm, make weapons for those activities, and pursue power that is “out there.” In such cultures, male dominance in myth and everyday life is associated with “fear, conflict, and strife.” Sanday observes,

In these societies, males believe that there is an uncontrollable force that may strike at any time and against which men must be prepared to defend their integrity. The nature of the force and its source are not well defined, but often they are associated with female sexuality and reproductive functions. Men believe it is their duty to harness this force, with its power over life and death, to prevent chaos and to maintain equilibrium. They go to extraordinary lengths to acquire some of the power for themselves so that they will not be impotent when it is time to fight. Men attempt to
neutralize the power they think is inherent in women by stealing it, nullifying it, or banishing it to invisibility. In such cultural configurations, fathers are more distant from childrearing, rape is not unusual, and men often forbid women to use certain ritual objects, musical instruments, or meeting places. Sanday found that the sexes tend to separate from each other in situations where nature is defined in hostile terms and that the sexes must be physically as well as conceptually separated in order for men to attain dominance.

Once in place, cultural patterns tend to have great tenacity. Although many modern citizens of our country would bristle at any comparison with tribal customs, it is obvious that the historical processes resulting in Western civilization preserved a good deal of the orientation exhibited by those cultures in Sanday’s “outer” category. Nature is not considered sacred or a partner; ultimate power resides “out there” with a sky-god; and men traditionally proclaim numerous cultural “spaces” (the priesthood, higher education, law, medicine, business, government, the art world) to be off-limits to women. In a cultural orientation where the elemental power of the female body—by which I mean the capability to grow people of either sex from her flesh, to bleed in rhythm with the moon, to transform food into milk for infants—is considered somewhat frightening by males, a tremendous amount of effort goes into preventing women from acquiring cultural power in addition to the disquieting elemental power. The female is contained by belittling and controlling her. Our culture can be classified as “patriarchal” (meaning literally “ruled by the father”) not because power is reserved for biological fathers, but because men and women are socialized to understand that males should legitimately act as controlling cultural fathers, while females should appropriately act as dependent, obedient minors.

Patriarchal Dynamics

“Oh, how dreary. Patriarchy is such a seventies topic,” one hears in certain circles today. “Let’s just drop that whole tedious gender-conflict business and get on with ecology [or global networking, or making a lot of money].” One also hears, from some deconstructive postmodernists, that analyzing the power dynamics of oppression by gender (or race or class) is passé since the mechanisms of domination are now understood to be too subtly diffuse for any analysis. I do not feel that attention to patriarchal dynamics can be dismissed as long as one of every three women in the United States will be raped during her lifetime, or a woman is physically beaten every fourteen seconds in our country, or our youth get the message early on that (patriarchal) men’s sexual “needs” take precedence over the “wants” of women and children. The average age of young male sex offenders and their victims is decreasing, and growing numbers of college students today feel that forced sex on a date is not rape. A random survey of women in Los Angeles in 1986 found that 62 percent had been sexually abused at least once before age eighteen. A survey of teenage mothers in Illinois in 1987 found that 61 percent had been sexually abused as children. Studies consistently find that most prostitutes, and many people convicted of violent crimes, were sexually abused as children. Even the crisis in homelessness, generally thought to be solely an economic problem, disproportionately afflicts women who, according to a recent study, are to some extent dysfunctional because they have experienced physical, sexual, and emotional abuse since early childhood and who are caught in the economic crunch. A study of Third-World women, which was not intended to focus on “battering” by men, repeatedly found it to be a common thread among women’s experiences in a variety of patriarchal cultures. Moreover, the female body is not only abused but exploited: women worldwide contribute two-thirds of the work hours, earn one-tenth of the income, and own one one-hundredth of the property. Patriarchy is real.

In a patriarchal society, cultural forms evolve to ease the fears of nature and the female felt by the dominant group. The compensatory dynamics identified in Sanday’s survey of patriarchal cultures are abundant in our own. Traditionally, dominance-or-submission has been the model for interactions. Chaos is avoided
by a chain of command, not only in military and corporate subcultures, but in the very perception of being: a hierarchical configuration with God at the top, followed by angels and white men, on down to animals. The "sacred blood of the female," as it is regarded in "inner-oriented" cultures, becomes a source of embarrassment to women in patriarchal cultures, a shameful function that must be hidden and denied. Yet the blood mysteries of the female have extremely ancient associations with honor, sanctity, and power. For example, at pre-patriarchal, Neolithic excavation sites, red ochrer has been found smeared on the entrances to caves in which ritual objects, often Goddess statues, were found and on the statues themselves. Sometimes this association is maintained even in patriarchal societies, such as the tradition of brides in China and India marrying in red, not white. Honorable access to flowing blood is available to men in patriarchal societies through participation in imitative rituals such as religious circumcision (in which blood is drawn from the male genital), drinking the transubstantiated blood of Christ, or earning the "red badge of courage" on a battlefield.

Like menses, pregnancy under patriarchy is treated as a disability, one requiring the power of the male medical establishment, who pushed midwives out of practice in most areas until recently. Lactation, too, has been disparaged by modern physicians as a rather pointless, animal-like function of women; between the 1930s and the mid-1970s, doctors almost succeeded in phasing out breast-feeding, which passes antibodies of immunity as well as nutrition to the infant, in favor of more modern, "civilized" bottle-feeding. The hundreds of thousands of unnecessary hysterectomies performed in the United States, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, constitute a devastating assault on the womb. Patriarchal men often experience discomfort at having to be around pregnant women—in boardrooms, classrooms, or factories. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, reportedly could not stand the sight of pregnant women. Did his macho sensibilities perhaps perceive "the great round" as a competitively superior erection?

Social structures and attitudes in our society draw legitimacy from the central assumptions of Western religion and philosophy. Creativity in the universe, ultimate mystery, the divine—all are symbolized by the distant father-god, ruling in transcendence far above Earth's realm of blood, mud, birth, and death. The goal of most Western spirituality has been to transcend nature and the flesh (which meant primarily man's escaping the "lure" of woman's flesh). Western philosophy, following the Pythagoreans, identified man with mind, subjectivity, determinate form (substance), and potential transcendence. It has identified woman with body, passivity, indeterminate and disorderly form (process), and "dumb" matter. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, three vital concerns of men raised in patriarchal culture continually appear: separateness, reactive (defensive) autonomy, and control. What is accorded value is that which is situated within the bounds of "reason," a mode of cognition that disallows gestalt sensibilities, feelings, or subtle perceptions called intuition.

