

**GRACE UNFOLDING:
A JOURNEY THROUGH
A WOMEN'S CIRCLE**

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Karla S. Giminez

MY SACRED CIRCLE OF APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE

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I am a circle

I am healing you.

You are a circle

You are healing me.

Unite us

Be as one...

~ Women's spirituality song,
composer unknown

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ESSAY 1:
TOWARD WHOLENESS THROUGH COMMUNITY

Community.
Somewhere, there are people
to whom we can speak with passion
Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us,
eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us
whenever we come into our own power.
Community means strength that joins our strength
to do the work that needs to be done.
Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing. A circle of friends.
Someplace where
we can be free.

~ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*

Stepping into a Woman's Circle

A circle of trust can form wherever two or three are gathered –
as long as those two or three know how to create
and protect a space for the soul.

~ Parker Palmer

About a year ago, I became aware of a particular energy humming through my life. My days were filled with “To-Do” lists which never seemed to shrink. My body contracted with tension which, instead of abating with sleep, continually woke me up in the middle of the night, insisting that I attend to duties left undone from the day before. My attempts at meditation became sessions of prioritizing my day or planning future errands or events. I had become disconnected with aspects of my spirit and body; I was enveloped in the energy of stress.

Among my “to-dos” was an assignment for one of my classes; I was to experience church services from various denominations with which I was not familiar. I remembered someone speaking of a nearby monastery which offered retreats and discovered that this organization had a five-day silent retreat scheduled soon. I quickly enrolled and eagerly anticipated the silence and seclusion.

While at this monastery run by the Benedictine Sisters, I was finally able to rest my mind and hear the voice which speaks from the depths of my soul. For me, this voice is a whisper emitting from my heart and uses words of love. “Rest,” it murmurs and I know without a doubt that all else is futile so I lay down my pen, shut off my computer, or abort another meaningless errand. When at the monastery, I heard, “This is all you need,” and I knew that all my questions could be answered through silence and prayer.

No amount of scrambling from workshop to workshop or class to class would heal my spirit more completely, or more quickly, than listening to the guidance offered by the Universe through my inner wisdom. I humbly asked for direction amid all the choices laid out in front of me...and received none. Wait, where is the voice that spoke so clearly? There was only silence. I began journaling. I wrote about my frustrations with school, with my life, with my lack of direction...until I ran out of frustrations. Then I began to write about what I was observing while at the monastery. I wrote about the community of women who lived there, their obvious caring toward each other and guests, their gentleness of manner, and the sense of safety I felt among them. Although I had not been raised Catholic, the community had taken me in as though I was an honored member instead of a stranger paying for lodging. As I continued to write, my musings extended beyond the borders of the monastery to women in general and the shared experiences women have even though we may never meet in the physical. "Find a community of women," my heart whispered and, thus, my immersion began.

I realize that a "community of women" could be defined as vaguely as "a group of two or more females with a common interest," but I knew that a collection of women who were intrigued with the latest fashion or fad would not hold my attention. I was elated when I connected with a group of women who were beginning classes in energy healing. While energy healing is a fascinating modality and I was glad to delve into it more thoroughly, I knew from the onset that my heart was drawn to the actual community more than the offering of the class.

At our initial weekend gathering, one of the women gifted us all with a book by Jean Shinoda Bolen titled *The Millionth Circle*. In it, Bolen uses "The Hundredth

Monkey” story to inspire women to form women’s groups – women’s circles, to be exact – that empower its members to become vehicles of psychospiritual change for the world.¹ The chronicle of “The Hundredth Monkey,” considered a myth by some, is based on the Morphic Field Theory brought forth by biologist Rupert Sheldrake. Sheldrake theorizes that an entire species will change its behavior when a certain number of its members have integrated the change.² A “tipping point,” you might say.

In “The Hundredth Monkey,” researchers study a colony of monkeys on an island over the span of thirty years. One of the monkeys begins to wash her food supplied by the researchers before eating it. She goes on to teach the other monkeys on the island to do the same. While this act was interesting in itself to the researchers, even more incredible was the discovery that monkey colonies on other, far-reaching islands were now washing their food in water. There had been no direct contact between any of the monkey colonies.

Using this theory, Bolen unwraps her vision of thousands of communities of women who hold each other up within a container of love and support, called a circle, who are then strong enough to bring this love to the outside world. As the circles multiply, Bolen believes there will be a build up of spiritually healing energy which will eventually “tip over” into the world.

Reading Bolen’s words, I could feel her vision entering my heart and igniting a fire within. Her dream became mine. I set her book down and knew the words of Gandhi, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Looking at the women’s circle which we had just formed, I saw and felt the possibility of bringing Bolen’s vision to fruition. I believed that this particular community of nine women was capable of holding

sacred space for each other in order to realize their individual wholeness and bring that realization to others outside the circle. My journey had just begun and I had much to learn.

Defining Community

My lessons began with the basics. I had to backtrack to the words I had heard at the monastery, “Find a community of women.” What was community and why was it important? For a class assignment, I wrote a paper on the topic of “community.” I assembled a stack of reference materials, intent on learning every nuance of this gathering of individuals. Instead, the paper became a lengthy exploration merely for the *definition* of “community.”

This can be done with most any word. Take a word you have used without much thought throughout your life, take it purposefully into your mind and heart, and turn it upside down, inside out, and blow it apart, if necessary. When it emerges on the other side, you have a new relationship with the word. It is as if you have taken ownership of it, embodied it. The only stipulation is that you include your *heart* in this process, not merely your mind. This is what I did in order to define “community” for myself.

Among the books I gathered to investigate community, one of my favorites was written by psychologist M. Scott Peck, titled *The Different Drum*. Although the book was written in 1987, the material remains pertinent today, and many of Peck’s concepts are cited in more recent community-based literature. “In and through community lies the salvation of the world,” declares Peck in the introduction to *The Different Drum*.³ He

continues this same tone throughout the book, revealing his passion for what he calls “true community.”

Peck is not describing your local neighborhood or village but, rather, a community of people who forge a bond which requires more than a casual greeting at the post office.

If we are going to use the word [‘community’] meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment...But what then does such a rare group look like? ⁴

Peck’s definition for community – true community – includes commitment, consensus, realism, contemplation, inclusivity, shared leadership, and a safe place to “fight gracefully” and cultivate “the spirit of peace.” His definition and, in fact, his entire book was inspirational and served to encourage me to continue delving deeper for a definition of this “rare group” that connected with my heart.

