

Images of the Goddess

Spiritual Aspects of the Women's Life Cycle

by E. L. (Betty) Donaldson

Dans cet article, l'auteure examine trois cycles de la spiritualité des femmes (la virginité, la période sexuelle active et la

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ménopause) dans le contexte contemporain de la vie des femmes, de leur choix religieux et de leur mythologie en se basant sur les vignettes de l'ouvrage Images de la production des déesses

(Images of the Goddess Production) de l'Université de Calgary.

An advantage of being a late bloomer is that one reviews the life cycle with a certainty born from personal experience; the disadvantage is that one can't rewrite the life script. For example, for years I've regarded the three stages of the female life span as maiden, midlife, and crone but only recently have I tried to image these cycles from a woman-centred perspective. When doing so, I've been appalled at the paucity of role models and the difficulties in creatively envisioning female spirituality. It seems so much easier to be gender neutral (an impossible nightmare) or work from an internalized male paradigm. *Images of the Goddess*, 13 separate vignettes or pieces based upon aspects of the women's life cycle, is a performance art production that resulted from my struggle to visualize women as normative, and spiritual, plus the commitment of a number of talented artists to that vision.¹ Produced in the University Club (no small feat), the concept derived from R. Murray Schafer's theatre of confluence in which the fine arts come together like the tributaries of a river to form a microcosm of life itself (see also MacKenzie).

During the first week of January 1995, the audience was invited on a journey, using the program as a map. In order of their preference people could visit five art pieces, five dramatic scenes, an Aboriginal talking circle, a computerized multimedia program, and a video about multicultural women's spiritual traditions; there was a wine bar and dinner was extra. Some participated in all vignettes while others absorbed only one or two. Reactions varied. Most women were stimulated ("thoroughly mindful, heartfelt, and mysterious") and many men challenged ("informative, provocative, and on occasion incomprehensible").

Although we raised \$13,500 for the proposed Gender Institute at the University of Calgary, many of the artists, the audience and I, myself, thought a more important consequence was the clarification of how women's lives reflected a distinctive spirituality. *Images of the Goddess* had been "dedicated to the creative spark of the divine that resides in all of us and is female." It was an attempt to view spiritual life from the perspective of the woman's life cycle, as normative but not necessarily aligned with that of the man's. As such it played with light (what we understand well) and dark (what remains to be explored). This article is a continuation of that effort to profile changes in spirituality during the women's life cycle, using excerpts from real situations, religion and mythology, and the *Images of the Goddess* production. In the following sections, the 13 vignettes that formed the production are described within the context of the women's three-phased life cycle.

Maiden

Few aspects of life enchant as much as a young girl, fresh as spring, full of

innocence, radiant with life. Even fewer are the attempts to record what causes that vitality and how it becomes invisible (see Coles). Feminist critiques of fine art morés identify the male gaze and comment upon female exclusion from the genre, noting the conservatism in all disciplines (see Broude and Garrard; Raven, Langer, and Frueh; Elliott and Williamson). But the world would be impoverished without Barrie's *Alice in Wonderland*, Beethoven's *Für Elise*, and Whistler's *Girl in White*. Christian religion is less replete with images of spiritual young girls: Mary's pregnancy, Ruth's loyalty, Esther's bravery are inspiring narratives—told within the post-puberty context of the female relationship to men. In mythology, the Persephone story is usually of the mother's mourning, while nymphs, feys, and other youth are either asexual or voiceless. Current reality is that young women still are educated within a male paradigm or sold as sexual slave objects. The result contributes to the invisibility, the silencing, and the loss of creativity in adult women. No wonder there are so few great women artists!

In the production of *Images of the Goddess*, two representations of the maiden cycle included a dancer and an actor. "Spring Maiden" included many traditional symbols of purity. Dressed in a filmy white Grecian style robe, a talented, blonde, teenage dancer skipped and whirled among rose petals in an enchanted forest to music from *Education of a Girl Child* by Meredith Monk. She exuded grace, charm, curiosity, mischievousness, humour; she loved life: she was full of spirit. Our dancer brought tears to the eyes of many in the audience. "Persephone," the archetypal female coming-of-age myth, is a story of the mourning queen mother who refuses to nurture anything until her daughter returns. However, because her

daughter has accepted the seeds of the pomegranate from her lover, part of a marriage ritual, she can no longer reside full-time with her mother. Our Persephone had come of age, accepting the juggling of relationships so well documented in recent literature as a distinctive component of women's value system.² She heard her mother's voice begging her to come back, but like all women who mate, she moves toward the male invitation, and the acceptance of her own queenship.