Patriarchal socialization shapes the consciousness of both sexes, not with uniform results among individuals, of course, but with an informing orientation. In general, women raised under patriarchy received the message from myriad sources that we have the wrong body to be taken seriously in matters of culture, commerce, medicine, government, and so forth. "Feminine nature" is found wanting by the dominant culture; hence insecurity abounds. Even within the delineations of patriarchally approved presentations of the female body, cultural messages tell woman she is inadequate—in need of bound feet or high heels, corsets, padded bras, dyed hair, and even plastic surgery. Depression, fear, self-loathing are common psychological themes for women raised under patriarchy. For men raised in such societies, the informing obsession is to be "not-woman"—not emotionally invested in relationships, not "vulnerable" through empathy, not weak in physicality (especially upper body strength), not docile. Autonomy is the goal, and there is great pressure to distinguish oneself from the pack. Life is often experienced as competitive,
atomized, and alienating. Cultural messages tell man that his body is somehow treacherous, issuing from a woman's vagina only to eventually cause his death by breaking down and failing. Rage, fear, and loneliness are common psychological themes for men raised under patriarchy; detachment from feelings is the acceptable coping strategy.

Society generally evolves controlling structures and behavior patterns that diminish culturally implanted fears. When patriarchal man's deep-seated fears of the elemental power of the female, his own body, and his emotions are indulged, however, by a supposedly strong leader calling for even more intensely patriarchal social structures, fascism can result. Contrary to German Marxists' insistence that National Socialism was simply the natural progression of capitalism, aided by the intrusion of "the irrational," a recent study by Klaus Theweileit, Male Fantasies, found in the Nazi dreams of mythic grandeur an attempt to escape the personal and the intimate. Studying recruiting posters, popular novels of the post-Great War era, and journals written by officers of the proto-Nazi Freikorps units, many of whom went on to become officers in Hitler's SA and functionaries in the Third Reich, Theweileit discovers the fantasy urge to stay dry, erect, and rigid versus an imagined female liquefaction and flowing, a feared and yet desired "flood." Desire becomes mutated into the desire for violence against desire. The cultural artifacts Theweileit studied reveal fantasy as a means of killing and protecting: the more lifeless, regimented, and monumental reality appears to be, the more secure the men feel. He concludes that the core of all fascist propaganda is a battle against everything that constitutes enjoyment and pleasure, so that the only remaining "erotic" fantasy is one in which soldiers destroy a mob of supposedly evil and lascivious enemies and are rewarded by distant and stiff dream-figures: kings, generals, and idealized women. He found the diaries of the Freikorps officers to be rife with dreamy scenes of brutality and passionate dedication to a quest, a beloved commander, and hallucinated vision-queens without female genitals. Fascism, according to Theweileit's study,

is a set of violent fantasies and acts meant to protect (patriarchal) man from his body, his desires, his emotions, and his immediate and local relations with other people. While fascism is an extreme form of the patriarchal shaping of life, its themes are recognizable as intensifications of the leitmotiv that recur throughout such cultures.

A Patriarchal Dream: The Disembodied Worldview of Deconstructive Postmodernism

Within the context of patriarchal culture, deconstructive-postmodern philosophy has emerged during the past twenty-some years, not only focusing attention on the cultural construction of our most dearly held "natural" concepts, but also making the leap to declaring that there is nothing but cultural construction in human experience. A problematic aspect of this mode of analysis is its seeming lack of attention to the ways in which its own cultural context, Eurocentric patriarchy, has shaped its perspective. In many regards, it continues certain thematic concerns of Western patriarchal philosophy and culture, such as autonomy from relationship, separateness, and control through abstraction (see Appendix B). In patriarchal societies the fundamental orientation toward the two primal power-mysteries—nature and the elemental power of the female—is fear because those powers are conceived of as powerless and threatening, rather than as cosmic presence, a dynamic and transformative power in which males participate. This fundamental response infuses all social constructions. For patriarchal men in particular, who have traditionally shaped Western culture, all relationships, and even the very nature of relationship, are potentially dangerous. Safety lies in guarding one's autonomy and dominating others whenever possible.

Throughout Western patriarchal history each era has shown a particular genius for meeting these challenges, with variations on the themes in each society. Modernity's thrust of will over nature promised a seemingly invincible protective shield of technology,
but the felt danger of the elemental power of the female, the fear of being engulfed by her sexuality, was still omnipresent. The macho strikes of much modernist literature and painting had not succeeded in smashing the female threat and containing "the new woman."

Structuralism later conceptually squeezed the female into a mere complement of the male, but the popularity of that analysis has faded. Into this struggle was introduced the dazzling tactic, far less engaged and hence less risky, called postmodernism, or poststructuralism: simply declare the elemental power of the female null and void on the grounds that *anything* associated with the female (or anything else) is merely a cultural invention! Any mention of the elemental capabilities of woman can be dismissed as merely a "valorizing narrative"! Since such concepts as "woman," "man," "nature," and "body" are regarded as nothing more than the cultural projections of a particular time and place, their "presence," or substantive validity, is "erased" by seeing through and deconstructing their cobbled nature.

Because "the body" is so strongly associated with woman in patriarchal cultures (man/mind/spirit as opposed to woman/body/matter), the deconstructive-postmodern "erasure of the body" is foremost the erasure of the female body. Derrida asserts that everything in human experience, including nature and human physicality, is "always already," that is, always an already "supplemented" entity that has been shaped into cultural perceptions. Hence any search for origins is deemed absurd, as there was no foundational experience. That is, deconstructive postmodernists seem intent on denying there was a point at which the bodies of female proto-humans transformed from cycles of both estrus and menses to cycles of menses alone, when human consciousness developed. Among other phenomena, the new human consciousness encountered day, night, water, edible plants, weather, animals, and wombs from which issued both males and females, breasts from which issued life-sustaining liquid, and vaginas that bled, even though no cut had been made, in rhythm with the moon. (They also encountered two kinds of liquid issuing from penises, but apparently semen was not connected with birth for a long while. That connection was probably apparent in many societies at least by the Neolithic era, when animal husbandry was common, but even well into the modern era aboriginal peoples in Australia, for example, believed that women are impregnated by the wind.)

Although we, with our own culturally informed concepts, cannot know the cognitive processes of the earliest humans, they obviously had some sort of psychological response to physical phenomena, and those responses set in motion the dynamic orientations of culture. Myriad responses would be possible, of course, but anthropological examples of the alternatives can be considered in two groups. According to Sanday's study, peoples who found it rather easy to fulfill bodily needs perceived their surroundings (nature) to be benevolent and the elemental capabilities of the female to be the locus of benevolent mediation of great power, while peoples in more difficult and nomadic circumstances perceived nature to be unreliable and harsh and the female powers to be sources of danger. From such responses to physicality grew cultural orientations, which have proven remarkably stubborn even through changes in a people's physical situation. Within the framework of a people's cultural response—principally fear or love—to the power-mysteries, the insights of the deconstructive postmodernists are quite valid: all our concepts are indeed socially constructed. "Woman," "man," "nature," "body" are all infused with meaning that varies from era to era and place to place. The conceptualizations, however, remain within the fundamental cultural orientation. ( Cultures in transition from one orientation to the other, of course, exhibit elements of both.) "Woman" in patriarchal societies may be considered a madonna or a whore, weak or dangerous (or all of those), but she must be contained by cultural constructions and made as inconsequential as possible.