After perusing a few more books, I constructed my own list of qualities that I felt were present in what I called “authentic community”: 1) Safety, 2) Effective Communication, 3) Collective Spirit, 4) Authenticity, 5) Commitment, and 6) Servant Leadership. At the time I wrote my original paper and even now, I view community through the lens of my women’s circle. I would also describe myself at the time of writing my former paper as an innocent, newly inducted into the world of women’s circles; my lens was tinged with a rosy hue. What I have learned since is that thrashing the term “community” about and filtering it through my mind and heart was not sufficient. I also needed to take each of the *qualities* of community through the same

process. This can be done purposefully by way of contemplation, journaling, and/or meditation, by aimlessly experiencing the sometimes painful path of life lessons, or any combination thereof. I went the “combination” route. Through a variety of circumstances, our “community of women” had begun to crumble; I was being asked to *live* the qualities of community, not merely make note of them. Thus, I began my heartfelt examination of the qualities of authentic community.

Safety

What is safety as related to community? To be clear, my contemplations on this subject went beyond the obvious physical non-violence and into a search for emotional and spiritual safety. According to management consultant Stephanie Ryan, “Community is a place where I am and others are willing to see and be seen, hear and be heard, feel and be felt.”⁵ In other words, within community, members allow themselves to expose their innermost thoughts and feelings without recriminations. However, before most people will risk vulnerability, safety must exist. Paradoxically, how does one know that safety exists until they risk exposure?

Peck addresses this quandary and warns that we must “exercise our wits to discern toward just whom we should behave vulnerably and toward whom not, and when and how and to what degree.”⁶ At the same time, no community can exist without vulnerability and, invariably, Peck declares, “in building community, some brave soul always has to start.”⁷ Within our circle, I was the first to open myself up to the risk of rejection.

One of the rituals our circle had decided to include in our time together was the sharing of our stories. In my opinion, this was an important aspect of becoming transparent; I desired to be fully known. At that time, I was not entirely aware of what was impelling me to open myself to this group of women. I only knew there was within me the yearning for all parts of myself to be witnessed and acknowledged without judgment. I felt as though I was laying myself out on a slab and handing the knife to others. I was giving them the opportunity to cut my heart out with a mere derogatory gesture or word. They did not. Instead, I was held in love and respect as a fellow seeker who is learning through life experiences, whatever form those experiences may take. When I revisited the dynamics within the sharing of my story, I came to the realization that safety requires two qualities – respect and trust – from both the one who displays their woundedness and the party who acts as witness.

Respect

One of the founders of the Myers-Briggs personality-type indicator, Isabel Briggs Myers, lists “respect” as one of the three qualities that underlie any enduring relationship.⁸ (The other two being “understanding” and “appreciation.”) Taking the time to listen, observe, and discover the spark of divinity in others cultivates respect. Respect is the essence of the “Golden Rule” and reflected in every wisdom religion.⁹ Most all of us attempt to behave respectfully the majority of the time, but all of us, at times, slip into disrespectful behavior when our expectations are not met. When disappointed, frustrated, or sad we can withdraw into indifference or attempt to manipulate others by making them feel guilty or afraid. Attempting to get others to change and do things our way shames them because it denies the appropriateness of their

own behavior. Who has not condemned, blamed, coaxed, or isolated another person in an attempt to get them to measure up to what we thought was “right” or to get what we wanted? None of these behaviors is respectful.

According to Jordan Paul, president of Effective Communities International, “Almost all relationship breakdowns, depression, deteriorating health, and business/career failures result from a history of disrespect and distrust.”¹⁰ Conversely, respectful behaviors such as valuing differences, honoring boundaries, acknowledging feelings, showing compassion, and being inclusive cultivates authentic community and engenders trust.

Trust

Authentic community will remain extremely rare if people choose to live within the confines of mistrust. In this human existence, we have all experienced disappointment and pain through our relationships with others. At any one moment, we make the choice of how to frame any situation. It takes hard work and emotional pain to break down patterns of belief established from past experiences and open our hearts to new paradigms. In my opinion, there comes a time within community when the individual members must make the choice to trust.

In her book, *Life's Companion*, author Christina Baldwin portrays the choice to trust as the moment between letting go of one trapeze swing and grasping the next.¹¹ There, between the feeling of one bar in your hand and another bar in the opposite hand, is a moment of surrender; a moment when you move into faith of something beyond ourselves or others. When I decided to share my story with my circle, I was at a point when I had abandoned expectations and ego control and had shifted into faith. Baldwin

affirms, “The ego cannot comprehend spiritual trust because it doesn’t make instinctual sense not to be afraid.”¹² I believe that we can only liberate our lives from fear through faith and trust. “Trust is not a promise that good will automatically come,” writes Baldwin, “but that something good is somehow already present. *For in trusting the sacred is there: it is there.*”¹³ Out of faith and trust grow a certain inner security and relief from fear and deprivation.

The sense or spirit of authentic community can only flourish in an atmosphere of trust. While respect is the foundation of community, trust is the cement that bonds it together. Together, they create the safety.

Our circle never overtly discussed the issue of safety; there seemed to be an assumption that safety would be easy to uphold and, therefore, required no attention. Indeed, time and time again, through the circle as a group and individually as members, trust and respect were demonstrated as we tentatively found our voices and expressed our experiences through stories. But, there were different levels of trust and respect displayed, as can be expected from a group of individuals, complete with varied life experiences. The choice to expose one’s woundedness invariably pivots on one’s view of the nature of the Universe. Is the world viewed through a lens of love or fear? In my opinion, fear can be overcome only through love, which is the force behind respect and trust. Whether that love springs initially from the Divine within the individual or through the Divine within another, a bridge of safety between the two is built which affords a meeting of hearts. To build, nurture and sustain this bridge and, thus, a safe environment within community, the members must practice frequent, open, honest, and heartfelt communication.

Effective Communication

In my opinion, the importance of effective communication in relationship, including community, cannot be overemphasized. We tend to think of communication in terms of the words we speak, but words are nothing more than *tools*. We give words power and can also take that power away. For effective communication, we must be aware of the meanings and intentions that words may or may not convey. This is not always easy to do as we bring with us into any relationship meanings and beliefs attached to words from our family and culture.

My husband's son married a lovely Korean woman who has brought our family the gift of awareness of the meanings and intentions behind words and actions. Through many missteps, we have learned to ask for feedback from her as to her interpretation of poignant conversations or situations. She has shared many humorous communication misunderstandings between her and others since arriving in America. Some of these misinterpretations, however, have affected her deeply and, even after fifteen years, she still struggles to understand the nuances of our language.