Momma says I should be careful.... Ah, yes, and so you should but the plum, try it. Peel the plum.... Persephone looks at the pomegranate, bringing the two halves together: Here are two halves made whole.... We hear my mother calling. I must return to her world to nurture her dark soul for a while.... Yes, the cycle is eternal, a marriage of light and dark.... And I will return as the season turns. (*Images of the Goddess*)

Thus, our young Persephone uses her power, making choices and decisions about when to be with and when to separate from the important people in her life. These are moral actions, based upon spiritual insights and she has responsibility in the generation of consequent pain and joy. For all young girls who make such

decisions, there is a loss of innocence. The first of their life cycles has ended.

Midlife

The traditional perspective of the



Tamara Thiebaux, "Susan," watercolour, 22" x 15", 1992.

women's midlife cycle is that of motherhood but mid-century technologies of birth control methods and antibiotics have irreversibly changed the lives of most western women. No longer is physical mothering absorbing the health and time of adult women although becoming a mother remains the centerpiece of most women's lives. All creative work is a form of birthing and adult women are only beginning to explore the new possibilities (Donaldson). Whatever they create, their work is unlikely to reflect a perspective identical to that of men

in all aspects of life: reasons for two members of the species are more than biological.

Since the advent of Christianity, for western women religious imagery has been primarily a sanctification of motherhood although the interesting sisters in the Bible, Mary and Martha, suggest other possibilities; even during Biblical times, single women forget some form of public identity that was later denigrated or distorted. Degraded by the persecutions of the witch hunts, few realize how the yearly cycle has so much historical female imagery embedded in it. For example, Easter eggs derive from the goddess Estre and rebirth of spring. Juno was the most powerful Roman goddess, guardian of marriages. Victoria Day represents the flowering of great political power while the provincial holiday in Alberta honours her daughter, and Hallowed evening signifies autumnal transitions between

the material and spiritual realms that Wiccan priestesses celebrated. During the middle ages the subsequent inversion of knowledge evolved into the wicked witch stereotype. There is much to reclaim. Women in non-western traditions have had their ancient connections to great goddesses less truncated thus they often exhibit great self-esteem and psychological centredness although opportunities to participate publicly in their cultures may be limited (Sharma).³

Images of the Goddess portrays midlife in many ways, exemplifying the

diversity of this cycle. The Dark Madonna sculpture, created for the opening of *Images of the Goddess*, stands over six feet and currently resides in the Archbishop's Boardroom of the Calgary Diocese. She evokes Aboriginal roots but also represents the black Madonna traditions of Africa and Europe; she symbolizes the negative part of the life cycle. "Rise Up and Call Her Name" is a video of women's traditions in cultures such



Tamara Thiebaux, "Dale," watercolour, 22" x 16", 1994.

as Africa, Japan, India, China, and Amerindian.

"Women's Labour," a dramatic monologue provides a '90s male voice about "our pregnancy" while "The Kitchen Shrine," a sculpture, featured a kitchen from the 1950s period during which Betty Freidan and her generation began to rebel against their incarceration. In "Forward to the Future," all 13 vignettes were imaged in a multimedia art format in which the computer became an art form which illustrated the vignettes, also providing additional information

about each artist. "Charlotte Whitton" dramatized the first woman mayor in Canada, assumed this role in Ottawa as a mature, unmarried, activist leader. Her booming witty voice was revived during the production to remind all listeners that most women's issues have eternal cycles: daycare, equitable pay for equal work, recognition of achievements, and the need for solidarity to gain political goals. The "Women's Honour Archway" was an interactive art piece that still hasn't found a home. Four painted cedar columns were joined by a latticed roof from which hung 176 wooden "leaves," each painted with the name of a woman noted for her achievement. Most in the audience had never heard of these people but one woman discovered her grandmother's name dangling above her head.

Thus, at unexpected moments intergenerational connections strengthen women's perceptions of themselves as historical beings joined in spirit. Perhaps women's spiritual consciousness is entering a midlife phase, but the possibilities for creative women in their midlife cycle are just beginning to expand. It's a frustrating and exciting time.