Foucault painstakingly brought attention to the historicity of the acculturation processes by which human beings are shaped into particular kinds of acting subjects. He also illuminated the
diffuse and multicentered nature of societal control. Such dynamics, though, are not the enforcement of arbitrary abstractions. They are always situated within a fundamental cultural orientation. Foucault was well aware of expressions of cultural continuity through epochs—the recurrence of determined practices and “discourses,” which he called “generalities”—but did not emphasize these as streams of a cultural orientation. He focused instead on the “transformable singularities,” the particular manifestations of power relations within a time and place, because his mission was to awaken people to the socially constructed nature of the received concepts we consider to be natural. Foucault did not deny the possibility that singular forms of experience “may perfectly well harbor universal structures” (a position many of his more aggressive followers seem to overlook), but he insisted that the “putting into play” of any universal forms is always done via thought, which has a historicity. Unfortunately, his conclusions, like those of other deconstructive postmodernists, often fulfill core desires of patriarchy, such as the negation of the female body: Foucault proposed that rape be reclassified as simple assault since, after all, our notions of sexuality are merely an arbitrary social construction. This is an example of the “desexualization” he recommended to the feminist movement as a comprehensive goal.

The patriarchal desire to disempower the body is served by the deconstructive-postmodern assertion that abstraction, or conceptualization, is all. Foucault proclaimed that we are “nothing but determined historical figures” (my italics), our bodies being mere docile recipients of various power-laden “discourses” and diffuse practices of cultural discipline and self-discipline. The deconstructionist insistence that socialization “goes all the way down,” as the philosopher Richard Rorty puts it, champions human endeavor above the larger dynamics of the universe. Yet extensive studies of identical twins reared separately, which have been conducted at the Universities of Minnesota, Ottawa, and elsewhere in recent years, reveal idiosyncratic and extremely resilient expressions of the genetic coding carried in every cell of the human body. In short, our evolving inheritance from the fireball constitutes a drama unfolding in the midst of cultural construction. Since we possess limited understanding about the vast web of cosmic dynamics—that is, our inherent participation in the larger reality, which subtly affects one’s experiencing of life—humility is in order. Instead, deconstructive postmodernism calms the patriarchal anxiety about containing “hostile” nature by shrinking the awesome creativity of the unfolding universe into the realm of (human) man’s invention. Nothing matters, or even is real, except the projects of human society. “There is nothing outside the text,” Derrida announces.

Within that realm men raised under patriarchy are taught, directly or indirectly, that relationship is always a threat to one’s prized autonomy. Images of “oneness” or “unity” trip an alarm in patriarchal consciousness that dangerous forces (religion? woman?) are trying to swallow up male autonomy in an annihilating “sameness.” Patriarchal man believes he must always guard against being colonized via relationship, so Derrida is embraced for “proving” that language itself, a primary tool of relationship, is inherently unreliable. The (patriarchal) horror that even the very personal interior monologue in a man’s mind is composed of language invented by other people is deflated by Derrida’s assurance that language has no power because it refers to nothing except endless chains of “signifiers” and “signifieds.” “The play of difference” is the only reality for the insular subject. Relationship is held at arm’s length. In the deconstructionist worldview, one’s sense of fixed “identity” also must be denied as a hopelessly ignorant and reactionary concept, but deconstructionist men are nominally willing to sacrifice identity because they experience their own, in patriarchal culture, as reactive and insecure, continually projected in opposition to nature and the female. Since it is all a house of cards anyway, why not knock it down? Foucault felt that once the nature of social relationship, to self as well as others, was revealed and demolished as being other people’s power plays and “discourses,” we could face the task of constituting ourselves as “autonomous subjects.”
To be truly free for autonomous self-creation, one must be free of any received or inherited determinations, tendencies, or associations. Deconstructive postmodemism, growing out of Western philosophy, addresses this issue by employing Aristotle's sense of "essence," that which is most irreducible and unchanging (as opposed to "accident"). Deconstructionists apply the derogatory label "essentialist" (or "cultural imperialist") to anyone who speaks of commonality by using words such as "woman," "women living under patriarchy," "we," "the African-American experience," or "the service-sector working class." Deconstructionists are genuinely concerned that the particularity (or "difference") of individuals and groups is disregarded in the construction of generalities. They feel that by speaking of even qualified commonality, "essentialists" are guilty of "grammatical violence" that squelches individual differences. Moreover, deconstructionists maintain that speaking of commonality assumes that the group is composed of a fixed essence that supposedly supersedes the historically and locally determined production of conceptualizations. Such an interpretation of perceiving the relationships of commonality is clearly an exaggeration; to speak of common socialization and cultural attitudes does not deny individual particularity. A further problem is that the deconstructionists have once again opted for the assumptions of patriarchal Western philosophy: the focus on substance (Aristotle's fixed characteristics) rather than process. Hence they arrive at a dualistic conceptualization: either fixed essence or social construction.

This dualistic perception has led to a one-way "debate" within feminism between deconstructionism and alleged essentialism. The question posed, however, is skewed to support the deconstructive-postmodern retreat from engagement with the wilderness, the amazing novelty, the vast and relational flux and evanescence of the cosmological processes of being, which cannot be captured and pigeonholed by conceptualizations. They can only be alluded to with metaphors of art, including language and ritual. The female, like other cosmological life-forms, consists of a flux of microevents rather than stasis, or a fixed essence, yet to deny the particularities of the female body is to serve the interests of patriarchy. Deconstructive postmodemism promises freedom for all, but elements of its internal logic continue the patriarchal project by authoritatively declaring NO! to the female body, the Earthbody, and the larger reality that is the cosmological scope of existence.

What is particularly worrisome about many current expressions of deconstructive postmodemism, especially in analyses of contemporary culture and politics, is the utter glee at citing evidence of violation and cultural dismemberment of all sorts. Many postmodernists' observations about the effects of commodification and mass media are telling (although quite a few of the more extreme conclusions would be justified only if each of us passed our days with a small television set strapped in front of our faces so that mass media constituted our "sole" reality). I find it eerie that one rarely encounters an (apolitical) deconstructive-postmodern analyst who is the least bit wistful over what has been lost. Instead, the attitude is one of triumph at naming the perceived disempowerment of everyone and everything (except the corporations running the mass media, as political postmodernists note) and a "sophisticated" passivity that mocks any attempt to change the situation. A deconstructive-postmodern "advanced" attitude in a recent anthology is typical of the syndrome: "Why then be sad as the body is unplugged from the planet? What is this if not the more ancient philosophical movement of immanence to transcendence as the body is on its way to being exteriorized again?"21 Indeed, it is the ancient patriarchal dream: transcendence beyond the body.