In most all communities, the members have divergent backgrounds, upbringings, values and, sometimes, cultures. The individuals may share the community vision but employ different methods of sending and receiving communications. In his book, *Compelled to Control*, J. Keith Miller asserts that there are two styles of openness in communication: skunks and turtles. Skunks spew out their feelings much like a skunk discharges their odor; turtles withdraw into their shell, refusing to share their inner feelings.¹⁴ When examining the differences between communication styles of skunks and

turtles, males and females, cities and villages, and peoples from dissimilar cultures, it is easy to question if effective communication is achievable in community. I believe it is attainable through a process known as “dialogue.”

Dialogue

The kind of communication that supports connection is found more in the interaction of dialogue than the more familiar form of communication known as discussion.¹⁵ Drawn from the work of theoretical physicist David Bohm, dialogue “is a group communication process aimed at exploring the nature and power of collective thinking and how it shapes the culture of a group.”¹⁶ The roots of the word “dialogue” are *dia* and *logos*. *Dia* is defined as *through* and *logos* is defined as *meaning*. Hence, dialogue means “through meaning.”¹⁷ It is the ability to have a conversation where the meaning flows *through* the participants. In a dialogue, people are open to being influenced, literally willing to be changed by the meaning of the words of others. In contrast, the root of the word “discussion” is analogous to the root of the words “concussion” and “percussion,” where individuals propel their view of right and wrong at one another.¹⁸ When communities dialogue together, members have drained themselves of their “knowing” in order to generate space for perceiving and acting new.

In their work as communication specialists and organizational consultants, Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs have devoted their practice to the development and facilitation of dialogue. Through their organization called The Dialogue Group, Gerard and Teurfs have generated essential guidelines for dialogue:

- Listening and speaking without judgment
- Acknowledgment of each speaker
- Respect for differences
- Role and status suspension

- Balancing inquiry and advocacy
- Avoidance of cross-talk
- A focus on learning
- Seeking the next level of understanding
- Releasing the need for specific outcomes
- Speaking when “moved”¹⁹

Integrating these guidelines into communal conversations creates the possibility of a profound shift in consciousness. In my opinion, this change in consciousness is a shift into *heart consciousness*.

Heart Consciousness

Heart consciousness is at the core of communication within women’s circles.²⁰ In her book, *Women Circling the Earth*, circle facilitator Beverly Engel defines heart consciousness as “listening from the heart, speaking from the heart and discovering the innate wisdom we hold within our hearts.”²¹ Rather than adopting a chaotic, emotional mode of interaction, I sense “heart consciousness” as coming from a partnership of the heart and mind of the individual. Instead of allowing the mind to reign supreme, which is common in our Western culture, our capacity for rationality, logic and reason takes its directives from the heart. This profound approach to relating to others comes from a stance of openness and inclusion and holds the possibility of creating new solutions to issues within the authentic community.

Integral within heartfelt communication is “receptive listening.”²² Receptive listening is not the action most often perceived as listening in today’s society. Most everyday conversations that take place are filtered through the egos of the participants, funneling the contents into categories of “accepted” or “rejected.” The “listening” participant has more than likely formed their response to the exchange before the speaker is silent. As a contrast, receptive listening requires that we suspend our judgments and

biases and enter a space of openness to new ideas and views. In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, highly respected teacher and author Parker Palmer describes three visible signs of receptive listening:

1. Allowing brief, reflective silences to fall between speakers, rather than rushing to respond – silences that honor those who speak, give everyone time to absorb what has been said, and slow things down enough so that anyone who wishes to speak can do so.
2. Responding to the speaker not with commentary but with honest, open questions that have no other intent than to help the speaker hear more deeply whatever he or she is saying.
3. Honoring whatever truth-telling has been done by speaking one's own truth openly into the center of the circle – placing it alongside prior expressions as simple personal testimony, with no intent of affirming or negating other speakers.²³

Receptive listening is encouraged in many authentic communities, including women's circles, by the use of a "talking stick," or other device which indicates the speaker at that particular moment. It also serves as a reminder to the listeners to "refrain from interrupting, interjecting, questioning and commenting."²⁴ Receptive listening promotes the sense of safety which is so very essential to the core of all communities.

In my opinion, one of the most important aspects in embracing and integrating effective communication is that the practice does not depend on every member of the community changing. When just one person takes on the challenge of communicating from the heart, a ripple effect is created. Individuals functioning from heart consciousness are noticed by others and everyone in that person's sphere is touched by the new possibility of loving interactions within relationships. I know that I, for one, learned much about effective communication, namely communicating from the heart, from members of our circle. On more than one occasion, a circle sister would lovingly

extract my heartfelt beliefs without the need to change my views but, rather, from a place of truly desiring to *know* me. This practice of listening without an agenda began to emerge in my own interactions with others, both within and outside of circle. But, until we as a society learn to dwell in a perpetual state of unconditional love, all evolving communities will experience *conflict*.

Conflict

The safety contained within authentic community does not preclude conflict. According to Peck, true community provides a “place where conflict can be resolved without physical or emotional bloodshed and with wisdom as well as grace.”²⁵ He goes on to declare that this type of community is unusually adept in conflict resolution because of the members’ enhanced abilities in effective communication.²⁶ This may well be the case in Peck’s vast experience in community-building but, in my limited exposure to the dynamics within community, I have found that conflict resolution is a challenge which, at times, can prove insurmountable.

In discussions with members of various women’s circles, I found that most all of their circles have encountered conflict at some time during their existence. This finding was not a surprise as differing values and beliefs are inevitable in our pluralistic society and, according to noted author John Gardner, “part of the normal functioning of a healthy community.”²⁷ However, I also learned that the majority of the discussed disputes were not considered to be effectively resolved because the conflicted parties refused to appear within circle to address the matter and, instead, many left the circle community. Whether the issue of departing without closure was related to safety within the circle or the women themselves, it is not known. Avoidance is not a constructive solution to conflict.

Without processes for conflict resolution, women's circles and authentic community can never achieve the integration of diverse opinions.