Crone

The traditional western perspective of older women is so negative that most women try to make themselves invisible, externally as well as internally. This situation is radically different from many other cultures, such as the Aboriginal and eastern, where age is equated with wisdom, respect, and spiritual insights. As the demographics change, tipping the balance toward senior citizens in North America, it will be interesting to observe what elder women do with their relative health, wealth, education, and leisure time. Never before in history have so many postmenopausal women been so positioned; their potential power for change is very great.

In religion and mythology, the older woman has been associated with death as much as life. No longer

midwife, she is chief mourner as Mary was during Jesus' death. Mother Earth, herself, offers a strong image of seasonal rotations. But the "woman's holocaust" of the Middle Ages, the devastation of women's traditions during the witch burnings, is still such a frightening unconscious threat that most women simply do not look beyond their life experiences to deepen their personal understandings of existential concerns (see Read). In *Images of the Goddess*, the "Aboriginal Talking Circle" led by an elder from northern Alberta became a healing space for many women who told stories, meaningful narratives for many listeners. Much of women's spirituality remains an oral tradition.

The "Crone Dance of Wisdom" provoked the most discussion. Ten feet tall, the image was that of a sacred tree rooted in knowledge and wisdom keening to the young maiden asleep on the ground. For many older women in the audience, this representation was too mournful; as they have aged they experience freedom, joy, and opportunities to be themselves that they haven't had since childhood. Thus, another sculpture, the "Sacred Well," built of polished stones and mirrors, encouraged all involved in the production to rethink their images of women, to reconceptualize their experiences as normative, to reconsider their spiritual identities.

As producer I was rewarded with male reactions to the imagery. One commented, "you know I am a bit of a jock so this immersion was a real education. I think I'm beginning to understand." Another gratification was observing the development of the female artists, some of whom were working consciously for the first time from a woman-centred perspective. The artist who built the kitchen sculpture, Tiki Muivihill, had not been alive during the 1950s and approached the project with trepidation. She read Friedan and Faludi, talked with her mother, and concluded about her shrine:

it is an impenetrable unyielding

icon. This era so often romanticized and glorified is really dead here. A traditional monument might more appropriately be carved in solid stone. This decade was as much about facades as anything else.... Why is the truth of this time forgotten or glorified? What has really changed? Despite my initial reservations embarking on this journey, I am glad I undertook it. I suppose that in order to know where you are going in life, it is important to reflect on what you have left behind.

Perhaps this artist will approach cronehood differently from one more immersed in tradition. I hope I am around to view her work.

Conclusion

All involved with *Images of the Goddess* understood the project to be a starting point although the emotional and professional commitment development varied. We worked alone and together, in trust and with distrust, with enthusiasm and persistence. As always, we benefitted most as individual artists but the work seemed to encourage other people to think more about the woman's life cycle. Thus, the personal becomes political. Images based upon real life contexts, traditional religion, and historical myths proved to be permeable: women as spirited, creative beings are normal.

Each aspect of the trinity (maiden, midlife, and cronehood) contains subphases that should be explored if the woman's life cycle is to be understood and better cultivated. Educational and religious establishments have not yet begun to do so. The extent to which gender realigns female and male perceptions is being studied but curricula rarely address spiritual, thus creative and aesthetic, differences. Only when women can wholly image themselves as spiritual beings, comprised of light and dark nuances, will we rediscover the Holy Land.

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Dr. Donaldson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary became the first Canadian recipient of the Feminist Theology Award (1995), Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, Boston, for Images of the Goddess, a performance art piece production. Subsequent to a residency at the Banff Centre for Fine Arts, print and video scripts have been developed. She teaches a graduate course, "Educating Girls and Women."

¹*Images of the Goddess* was produced at the University Club, January 7-13, 1996. A print script and documentary video will be available by December 1996 for purchase. Contact the author at the University of Calgary, or by email (edonalds@acs.ucalgary.ca).

²Many books summarize the story of Persephone and Demeter but for the beginning of alternative interpretations see Spretnak; Bolen.

³The *Rise Up and Call Her Name* program is a 13-week experiential course about women's spiritual traditions in non-western cultures such as Japanese, Indian, and Amer-Indian. Distributed by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, it has a number of resource materials in addition to the excellent video.

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