Cultural Feminism and the History of Goddess Spirituality

Since the midseventies a movement of spiritual renewal that honors nature, the female, and the body has flourished in our society: the reclaiming of Goddess spirituality. The genesis of this recovery was part of the movement by many women from radical
to cultural feminism, although there is still much overlap. In the initial burst of the current wave of feminism, the source of women’s oppression was located in “male chauvinism” and “white males.” Some feminists still cite the latter term as the cause of social ills. Many of us, however, came to focus attention on the dynamics of acculturation that maintained attitudes devaluing women. We located the problem in socialization rather than in oppressive types of supposedly inherent masculine behavior. Hence there is a good deal of common ground between cultural feminism and certain aspects of deconstructive-postmodern feminism.  

In my own life, I can recall the exact moment of the shift to a cultural analysis. I was traveling to a meditation retreat in 1974 in New Mexico from southern Illinois in a Volkswagen “Beetle” with two friends from our local women’s center. Someone had recommended The First Sex by Elizabeth Gould Davis, which I had purchased and was reading in the backseat. Over the engine noise I would call out, “Amazing! Listen to this!” and read passage after passage. Davis revealed countless examples of how woman’s cultural and legal status declined as Christianity gradually transformed the Celtic societies in France, England, Ireland, the Rhineland, and elsewhere. She also noted that Christian conversion succeeded in Celtic Europe only when the people agreed to accept “Mary” as a new name for the Goddess. As I read on with sustained astonishment, the fixed entity that had been taught to me as “history” disassembled along Interstate 40, and I saw for the first time that patriarchy is a cultural construct—although I did not conclude, as deconstructionists do, that there is nothing but cultural construction in human experience. (Even though I could see that Davis made a number of unwarranted leaps in her conclusions, I hope her memory will be honored as a catalyst for the more careful studies that followed.)  

Cultural feminism has focused on prepatriarchal culture (such as Neolithic Old Europe), nonpatriarchal culture (such as the Hopi), dynamics of oppression in patriarchal culture, and creative possibilities for postpatriarchal culture. From this branch of feminism the terms “patriarchal culture,” “patriarchal religion,” and so forth have spread to the others. That the informing expressions of the prepatriarchal Neolithic era stood out in our readings, fixing the attention of women who had been raised in patriarchal religion, is not surprising. Feminist critiques of the Jewish and Christian traditions were already in the air, but they did not offer the spark of possibility that we found in poring over statues, symbols, and mythic narratives from the age of the Goddess. We discovered powerful female bodies of all sizes honored and revered; statues that were half bird and half female, linking humanity with the rest of nature; ritual figurines of female bodies incised with representations of life-giving water; symbols of the sacred pelvic triangle of the female; and sacred myths of the transformative powers of the Earth and the female celebrated in ecstatic dance and holy rite. Imagine our surprise.  

During that period of awakening I became engrossed with reconstructing the pre-Olympian myths of early Greece, the sacred stories and symbolism of the pre-Hellenic goddesses, whose artifacts, shrines, and other historic documentation long predate the arrival of the Indo-European thunderbolt god, Zeus, and his patriarchal soap opera on Mount Olympus. The shift from the pre–Indo-European religion (centered on goddesses, who were enmeshed with people’s daily experiencing of the energy forces in life and who were powerful sources of compassion and protection, as well as inspiration for divine wisdom and just law) to the Indo-Europeanized Greek religion (centered on a chieftain sky-god who was “up there” and remote, judgmental, warlike, and often involved in local strife) was well established. Yet I and other “spirituality feminists” were curious to know more about the societal transformation in which the disempowerment of the Goddess was embedded.  

Over the years numerous studies have appeared documenting widespread occurrences of Goddess spirituality in Old Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It would be most interesting if an international task force of cultural historians were constituted to assemble and synthesize all the evidence
regarding the myriad incidents of societal shift from Goddess to God, from matrifocal to patriarchal culture. (Most feminist cultural historians interested in the long era of the Goddess in various societies avoid the term “matriarchal,” since the archaeological findings usually indicate a roughly gender-egalitarian society or are inconclusive regarding sex-role dominance—although many excavated sites clearly do reflect the centrality of women’s social roles. Because “matriarchy” connotes the inverse of a power-over, male-dominant society, cultural feminists and several archaeologists prefer to use matrifocal, matrastic, matricentric, gynecentric, and so forth, since the cultural artifacts demonstrate a focus on the transformative powers of the female regardless of whatever the exact form of government may have been.) Eventually, many matrifocal, matrilineal cultures were pressured to shift to patriarchal arrangements when they were confronted with dominant forces of Christianity, Islam, or Eurocentric colonialism. Male-dominant cultures certainly existed before those powerful forces of social, economic, and religious conversion spread out over the world, but they did account for a sizable boost in the incidence of patriarchal societies.

For cultural feminists with European familial roots, the archaeological record indicating the patriarchal shift in Old Europe is particularly engrossing. Evidence indicates that waves of nomadic horsemen, examples of the cultural model Sanday classifies as having an “outer” orientation, migrated from the Eurasian steppes into east-central Europe, arriving first in the Danubian basin, and imposed their rather crude culture onto the existing agricultural settlements, which exhibited an “inner” orientation and produced an impressive array of artwork. The horse had not become extinct on the steppes, as it had in Europe. (Recent findings in archaeozoology indicate that horses were ridden with a bit and bridle on the steppes at least as early as 4000 B.C., although many archaeologists expect the date to be pushed back even further as more research is conducted.) According to the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who has excavated several pre-Indo-European sites in southeastern Europe, the horse-riding “Kurgan” pastoralists from the Eurasian steppes migrated west in three major waves: c. 4400–4300 B.C., c. 3400–3200 B.C., and c. 3000–2900 B.C. Their initial arrival in Neolithic Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania caused waves of refugees to move west and northwest into hilly terrain where no human community had settled since Paleolithic times. The Kurgans also moved outward from the steppes in southern and southeastern directions. In India they became known as “Aryans,” warlike Indo-European cow-drivers who imposed worship of the sky-god Brahma and instituted the caste system. Most probably they moved beyond their original pastoral range because of climatic or other environmental change.

The cultures of Old Europe (Gimbutas’s term for pre-Indo-European Europe) were matrifocal, sedentary, peaceful, earth- and sea-oriented, and appreciative of numerous art forms. They revered various manifestations of the Goddess. The Indo-European (Kurgan, or Aryan) invaders abided by a patriarchal chieftain system and were mobile, warlike, and indifferent to art. They revered warrior gods: the light-of-the-sky god, or sun god; the thunderbolt god; and the god of death and the underworld. The upheaval of Old European civilization is registered in the archaeological record by the abrupt cessation of painted pottery and figurines and by the disappearance of shrines; matrifocal, matrilineal culture; Goddess religion; and symbols of cosmogony, generation, birth, and regeneration. The Kurgans used a primitive stabbing technique to impress their main symbols, the sun or a fir tree. They exulted in the making of weapons, rather than art, and believed that a glorious death was visited upon heroes who died in battle, touched by the spear of the god of death. After the Indo-European incursions, burial patterns shifted from roughly egalitarian graves (with females having somewhat more burial objects, though age seems to have been the major determinant) to chieftain-centered barrows (burial mounds), in which one man apparently owned, or dominated, the
other buried men, women, horses, and objects. Almost all Old European settlements before the middle of the fifth millennium were unfortified, and no evidence of warfare (extensive fortification of hilltop settlements, caches of weapons, large numbers of skeletons killed by wounds at the same time) has been found from that era.