Margaret Wheatley, an expert in the field of organization behavior, shares a unique process rooted in Tibetan teachings which uses symbology and “the passion and energy of all involved to develop greater clarity and insight into truly creative solutions.”²⁸ All participants are asked to approach the process in humility and open to the possibility that others have perspectives that offer value to the conflict. Wheatley points out a very integral component to resolving the situation when she affirms “we’re all on the same side – *that the problem is the problem.*”²⁹ She continues by listing five sequential activities in order to fully understand the problem and how to settle it:

1. Cooling, Quieting – Done in a circle to promote peacefulness and drain drama; Questions are asked, but this is not the time for exchanges or debates; Everyone is invited to speak, in turn, and with a time limit; The core behaviors experienced at this stage are patience and curiosity.
2. Enriching through Fruitful Opposition – Done in a square to create differentiation and to literally “take sides;” Returning to the source of the conflict, the purpose of this stage is to amplify the difference in order to create a fuller, detailed picture of the problem; The task is to go deeply into the rationale of each position; Respect and clear thinking are the core behaviors.
3. Magnetizing Resources – Done in the curve of a half-circle to indicate incompleteness and the need for more perspectives and information; Using the principle of attraction and rejection, the group uses thoughtful analysis to decide what needs to be done to complete resolution; The core behaviors are generosity and patience.
4. Precise Destroying – Done in a triangle with an open apex to symbolize laserlike discernment as to what needs to be destroyed; As in death and rebirth, precision destroying creates the capacity for moving forward; Discipline and discernment are the core behaviors.
5. Intelligent Action – The circle is reformed to indicate completion; Intelligent action is the harvest in working through the process; The participants have become better listeners, more open and curious, and developed new thinking and analytic skills; The core behaviors are commitment and teamwork.³⁰

Wheatley's model for conflict resolution is an option to consider rather than utilizing avoidance or aggression. I question her proposal in stage two to form a square and to literally "take sides." In my view, this action would create unnecessary divisiveness and set up the possibility of a "one-against-the-world" situation, which would not seem to be conducive to future cohesiveness. Instead, I would suggest remaining in a circle to symbolize the strength and wisdom of the collective spirit inherent in the symbol of the circle.

Collective Spirit

To use an old cliché, authentic community is "much more than the sum of its parts." The individual members of a community create an essence, or "spirit," that can be considered collectively as an entity with its own particular energy. The nature of this energy is determined by the accumulated energy of the individual members. This theory was developed by quantum physicists and systems thinkers, although most refer to this phenomenon as a system's "consciousness."³¹ Organizational specialists Joel and Michelle Levey proclaim, "The *quality* of consciousness within a system is defined not by how many neurons, or members, it has but rather by the *quality* of relationships, interactions and communication among its members. (italics mine)"³² It is my contention that the quality of the collective spirit emitting from a community is also determined by the community's intention. In my opinion, the importance of the intention of the group cannot be overstated.

Whether a community has come together for the purpose to enjoy one another's company or to save abandoned pets, there exists in the center of all groups an intention. It is from this intention that all "rules," expectations, and behaviors will emanate. Within

authentic community, there is, *at minimum*, the intention of holding safe space. In my opinion, the other qualities of true community – heartfelt communication, a desire for authenticity, commitment, and a style of revolving, servant leadership – serves to strengthen the group.

When our circle met for the second time, we created a list of our values, principles, and desired experiences. Most all of these qualities were thrown into the mix without much thought behind them. Since that time, I have become aware of the importance of clear, strong intentions. I believe that, to the degree that a community is clear on its intentions, the more effective the community becomes. For example, if the intention of the group is to facilitate the spiritual growth of its members, the more likely that will happen because the group can then monitor their actions relative to the initial intention. This not only benefits the individual members of the group, but the community itself. When constructing the foundation for a community, the intention will determine the power and direction of the collective spirit.

To revisit the situation discussed earlier concerning circle members who left their circles without confronting their conflict within the community, a poignant aspect to this exodus of members is that many of the circles, as a group, did little or nothing to address the issue. Looking through the lens of the collective spirit and intention, this avoidance of conflict brings an interesting concept to the forefront.

During World War II, psychiatrist Wilfred Bion fleshed out an understanding of group behavior through his therapy work with military personnel. Bion determined that every group of people – therapy, organizational, or community – has a task, whether conscious or implicit. As an example, while all individual members of a women’s circle

may be aware of their own desires for connection, they may be fully unaware of the fact that it is their task *as a group* to construct an environment of safety and acceptance in which connection can occur. Bion stated that sooner or later all groups attempt to avoid their tasks and one such method of avoidance was “flight.” In the task-avoidance assumption of flight, groups show a strong penchant to flee from difficult issues. Rather than face these problems, groups will operate as if they *assume* it is their purpose to evade them. According to Bion, such conduct on the part of groups is just as neurotic as it is for individuals.³³ In my perspective, this study reveals the need to clearly state a community’s intention. With an explicit intention, preferably written, flight from a group task may be less likely. It would be interesting to measure the impact of the collective spirit of a group, if possible. What, exactly, can the collective spirit do?

Within the context of my definition of authentic community, the collective spirit is capable of providing trust and respect, heart consciousness, authenticity, commitment and caring leadership. Sarah MacDougall, in her dissertation on the transformative process of PeerSpirit Circles, informs, “in circle the spirits of all are woven into a collective wisdom and energy that gathers in the center of the circle. That wisdom is far greater than the individual wisdom of any one person sitting on the rim [edge of the circle]. And so, the collective spirit...is a gift that circle gives to us in the modern world who are calling out for help, for assistance in building our human capacity to honor one another and creating a global village that values diversity and is founded on peaceful solutions to our conflicts.”³⁴ I believe it is the collective spirit of groups such as authentic communities and circles that promote the spiritual healing of the individual members and, as MacDougall maintains, the “global village.”

In her book, *A Home for the Heart*, therapist and healer Charlotte Kasl states, “The capacity to connect authentically with another human being is perhaps the most sustaining ability we can develop. Healthy community is an integral part of this process when it assures us of a support network where we can make connections and celebrate our joys.”³⁵ Kasl continues to cite examples of the collective spirit of community creating healing bonds through organizations, support groups, workplaces, and public systems. “We are here to love and serve others,” she says, “and in doing so we find our own spirit and meaning in life.”³⁶ Kasl describes the spirit of community as “circles of energy,” creating connections that make us “feel whole.”³⁷ This interconnection found between the community members and the collective spirit can, at times, appear to be both nurturing and chafing.

We are born as individuals, creating boundaries in order to remain intact within ourselves but, at the same time, we are propelled out of those boundaries by a need to connect with others. Therein lies the paradox of community.³⁸ According to Margaret Wheatley, there is “a fundamental recognition that nothing can exist without the other; that it is only in relationship that one can be fully one’s self. The instinct of community is everywhere in life.”³⁹ These instincts for both individuation and connection create a tension within the individual. I venture to say most all persons have experienced the push and pull of membership within a group. The collective community, on the other hand, desires to serve the needs of both the individual and the group. Both the community and the individual are interdependent systems. What, if anything, would lessen the tension and yet create balance between the systems?