Transitional cultures, such as the Mycenaean in Greece and the many Celtic cultures across Europe, exhibited the dominant Indo-European elements (a patriarchal chieftain system, hill forts, reverence for warriors, worship of a sky-god), but also maintained traces of Old European culture, such as matriliney, Goddess symbols, and rituals at sacred springs and groves. In time, the Indo-European societal characteristics triumphed and still figure largely in all Eurocentric cultures. Yet the old ways, the Earth-based sensibilities, proved extremely resilient among the folk cultures in rural areas, even into the present time. In a few areas of Europe where the people speak a non-Indo-European language, such as the Basques, those linguistic patterns are thought to be survivors from the pre-Indo-European era.

Cultural feminists’ attention to the radical shifts indicated by the archaeological record in Europe brought intense, if unexpected, reactions from various ideological quarters, each of which insisted that patriarchy must have arisen internally in all societies. Had it come into Europe or elsewhere via migrations, their informing theory would be shaken. Jungian cultural historians, such as Erich Neumann, maintained that all societies naturally “progress” from “immature patriarchal consciousness” to “mature patriarchal consciousness.” Marxist feminists asserted that patriarchy universally arose with the development of private property. A group of antireligion anarchists even held that shamans (animistic healers), rather than warrior-chieftains, were the cause of all domination! Another curious development was that materialist feminists (Marxists, neo-Marxists, socialists, and anarchists) dismissed cultural feminism as “ahistorical,” even though it has been the source of scores of books and articles tracing patriarchal dynamics, and resistance to them, through history. Following Marx, materialist feminists considered real history to be economic history. Cultural history, they felt, was merely a dabbling in the “superstructure” extruded from economics, utter pablum unless it was the type of analysis that treated contemporary culture solely as an outgrowth of capitalism, specifically “the forces and relations of production.” In contrast, cultural feminists tend to view a society’s fundamental orientation to nature, women, and issues of autonomy, interrelatedness, control, and complementarity as the forces driving its particular development of religion, community, economics, education, health care, and so forth. Efforts to radically transform all institutions in a society must necessarily fall short if the deepest informing assumptions go unexamined. Only if the powerful dynamics and historical tenacity of the core values are understood can the depth of the transformative task be embraced.

**Earthbody and Personal Body as Sacred**

The contemporary renaissance of Goddess spirituality draws on a growing body of knowledge about historical Goddess religion but is shaped and energized by the living practice, which is both personal and communal, ancient and spontaneous. The initial response to learning of the historical presence of Goddess religion, at least for myself, was wonder, followed by gratitude that the entire phenomenon, which had nearly been paved over by patriarchal culture, might now be known. That wonder was followed by puzzlement at what Goddess religion might mean to the spiritual lives of women in contemporary circumstances. Poring over the hundreds of photographs of Goddess figurines, bas-reliefs, and frescoes, one could not fail to grasp the centrality of the elemental power of the female body, jarring as that was to any reader raised under patriarchy. Absorbing even a little of that orientation made it easy to see why our Neolithic, and probably even our Paleolithic, ancestors perceived the bountiful manifestations of the Earth as emanating from a fertile body—
immense female whose tides moved in rhythm with the moon, whose rivers sustained life, whose soil/flesh yielded food, whose caves offered ritual womb-rooms for ceremonies of sacred community within her body, whose vast subterranean womb received all humans in burial. It is not difficult to understand why they held Her sacred.

To even attempt to surmise the Neolithic thought processes that informed the artistic expressions of female forms and the ritual practices that must have surrounded them, however, was more difficult, even though Gimbutas's work has helped to sort the multiplicity of forms and focus on the recurring symbols of water, birth, regeneration, and so forth. Stare as one might at, say, a small sculpted circle of ritual female dancers, one could not know, more than five thousand years later, what the actual and entire practice had been. Hence the contemporary expressions of Goddess spirituality, including its flowering in the arts, are not simply attempts to replicate the extremely ancient religion that long preceded the "lost weekend" of patriarchal culture. Rather, these are creative spiritual practice, which is embedded in a profound historical tradition and, more fundamentally, in the female dimension of being.

Some forms of contemporary Goddess spirituality are entirely "free-form," creating practices by drawing directly on inspiration from the artifacts, myths, and other remnants of Goddess religion in early Greece, the biblical lands, Africa, Asia, and the pre-Columbian Americas. Other forms involve participation in mediating traditions, that is, systems of worship such as Goddess-centered "native European" witchcraft or the African-based folk religions of the Caribbean and Brazil. Some ancient traditions of Goddess spirituality, such as those of the Goddess Akonedi in Ghana, have spread to Europe and the Americas in recent decades through immigration. While there is great diversity within contemporary Goddess spirituality, the common threads among the forms that grew out of feminist renewal are the desire to honor the Earthbody and one's personal body via an ongoing birthing process of cosmological unfolding—the intention to articulate as deeply and fully as possible one's ontological potential as an embodied Earthbeing, a weaver of the cosmic web.

The honoring of the female embodiment that takes place in Goddess-oriented women's spirituality rituals has much in common with many of the concerns of postmodern French feminism's *écriture féminine* (also known as "writing the body"), which seeks to create nonpatriarchal "discourse," or modes of knowledge, regarding the nature of the female body. Although a few of the French feminist theorists have devoted a good deal of energy to refuting Lacan's absurd Freudian claim that women naturally function with a biological sense of phallic lack, the more interesting aspects of *écriture féminine* address deep structures in patriarchal culture of suppression of women's subjectivity, body, and desire and the need to recover women's authentic voicing of pleasure, or *jouissance*. They reject the binary dualism of male and female (so essential to the theory of structuralism) as a concept framed in patriarchal culture, which they call the phallocratic symbolic order. Patriarchal culture teaches men to perceive an opposition between self and other and then neutralize the other as being the same or complementary. As Luce Irigaray declares, however, "Women have sex organs just about everywhere." Because even the most radically body-oriented of the French feminist theorists were responding within the forum of intellectual exchange to poststructuralist patriarchal philosophy, their focus has remained in the areas of critique and suggested possibilities. In the United States, however, the *experiential* flowering of radical women's body-oriented spirituality from the midseventies on, generally uninfluenced by the rumblings in Paris, arrived at many of the same postpatriarchal conceptualizations of the female body—and embraced them as vital elements of a "new" religion and culture to be lived daily.

The contemporary practice of Goddess spirituality includes creative participation in myth, symbol, and ritual. Because this spiritual orientation particularly honors the elemental power of the female and its embeddedness in nature, it was perceived as
regressive, embarrassing, or even horrifying to liberal and material/socialist feminists, who apparently accepted the patriarchal dualism of nature-versus-culture and had internalized the patriarchal rationalization that the reason women had traditionally been blocked from participation in culture was their bodily "plight" of being mired in the reproductive processes of nature. Investing their consciousness within such an orientation, it is quite understandable that "modern" feminists recoil (I use the present tense here because it still occurs today) when "spiritual feminists" celebrate our bodies and our elemental connectedness with nature. If one subscribes to the patriarchal view of culture as human endeavor pursued in opposition to nature, drawing attention to such connections automatically places women outside the realm of culture as "biological agents" instead of "cultural agents." The renewal of Goddess spirituality, however, rejected the patriarchal dualism from the outset. Like countless prepatriarchal and nonpatriarchal societies, we women who had drifted out of patriarchal religion33 view culture not as a struggle in opposition to nature but as a potentially harmonious extension of nature, a human construction inclusive of creative tensions and reflective of our embeddedness in the Earthbody and the teachings of nature: diversity, subjectivity, adaptability, interrelatedness. Within such an orientation—let's call it ecological sanity—the bodily affinity of females and males with nature is respected and culturally honored, rather than denied and scorned.

The central understanding in contemporary Goddess spirituality is that the divine—creativity in the universe, or ultimate mystery—is laced throughout the cosmic manifestations in and around us. The divine is immanent, not concentrated in some distant seat of power, a transcendent sky-god. Instead of accepting the notion in patriarchal religion that one must spiritually transcend the body and nature, it is possible to apprehend divine transcendence as the sacred whole, or the infinite complexity of the universe. The Goddess, as a metaphor for divine immanence and the transcendent sacred whole, expresses ongoing regeneration with the cycles of her Earthbody and contains the mystery of diversity within unity: the extraordinary range of differentiation in forms of life on Earth issued from her dynamic form and are kin. A second aspect of contemporary Goddess spirituality is the empowerment experienced by people as they come to grasp their heritage and presence in terms of the cosmological self, the dimension of human existence that participates in the larger reality. Such empowerment is far different from a dominating "power-over," the binding force of social constructions in a patriarchal culture. Rather, it is a strengthening of one's capabilities of subjectivity and cosmic unfolding within a web of caring and solidarity that extends backward and forward in time, drawing one from the fragmentation and lonely atomization of modernity to the deepest levels of connectedness. A third aspect of Goddess spirituality is the perceptual shift from the death-based sense of existence that underlies patriarchal culture to a regeneration-based awareness, an embrace of life as a cycle of creative rebirths, a dynamic participation in the processes of infinity. It is a commonplace in patriarchal society that men often spend their lives striving to create cultural achievements, including male heirs who will bear their name, in order to beat death by achieving a measure of immortality.34 As Heidegger put it in Being and Time, one's constant awareness of his own death is the ground for an authentic existence; "being-toward" death is the nature of consciousness of the future. As is often the case, that "profound" philosophical insight is a projection of men's experience under patriarchal socialization, not a universal perception of human existence. (The contrast in images between a dead man on a cross and a bountiful, living goddess-body reflect two distinct perceptions of the core of being.) Goddess spirituality celebrates the power of the erotic as the sparking of cosmic potential, rather than wrestling with the erotic as a process that potentially yields a new generation and hence the signal of one's approaching end. The erotic and the sensuous, expressed through the aesthetic,
draw forth not only physical generation but unpredictably creative waves of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional renewal.

*Grace Embodied: Body Parables, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual in Goddess Spirituality*

Consciousness of the larger reality, through the practice of body-oriented *vipassana* meditation and body-oriented Goddess spirituality, led me eventually to perceive the erotic processes of female being as “body parables,” expressions of the subtle dimensions of existence that underlie supposedly fixed delineations of separateness. A woman often experiences a sense of soft boundaries of her body on the first day of menstruation. In the postorgasmic state, many women experience a peaceful, expansive mindstate of free-floating boundarylessness. (Many men, particularly young men, describe their postorgasmic state as a sensation of weakness and vulnerability; some call it *le petit mort*, the little death.) In pregnancy and childbirth, the delineation between me and not-me is blurred and somewhat elusive. In nursing, while cradling the extension of her flesh to her breast, a woman again may experience a dreamy sense of soft boundaries. All of these immersions into the “oceanic feeling,” which I have experienced as grace, teach one that, although boundaries can be important in this life, they are altogether relative and temporary in the larger field of the grand communion.

For feminists delving into the history of Western culture and religion, one of the most surprising discoveries was the closeted erotic meanings of common symbols or cultural objects. The rose, like the lotus and chrysanthemum in the East, originally represented the female genitals, the red rose being rich in the sacred blood. (Imagine my perverse delight to open the morning paper a few years ago and read that Congress had voted to make the rose, an emblem of the elemental power of the female, our nation’s official flower.) The custom of a woman painting her lips with red stain alluded to the red riches of her nether lips. (How incredibly constricted a culture is ours that such an obvious connection escaped me for twenty years of applying lipstick until I read about it.) The Holy Grail, and all chalices, are symbols of the womb. The throne evolved as a symbol of the seated body of the sacred queen, as succession passed matrilineally to rulers in many ancient cultures. As for that most famous negative symbol of the female, “vagina dentata,” it apparently is not universal but found only in patriarchal cultures.

The Virgin Mary, chaste and docile, is actually a direct descendent of the Goddess, producing her child parthenogenetically (that is, by herself), a son born with the coming-of-light at winter solstice and renewed, even after death, at the vernal equinox. As was commonly the case, her procreative power was inverted by patriarchal culture: Saint Augustine added to church doctrine the “fact” that Mary’s hymen was not ruptured in the birthing of Jesus, so she was not responsible for any “pollution” entering the world from her womb! She was made into a physically passive and nearly neuter symbol of a patriarchal dream-queen, often presented by clergy as a model of subservience against which women should measure themselves. Nonetheless, Mary retained her considerable power, as the Great Mother, in the spiritual lives of Catholic women, an extremely resilient phenomenon some church authorities try to curb as “Mariolatry.” In Latin America, where Mary is sometimes still called by the old pre-Columbian Goddess names, her image is the central one in many Catholic churches, while the statue of Jesus is found on a side altar.

As with symbols, feminist research into the myths of patriarchal culture also revealed long-hidden meanings. The goddesses of Greek Olympian mythology turned out to be degraded images of their far more ancient selves: Hera, the disagreeable and jealous wife of Zeus, was a powerful deity of women and all fecundity long before his arrival; Athena, the cold, boyish daughter of Zeus, was formerly a protector of home and the arts; Artemis, who had been made the sister of the new god Apollo, was formerly the wild forest presence in Arcadia and the protector of women in childbirth in her manifestation at Ephesus; and Pandora, who was made into the troublesome, treacherous
source of human woes, was actually the maiden form of the Earth Goddess who poured bountiful gifts from her earthen jar. Similarly, every element in the biblical story of Adam and Eve has been inverted from its earlier meaning: the serpent had been a positive symbol of renewal and regeneration in the old, Earth-based religion; the sacred trees were not forbidden but sites of worship and celebration; and the female was not the cause of a fall from grace but was a respected manifestation of the sacred cycles of life. The serpentlike dragon slain in the legend of St. George was actually the Old Religion being destroyed by “the one true Church.” So powerfully rooted was the ancient religion, however, that the dragon’s head often grew back in folk tellings of the tale. The metaphorical boast that St. Patrick had rid Ireland of “snakes” was also a story of the imposition of the new religion over the old, as the Goddess Bridget was transformed into a Christian saint.