Quantum physicists Danah Zohar and her husband, Ian Marshall, postulates that the balance can “only emerge where the individual members stand poised to allow the indeterminacy (inner freedom) of the situation to unfold...This poise...is inseparable from trust – trust in the unfolding potential of the situation and trust in oneself as an individual to ‘ride’ with that situation in a skilled way.”⁴⁰ Initially, this appears to be an effortless solution – merely, change your attitude – but, as discussed earlier, trust, and the required surrender attached to it, does not always come easily.

Another possible solution to easing the tension between collectivism and individuation is offered by Wheatley. She calls it “clarity of purpose” and claims that it can transform “the entire nature of relationships within...community.”⁴¹ She is speaking, of course, about having a clear communal intention. As members focus on the core of the community – its intention and purpose – living with the paradox becomes easier. Intention within community, declares Wheatley, “attracts individuals but does not require them to shed their uniqueness. Staying centered on what the work is together, rather than on single identities, transforms the tension of belonging and individuality into energetic and resilient communities.”⁴² As people release their protective defenses and accept and celebrate the pluralistic nature of our society, the spirit of the community can fully step into its healing energy of connection. However, the community members must remain cognizant that the collective spirit remains authentic to its purpose.

Authenticity

What makes a community “authentic”? A community is authentic when it embodies and operates from its guiding principles, ethics and values. In this discussion

of community, those values, principles, and ethics would include trust, mutual respect, effective communication, commitment, and servant leadership. The intention of the community would also be included in its core principles, whether the group's intention be related to service, individual spiritual growth, or planting a community garden. When all of these factors are brought forward, they can be translated into daily actions and concrete decisions. They can also be scrutinized to determine if the community is working from authenticity. Creating an authentic community includes continuously probing for and challenging assumptions, consciously monitoring congruency between beliefs and behaviors, and identifying the truth while genuinely listening to other's perceptions. Ideally, these same actions are practiced by each of the individual members of an authentic community.

If it is true that the energies of the individual members create the collective spirit of the community, then authenticity must be present in those members to produce an authentic community. As we mature into adults, we learn what qualities within us are supported and what are not. Along the way, we adopt some behaviors, values and beliefs which are encouraged by others but are not congruent with our original self. These principles and actions form what I will refer to as a "false-self" or mask. Whenever we pretend, edit, rehearse, perform, or withhold, the false-self is sustained. To be authentic, we must examine and discard our masks and retrieve the persona we discarded, squelched, or concealed.⁴³ This is living in integrity; this is realizing one's wholeness.

The only way to discern if another is living in integrity is by their actions or words. Is it the responsibility of the community to hold its members accountable to authenticity? I believe it is. Once again, I refer to the interconnection between the

individual members and the collective spirit of the community. The cyclical exchange of energy between the community and its members requires that each hold the other responsible to their own authenticity. If members insist on living through their masks, the community itself will become superficial and be unable to function through its intention. The values of trust, respect, heart consciousness, and service to each other will deteriorate or vanish altogether and, most likely, the members' commitment to the community will be withdrawn. Accountability does not imply that the community asks its members to attain perfection. We are all stumbling on our way to wholeness; it is not an easy journey. Nor does holding someone accountable within authentic community involve hurtful confrontation. Dialoguing through the heart brings the truth to the surface in most all situations, making it possible to recognize one's true self. What I believe the community *can* ask of its members is that they have a *drive and an individual intention* to be authentic. Only then will the community serve the desire of its members – to be authentic – while, at the same time, the members serve the desire of the community – to be authentic.

Commitment

Entering authentic community requires a desire to change and the strength to venture beyond personal comfort zones to explore new ways of relating. While change brings the promise of growth, it also brings discomfort. This is not the time to run for the hills but, rather, to dig in and find the light on the other side. This is when the members' commitment to the community is tested.

Commitment is an important issue to authentic community. Without commitment, it is difficult to instill the necessary trust that is essential for members to feel safe and become vulnerable. Lack of commitment undermines the foundation of authentic community and discourages the openness crucial to its existence. Bolen likens an uncommitted community member to a slow leak.⁴⁴

Members need to be prepared for the commitment they will be required to make in community. To be prepared, it is vital when establishing the purpose and principles of the community that the members reflect on the meaning of the qualities and the commitment required of each goal. This is especially true for communities in which the members have a profound relationship with each other, such as in many women's circles. Engel speaks to the level of commitment within circle:

This commitment also includes having a strong intention to attend each and every circle gathering, and to make the circle a priority on the times when it meets. The only way for you to be really known by other members is for you to be present each time the circle meets. By the same token, other members need your presence each time they reveal something important about themselves.⁴⁵

She also offers some poignant questions for aspirant circle members to ask of themselves.

These same questions could be asked of potential members of any authentic community:

- Am I willing to bring my entire being – my mind, heart and soul to the circle?
- Am I willing to stay alert and present during the circle?
- Am I committed enough to self-exploration that I am willing to endure some discomfort or even pain to achieve it?
- Am I willing to be completely present when others speak?
- Am I willing to speak the truth in the circle, even when it is difficult or painful?⁴⁶

In circle, the commitment required extends not just to the community, but to each person in the circle. When considering the above questions, one quickly comes to the accurate

conclusion that circle, and authentic community, asks for more than merely passive allegiance. This is not, however, analogous to a life sentence to a chain gang.

Commitment to an authentic community creates a heart-bond among members, producing a synergy that contributes to each one's unfolding and, at the same time, to the unfolding of the community itself.⁴⁷ I have experienced this remarkable phenomenon myself and can only describe it as awe-inspiring. As any one member experiences a shift in awareness toward spiritual growth, so do all who are committed to the community. To me, when one commits to an authentic community, they are committing to themselves. The community is *us*.

Servant Leadership

If we work from the premise that the community is us, how does that affect the style of leadership in an authentic community? From my perspective, it insinuates that *all* members in an authentic community are leaders. If using the traditional sense of the word, any organization consisting of all leaders would, most likely, spawn a multi-headed creature doomed to self-annihilation.