Such symbolic legends of political conquest are twisted descendents of the far more ancient and primordial processes of myth that apparently informed the era of the Goddess and most certainly inspire its contemporary renaissance. Since the divine is understood to be immanent (dynamic creativity in the cosmic unfolding) as well as transcendent (as the sacred whole, or ultimate mystery), one approaches spiritual practice in this orientation as an awakening of possibilities. Engagement with myth and symbol, as participatory fields of relation rather than fixed artifacts, suggests a shaping of our continuity and groundedness while evoking a sense of our larger self, the fullness of our being. It is the aesthetic path to grace.

Many who follow this path assemble a home altar bearing symbols of the Goddess. It may be no more than a shelf in a bookcase covered with a cloth on which stand Goddess figurines, shells, stones, or other gifts of the Earthbody, but its affective power is remarkable. Even a passing glance at the symbolic forms of the Goddess reminds a woman that she is heir to a lineage of deeply grounded wisdom and inner strength and a weaver of the sacred whole. Sarasvati stands sensually poised on a lotus blossom, playing a sitar as She guides knowledge and the arts. Our Lady of Guadalupe stands on a crescent moon, clothed in a blue robe of the starry heavens and radiating a full-body aura of golden light. Yemaya, mother of the sea, the great womb of creation, stands draped in blue and white, a beautiful, dark woman of deep mystery. Quan Yin, smooth and serene, dispenses from her open hands the vast power of compassion. On many women’s altars “the little snake Goddesses of Crete,” their names long lost, stand as we moderns never could have imagined: planted firmly on the earth, baring breasts proudly, their outstretched arms hold writhing serpents, symbols of shedding and growth in endless regeneration. We sustain the mythic presence of the Goddess in our lives as She evokes our creativity and depth.

The telling of myth is a ritual creation of sacred space. It actualizes the narrator and the listener as engaged witnesses, weavers of a web of being that grows outward from the principals, avowing existential bonds of community in an eternal present. Far more than arbitrary “social constructions,” the articulation and cherishing of unions and separations, creations and destructions in mythic drama are acts of relation that place all participants in deep accord with the life processes of the unfolding universe. Myth is sacred narrative evoked by a totemic presence, a manifestation or empowered bearer of cosmic energies. The more a narrative evolves in elaborations distant from the totemic presence, the more it loses vitality and may fade in time to formulaic allegory. There are those myths, though, that do not fade. In the sacred stories of the Goddess—replete with totemic serpents, deer, owls, spiders, bear, and more—the body of the Goddess is itself a totemic presence.

By way of example, let the mythic presence of Artemis dance in your mind:

When the moon appeared as a slender crescent, delicate and fine but firm in the promise of growth, Artemis roamed the untouched forests of Arcadia. On each night of the waxing moon Her animals and mortals came to dance with the Goddess. They encircled a large tree that stood apart from the others, its smooth
bark and leaves seeming silver in the fresh moonlight. Artemis moved toward the tree and silence followed, but for Her doves cooing softly in the boughs overhead. The Goddess crouched as the Great She-Bear She once had been and touched the earth. From the roots, up the trunk, along the branches to the leaves She drew Her hands. Again and again. With each pass She brought forth new life: pale blossoms unfolding and falling away, tiny globes of fruit shining among the branches, and finally ripe, glowing fruit hanging from the sacred boughs. Artemis gathered the fruit and fed Her animals, Her mortals, Her nymphs, and Herself. The dance began.

The animals were drawn to the tree. They rolled over its roots and encircled the trunk. In a larger ring the dancers raised their arms, turning slowly, and felt currents of energy rising through their trunks, turning faster, through their arms, turning, out their fingers, turning, turning, to their heads, whirling, racing, flying. Sparks of energy flew from their fingertips, lacing the air with traces of clear blue light. They joined hands, joined arms, merged bodies into a circle of current that carried them effortlessly.

Artemis appeared large before them standing straight against the tree, Her spine its trunk, Her arms its boughs. Her body pulsed with life, its rhythms echoed by the silvered tree, the animals at Her feet, the dancers, the grass, the plants, the grove. Every particle of the forest quivered with Her energy. Artemis the nurturer, protector, Goddess of the dwelling moon. Artemis! She began to merge with the sacred tree, while the circle of dancers spun around Her. They threw back their heads and saw the shimmering boughs rush by. When Artemis was one with the moon tree, the circle broke. Dancers went whirling through the grove, falling exhausted on the mossy forest floor.

When a woman raised in patriarchal culture—which tells her she has the wrong type of body/mind, unlike males, to share a sexual sameness with the divine Father God—discovers the sacred stories of the Goddess, identification with Her female dimension of being is an immediate perception. When a woman—who has been told by patriarchal culture that female power is somewhat shameful, dirty, and downright dangerous if unrestrained—immerses herself in sacred space where various manifestations of the Goddess bring forth the Earthbody from the spinning void, bestow fertility on field and womb, ease ripe bodies in childbirth, nurture the arts, protect the home, guard one's child against forces of harm, issue guidance for a community, join in ecstatic dance and celebration in sacred groves, and set love's mysteries in play, then the woman's possibilities are evoked with astoundingly joyous intensity. She will create the ongoing completion of each mythic fragment. She is in and of the Goddess. She will body the myth with her own totemic being. She is the cosmic form of waxing, fullness, waning: virgin, mother, creator, wise crone. She cannot be negated ever again. Her roots are too deep—and they are everywhere.

In the present coming of the Goddess, we have recovered ritual. The presence of ritual circles at gatherings of the radical women's spirituality movement during the seventies spread to political actions such as the women's peace encampments at Greenham Common in England and at Seneca, New York, in the United States; the Woman's Pentagon Action, held simultaneously in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, and other cities in 1980 and 1981; and numerous actions at sites where design and production of nuclear weapons take place and at nuclear power plants. By the second half of the eighties, it was common practice to open and close meetings of a wide range of organizations in alternative politics with ritual circles of singing, or brief meditation, or a moment's silent "centering" and bonding. More elaborate rituals of mourning and empowerment, for instance, came to be included in political conferences on social justice and ecopace. Ritual practices have also spread to the fastest-growing branch of the men's movement, the "mythopoetic" wing. In workshops and longer gatherings, they use myth, ritual poetry, and drumming to spark a recovery of an "earthy masculinity" that is not constructed of insecure, fearful reactions to the female and to nature. They seek to identify men with the Earthbody once again and with the processes of healing—particularly healing themselves of the pain of being only minimally fathered in patriarchal
culture and denied close friendships with other men, who are culturally positioned as constant competitors. Perhaps the bodily dimension of ritual is particularly effective in dissolving the emotional numbness that many men have identified in recent years as oppressive patriarchal socialization.

Ritual has also spread in a third direction: honoring Gaia, the living Earth, on the solstices and equinoxes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these rituals are communal celebrations by men, women, and children around the country who give thanks for the cyclic renewal of our Earthbody and who seek to align their awareness with seasons of initiation, growth, fruition, and repose—a perception that balances the cultural pressure to regard one’s life solely as a linear trajectory. These ceremonies focus on the seasonal “moment” of the bioregion by bringing into the ritual circle found objects—feathers, leaves, rocks, flower petals—that activate the participants’ sense of relationship with the Earth.

Although the concept of Mother Earth as a sacred whole is extremely ancient in many parts of the world, objections have been raised in recent years to the projection of female identity onto the planet. The most obvious problem is the ill fit between carrying forth concepts that were regarded as a locus of honor and admiration, such as symbolism of the elemental power of the female, into patriarchal contexts, where those concepts are feared, resented, and degraded. A second objection is that patriarchal culture feels that “Mom” (Mother Nature) will always clean up any ecological mess we make and, besides, she would never really kill off her children no matter how badly we treat her. The argument that it is unfair for either sex to claim primary identification with our Earthself may be the most compelling objection. (Curiously, that call for fair play did not occur to men during more than two thousand years of patriarchal religion.) Then, too, there are poor reasons to reject the female metaphor for Earth: A man insisted to me that such identification is “very dangerous,” alluding to the patriarchal fear that women are always just a hairsbreadth away from turning into monstrously powerful biofascists. Personally, I find the notion of Mother Earth to be an image far more subtle and grand than a literal extension of woman’s processes and particularities, but I am not bothered by people’s declining to use a female metaphor as long as they understand this planet to be a body—a celestial body, an interrelated body, a unitive body of intricately balanced and dynamic systems of circulation and generation. It is the Earthbody that we celebrate and cherish at seasonal rituals of the Earth community.

Consciously or not, we exist as participants in the greatest ritual: the cosmic ceremony of seasonal and diurnal rhythms framing epochal dramas of becoming that are composed of a constant dance of subatomic manifestations of matter-energy. When people gather in a group to create ritual, they form a unitive body, a microcosmos of differentiation, subjectivity, and deep communion. To enter ritual space is to feel a palatable sphere of attunement among the energy fields of the participants. Such ritual presence, if successfully created at the outset, by singing, invocation, meditation, or other body-prayer, is at once calming and energizing. It is so pleasing to our body/mind that participants often experience reluctance to move away from the ritual space even when the circle has been formally broken at the conclusion.

Just as myth and symbol are aural and visual religious communication, ritual is whole-body communing that evokes personal emergence within the palpable whole. Ritual process often expands the awareness of one’s bodily presence, along with all the other bodily presences within the circle; participants may experience their presence and form becoming merged with the circle or the ritual space it encloses. One’s sense of group-being becomes as large as the whole, yet one is not lost in diffusion. On the contrary, the expansion of self to the larger group-body intensifies one’s unique sense of capability and energized subjectivity. This simultaneous expansion and intensification is the ecstatic
gift of ritual, a mystery of the erotic. It remains as a body memory that shapes new possibilities in a life increasingly understood to be thoroughly relational and endlessly creative.

In the contemporary renaissance of Goddess spirituality, women have formed ritual groups in order to mark passages in their lives, to affirm their emotional and other mind/body experiences, to heal and to celebrate, to explore new possibilities of being, to empower their efforts and desires, to renew commitment to ongoing social-change work, to enrich their spiritual lives, and to strengthen bonds of communion in this fragmented, atomized society. At times these rituals are wrenching, raucous, or sweetly rapturous. In my own life I have participated in many rituals over the years with a rather fluid configuration of sisterly ritualists: an intimate group of four, a larger group of a dozen or so, and a full tribal gathering of both sexes who assemble irregularly for solstice, equinox, wedding, and funeral rituals that include a multiplicity of friends and relations.

Although it is impossible to convey the experience of ritual on the printed page, I offer brief accounts of two ceremonies that may serve as examples of affirming the female dimension of being even in the midst of diffuse cultural mechanisms that degrade it. The first is a menarche ritual, the second a bride’s prenuptial ritual. (This selection is not intended to slight other rites of passage; I look forward to attending lots of truly great menopause rituals in the future!)

Some months after the daughters of two of us had their first menstrual periods, seven women plus the two adolescents spend a weekend at a hexagon-shaped house in the country with an open deck in the center. On Saturday afternoon the mothers prepare an altar in the womblike round enclosure, a cloth on which they set red candles and a pot of big red Gerber daisies, along with Goddess figurines, pine cones, an abalone shell filled with dried cypress needles, and other favorite objects that people had brought. The group silently drifts toward the circle from various doors and is seated on cushions. We listen as the order of the ceremony is explained. We begin by lighting the dried needles and passing the shell around the circle, breathing in the purifying smoke and fanning it gently to surround each body. We invoke the presence of the four directions and sing a melodic chant: We all come from the Goddess and to Her we shall return like a drop of rain flowing to the ocean. We tell the girls about some of the many, many cultural responses to menses as a visitation of transformative power, a sacred time set apart from the mundane. We tell them of the cultural degradation of women’s procreative power to potential danger and then shameful uncleanliness. We tell them of the invention of counting, the Paleolithic bone-calendars etched with twenty-eight marks, the cycle of women’s blood and the moon. We read them a poetic myth of Hera, goddess of women and the powers of fecundity, who draws forth the lunar blood. We sing again: She changes everything She touches, and everything She touches changes. Then, one by one, the women tell the story of their menarche, that first visitation of Hera—the excitement, the embarrassment, the confusion, the family’s response. After each story, the speaker receives a crescent moon painted with berry juice on her forehead. Some women also speak of their first sexual experiences, of how they hope the girls might think about their bodies and their womanhood. The girls tell their stories last, tales of red blood on white slacks during the middle of movies! The circle is filled with laughter and tears, blessings and hope. We sing a final song, Listen, listen, listen to my heart’s song.... Then the women stand and form a birth canal, an archway with our upraised arms. The two mothers stand at the far end of the passageway, near the opening of the deck into the outer world. One at a time the girls pass through our arch of arms as we chant their names and kiss their cheeks. As they emerge as women, the mothers paint a crimson moon on their foreheads and hug them. Then come gifts and feasting. That was my daughter’s menarche ritual.

When two women in our group married in recent years, we created a prenuptial ritual that draws on the ancient association of women and water. In pre-Olympian mythology, the goddess Hera returned each year for her ritual bath of renewal at the