Traditional leadership, employed still today in many organizations and most military units, works from the belief that a group of people must follow the direction of one person (presumably more intelligent than the individuals in the group) in order to be an effective troupe. It is assumed that the followers are unable to adequately function to attain their goals without the supervision and maneuverings of the leader. Wheatley refers to this style of leadership as "Command and Control."⁴⁸ I refer to it as "Fear-Based Management" and its roots are in the belief that we are separate, mechanistic

organisms in need of guidance rather than a connected, living, and creative self-organizing system.⁴⁹

At first glance, a theory based on the premise that we are one huge, connected system capable of unending creativity would appear to be a monumental discovery of science. It is, in fact, an ancient story, forgotten or ignored by most all of Western society, but retold over and over in indigenous tribe folklore, spiritual teachings, nature and through poets.⁵⁰ Science is just catching up.

If we apply this old/new belief/theory to the topic of leadership, what does management of a group look like? Wheatley beautifully brings forth the vision of this “new” leadership:

Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us. They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community, that we want to bring more good into the world.⁵¹

To me, Wheatley is speaking about nurturing the human spirit; she is speaking about servant leadership.

The concept of servant leadership is attributed to Robert Greenleaf, who first wrote of this style of leadership in 1980.⁵² Originally presented as leadership based on deep values and service to others, many organizations based in Western society have defined those values to be “excellence, fulfilling one’s potential and allowing others to do so, achievement, quality of products and services, and a commitment to never-ending growth.”⁵³ Personally, I like Zohar and Marshall’s definition of a servant leader, presented in their book, *SQ: Connecting with our Spiritual Intelligence*. “He or she is

attuned to the basic life forces of the universe and, in serving them, naturally serves his or her colleagues, company, society or whatever.”⁵⁴ This “basic life force” refers back to the idea that we are a unified whole – one living system. The community leader who holds this vision sees each member, including themselves, as a part of the whole and serves others to enrich the individual, as well as the community. The principles at the heart of a servant leader naturally cohabitate well with other servant leaders, making it possible, if not preferable, to have an entire community of revolving servant leaders.

There is no such thing as a perfect community, just as there is no perfect anything. Whenever we reach out to connect with others, we will ultimately face confusion and disillusionment. Occasionally, we will experience the excruciating agony of the soul. A women’s circle can at once be a refuge and the place of greatest danger. It confronts us with our most troublesome fears. It surfaces the gaping hole in our hearts and exposes all our futile attempts to fill it. Those fears and holes exist whether we are in community or choose to exclude ourselves from the outside world. However, within community – authentic community – we have the potential to break down the illusion of separation we have adopted in this world and connect to the reality of our unity within the whole.

Conclusion

In all honesty, I had never considered community to be an important aspect of one’s life. I was born into a military family, moving from place to place much of my childhood. Within that framework, I would have defined community as my birth family. However, I was also born with a heart of a hermit and can easily live what others may consider a lonely life. In other words, my “community” can shrink quite small. I only

mention this to point out the radical turn my life took when I stepped into my women's circle. Within one four-day weekend, my heart opened up to virtual strangers and I experienced feelings akin to when I gave birth to my daughter – a fierce protectiveness and love. What was happening to me? I was old enough to have experienced the complexities and heartache of relationships. In response, I had developed a myriad of defenses to protect myself from pain. One of those defenses was an obstacle course each potential relationship candidate would have to endure in order to enter my heart. Inexplicitly, these women had slipped through my barriers without references, tests, or even close examination. I was mystified but, at the same time, I felt the *rightness* of the breach of my walls.

After researching the qualities of community, my views have changed radically. I am now convinced that community is not only beneficial, but *essential* to an individual's mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health. To me, community is a piece of the big picture of wholeness. I also believe in the power of the energy that surrounds community, in particular, women's circles, because I have experienced it. I envision this energy enveloping my heart and whispering, "Trust," "Respect," "Love," "Listen," "Be True," "Serve," "Lead," and my heart responds by expanding to include a larger community of wounded travelers seeking wholeness, as am I.

Essay 1 Endnotes:

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- ² Ibid, 11.
- ³ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 17.
- ⁴ Ibid, 59.
- ⁵ Stephanie Ryan, "Emergence of Learning Communities," *Community Building in Business: Renewing Spirit & Learning*. Edited by Kazimierz Gozdz. (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995), 93.
- ⁶ Peck, *The Different Drum*, 230.
- ⁷ Ibid, 233.
- ⁸ Isabel Briggs Myers and Peter Myers, *Gifts Differing* (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980), 131.
- ⁹ Jordan Paul, "The Personal Elements of Effective Communities," *Community Building in Business: Renewing Spirit & Learning*. Edited by Kazimierz Gozdz. (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995), 213.
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- ¹¹ Christina Baldwin, *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 213.
- ¹² Ibid, 217.
- ¹³ Ibid, 223.
- ¹⁴ J. Keith Miller, *Compelled to Control* (Deerfield, FL: Health Communications, 1992), 242.
- ¹⁵ Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs, "Dialogue and Organizational Transformation," *Community Building in Business: Renewing Spirit & Learning*. Edited by Kazimierz Gozdz. (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995), 144.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 143.
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- ¹⁸ Ibid.
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- ²⁰ Beverly Engel, *Women Circling the Earth: A Guide to Fostering Community, Healing and Empowerment* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2000), 317.
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- ²² Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 119-122.
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- ²⁴ Christina Baldwin, *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 72.
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- ²⁷ John Gardner, "The New Leadership Agenda," *Community Building in Business: Renewing Spirit & Learning*. Edited by Kazimierz Gozdz. (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995), 294.
- ²⁸ Margaret Wheatley, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005), 184.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 184-195.
- ³¹ Joel and Michelle Levey, "From Chaos to Community at Work," *Community Building in Business: Renewing Spirit & Learning*. Edited by Kazimierz Gozdz. (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995), 107.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Margaret Rioch, "The Work of Wilfred Bion on Groups," *Psychiatry* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb. 1970), 56-66.
- ³⁴ Sarah MacDougall, "Calling on Spirit: An Interpretive Ethnography of PeerSpirit Circles as Transformative Process" (PhD diss., Fielding Graduate University, 2005), 114.

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- ³⁵ Charlotte Kasl, *A Home for the Heart* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 315.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 313.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 310-311.
- ³⁸ Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 46.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, 47.
- ⁴⁰ Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *The Quantum Society: Mind, Physics, and a New Social Vision* (New York: William Morrow and Co, 1994), 132-133.
- ⁴¹ Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 50.
- ⁴² *Ibid*.
- ⁴³ Robert Johnson and Jerry Ruhl, *Living Your Unlived Life: Coping with Unrealized Dreams and Fulfilling Your Purpose in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2007), 19-68.
- ⁴⁴ Bolen, *The Millionth Circle*, 56.
- ⁴⁵ Engel, *Women Circling the Earth*, 177.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 177-178.
- ⁴⁷ Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen, *Creating Community Anywhere: Finding Support and Connection in a Fragmented World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1993), 31.
- ⁴⁸ Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 64.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 17-22.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 22.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, 30.
- ⁵² Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *SQ: Connecting with our Spiritual Intelligence* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 33.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 33-34.

ESSAY 2:
**TOWARD WHOLENESS THROUGH CIRCLES; THE MANDALA, LABYRINTH,
AND THE MEDICINE WHEEL**

*You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle,
and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles,
and everything tries to be round.*

*In the old days all our power came to us from the sacred hoop
of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people
flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop,
and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace
and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain and the north
with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This
knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.*

*Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle.
The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball
and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.
Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.
The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon
does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great
circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were.*

*The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is
in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the
nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop,
a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.*

~ Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux 1863-1950

Symbols

Symbols are windows through which we can
view the Essential Nature of our Being.
~ Ngakpa Chogyam

As I continued to examine my experiences within my women's circle, I began to suspect that there was more to this community than merely a gathering of females. At times, there was a palpable energy which flowed through and around each individual, touching deep aspects of ourselves but defying verbalization. My intuition guided my attention to the form of the circle itself: is there an energy which is inherent within the shape of a circle? But, before I could explore the circle, I had to understand symbolism in general.

Symbols are a part of our everyday lives. Whether we are maneuvering an icon on our computer or responding to a road sign, we use symbols to assist us throughout our day. But, what is a "symbol"? It is difficult to grasp a concrete definition of the word because a symbol represents an image which speaks to the unconscious.¹ While symbols can signify factual knowledge in the objective sense, many of them are far more than that. Mythologist Joseph Campbell and renown psychologist Carl Jung define symbols as a substantial force in the psyche of humanity. Indeed, it could be said that the ultimate goal of Jungian psychotherapy is to make the symbolic process conscious. In his book, *Man and his Symbols*, Jung delves deeply into his considerable work in symbology and his explorations into the practice of unearthing unconscious symbols through revelation, intuition, or dreams. This integration of content from the subconscious into

consciousness has the potential to “affect the quality of your personal life, bringing value and meaning to it.”² In other words, symbols provide a pathway to higher spiritual understanding of our physical lives.

In his book, *Myths to Live By*, Joseph Campbell shares psychologist John W. Perry’s description of the physical power of a symbol:

It is an image that hits one where it counts. It is not addressed first to the brain, to be there interpreted and appreciated. On the contrary, if that is where it has to be read, the symbol is already dead. [A symbol] talks directly to the feeling system and immediately elicits a response. When the vital symbols of any given social group evoke in all of its members responses of this kind, a sort of magical accord unites them as one spiritual organism.³

This “magical accord” resonated within me as related to my women’s circle.

When I entered this community, it was as though I had stepped into an ancient tribal energy of oneness, not only as a group, but also the “unity” of myself as an individual; it was an experience of wholeness. It was the energy of the circle.

The Circle

The Power of the World always works in circles,
and everything tries to be round.

~Black Elk

In his study of religious symbology, James Churchward reveals the beginnings of primitive man’s attempts to communicate through symbols. According to Churchward, originally, there were only three symbols – the circle, the equilateral triangle and the square – and the circle was considered the “Most Sacred Symbol” of all.⁴ An endless line, the circle is unbroken and suggestive of the infinite. For centuries, this symbol has

carried the mystical connotation of perfection, unity and wholeness.⁵ Jung coupled the symbol of the circle to the divine:

From time immemorial the circle and centre has been a symbol of the divine, illustrating the unity of the incarnate god: the single point in the centre and the many of the circumference.⁶

The circle also indicates equality. Place a compass on a piece of paper, pivot it around a center point, and the equidistance from the center becomes obvious. This simple experiment reveals the parity and nonhierarchical nature of the circle. These characteristics, as well as the circle qualities of inclusion and protection, were integrated into the symbolism of the round table of King Arthur.

Circles are indicative of movement, such as the cycle of time.⁷ The cyclical nature of life is found in the rotation of the planets, the phases of the moon, and the cycles of death and rebirth. As in the alchemical symbol of the ancient Ouroboros, which is the snake swallowing its tail, life can be seen as a cycle of beginnings and endings, in a state of constant renewal. Archaeologists theorize that our ancient ancestors, noting the mysteries of these cycles of life and death, depicted their thoughts and beliefs on this subject in the spirals and circles found in their rock art.⁸

The circle is an universal symbol; it can be found in nature and all cultures.⁹ A simple walk in the forest or along a beach reveals circular patterns in such things as flowers, shells, tree-rings, and the ripples in a pond after a stone is skipped along its surface. Ancient Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian and Mayan cultures deified the Sun and, thus, the circle through symbolism. Even today, Hindus represent the great Wheel of Existence within a circle and the Chinese fashion the symbols of active and passive forces within the yin and yang of the universal circle. But, whether through religious

beliefs or not, positive or divine energies are attributed to many circular forms. For the purpose of this essay, I will explore the circular structures of the mandala, the labyrinth, and the Native American medicine wheel.

Mandalas

It became increasingly plain to me that the mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the center, to individuation.
~ C. G. Jung

The word “mandala” finds its roots in Tibetan Sanskrit, meaning “sacred circle.”¹⁰ Mandala art is as intriguing as it is beautiful. They are most often circular diagrams representing both the cosmos and psyche, a sacred state of consciousness, and/or an image of a circle containing a divine center.¹¹ For many, the mandala symbolizes the totality of existence, inner or outer. Although the mandala is more readily associated with Buddhism, the art has become more mainstream, emerging in Western traditions and practices, both religious and secular.

One such secular practice that has adopted the mandala as a path toward transformation is the field of psychology. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung employed the mandala as a tool for his and his patients’ psychic growth and transformation. Through his extensive use of the mandala, Jung concluded that spontaneously created mandalas were unconscious attempts to heal one’s psyche.¹² Jung was able to access his client’s unconscious experiences and thoughts through the symbols projected onto mandalas and bring them into the patient’s awareness. By contemplating on these symbols, the individuals were then able to gain insight into their Self, with the possibility of healing.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the mandala is an elaborate structure, rich in symbolism, and a ritualized instrument of meditation. It is believed that, through the mandala, the seeker can achieve enlightenment. In his complex textbook, *The Mandala*, theologian and anthropologist Martin Brauen delves into the intricacies of the philosophy, theory and practice of Tibetan mandalas. This mandala's design includes an outer circle with an inner square, with colorful and complicated designs residing inside of both spaces.¹³ The Tibetan mandala is seen as a microcosm embodying the various divine powers at work in the universe, and it serves as a collection point for the gods and universal forces. As opposed to the Western traditional perception of the earth and human beings at the universe's center, the Buddhist conception of the world has humans living on the margins and attempting to reach the divine center. By mentally "entering" the mandala through meditation and moving toward its centre, one is guided through the cosmic processes of disintegration and reintegration. Concentrating on the divine center allows the meditator to experience unity, and all the power and bliss contained in union with all there is. As Brauen reveals, "Mandala meditation is an aid that makes it easier to discern far-reaching interconnections, while time after time reminding one of the 'divinity' or Buddhahood that underlies everything – more than that, allowing one to actually experience it."¹⁴ These "far-reaching interconnections" makes it clear that the goal of the mandala cannot be the reintegration, or realization of wholeness, of only a single person, but must be twofold – one's own integration for the benefit of all others.

My first, and to date only, experience with creating a mandala came at a workshop after a two-hour breathwork process. Each participant was given a large white sheet of paper with a circle drawn in the middle and was encouraged to create an image

of what mentally emerged during the process. After moving past my initial fears of “doing it wrong” and my lack of artistic ability, I sat down and replicated what had emerged in my mind’s eye while experiencing the music and breathwork in my process. At the time, the finished image did not make “sense” to my rational mind and it wasn’t until months later that I came to recognize the circular pattern of light culminating into a center of darkness as a labyrinth. This mandala, created from my unconscious, was a depiction of my future journey toward my center, which I would undertake during this week-long workshop, where I would battle my mythological Minotaur, and reconnect with my wholeness.

Labyrinths – The Spiral Circle

To walk a sacred path is to know and trust that
there is guidance to help us live our lives on this planet.
~ Reverend Lauren Artress

In ancient Greek mythology, the original labyrinth was built in Crete to house the Minotaur, a cannibalistic half-man, half-bull creature who inhabited the center of the circular structure. Every year, Athenians would send seven young men and seven ladies to the center of the labyrinth, to be consumed by the Minotaur. According to the myth, Theseus, the son of the king of Athens, convinced his father to allow him to be sent to the labyrinth’s center. But, before Theseus left on his quest, he secured a magic thread attached to his beloved Ariadne, the princess of Crete, in order to find his way back out of the labyrinth. Ultimately, Theseus entered the labyrinth, destroyed the Minotaur and safely returned to the outside.¹⁵

This Cretan myth is a variation of the classic hero's journey which has been depicted in novels, poems, and theater for centuries. Theseus, the hero, confronts the challenges in his journey, slays the creature, and emerges victorious. We mere mortals can project our own life's challenges onto the path of the labyrinth and recognize our unique twists and turns on our journey toward our greatest challenge, the battle with the Minotaur. In this myth, the Minotaur symbolizes the dark, negative side of the psychic process of transformation met in the depths of the unconscious.¹⁶ The "magic thread" attached to Ariadne can be viewed as the labyrinth traveler's intuition, heart connection, or feminine energy, providing guidance throughout the journey. This powerful myth provides an eloquent metaphor for a seeker's journey toward wholeness through the use of a labyrinth. As I studied and understood this myth and the power of the labyrinth, I began to seek a physical labyrinth in which I could personally walk. I found one while on vacation.

My husband, Randy, and I pulled into the circular driveway of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The building was a white, modest structure and appeared to be hiding behind the many trees in front in an endeavor to blend into nature rather than be associated with the busy road on which we had just been traveling. The unkempt grass surrounding the church fueled the illusion of an attempt to disassociate from society. The front door proved to be locked and I searched for signs that the building was still in use for Sunday services. A few notices tacked on a bulletin board at the front entrance announced recent and future activities, giving me hope that I would find that which I was seeking.

Before leaving for vacation, I had searched the internet for labyrinths in the Fort Lauderdale area in the hopes of walking a sacred circle. I was ecstatic to find one a mere seven miles from our resort. Now, standing at the locked entrance to a seemingly neglected church, I was disappointed and forlorn. The website had boasted of an active ministry around the church's outdoor labyrinth, complete with a "labyrinth café." I was reminded again of the unreliable nature of the timeliness of website information. With a sigh, I ventured around the side of the building, wading through the dew-kissed long grass, searching for the labyrinth. There, alongside the building and beneath two large trees, was a mulched, rock-lined labyrinth. I tried to visualize the structure in its glory – weeded, groomed and celebrated as a sacred space. I felt a pang in my heart at the labyrinth's appearance but knew that the sacredness of a space is not defined by outward beauty, but by the intention of its user. With that in mind, I stepped into the labyrinth and began my walk to the center.

Immediately, my eyes and mind reached out to estimate how long this walk would take, calculate my route, and determine my progress thus far. And, on the heel of those thoughts, I realized how the labyrinth was mirroring my life journey. With a few centering breaths, I gently guided my presence to my heart and tears of relief filled my eyes at the knowing that I am not in control of my life's journey. As in the labyrinth, I need only to place one foot in front of the other and breathe. I was overwhelmed with gratitude that life is, indeed, a mystery and I can release my white-fingered grip off the imagined steering wheel of my life and surrender to the Universe.

Much like in my meditations, as I wandered toward the labyrinth's center, my mind captured and released thoughts, some trivial (Is that a lizard running across my

foot?), some revealing (Am I making Randy wait too long?). As thoughts emerged and drifted away, the labyrinth seemed to reflect back whatever I needed to discover. I was surprised when I found myself at the center, having been lulled into the rhythm of the twists and turns. There, in the center, I consciously breathed through my heart chakra and asked to feel the embodiment of all I am. On my walk back out, I felt a strength and *completeness* I had not experienced on the inward journey. It felt as if I were bringing something new of myself to the outside world. I was energized, anticipatory, and heartfelt. As I stepped out of the circular path, I knew I would seek another labyrinth, closer to my home, in order to walk into this experience again. But, I also came away with questions. What happens when a sojourner steps into this structure? Is there a “special” energy that inhabits the labyrinth?

In the 12th and 13th centuries, hundreds of years after the Cretan labyrinth, Christians adopted the labyrinth as a symbol to meet the needs of their religion – to them, the circular path reflected the route to salvation. At that time, labyrinths were created on the floors of cathedrals across Europe as tools of symbolic pilgrimage and prayer. One of the most famous examples was built circa 1200 on the floor of Chartres Cathedral near Paris, France. This well-known Christian labyrinth, featuring a rosette motif center, is sometimes referred to as the “Road of Jerusalem” and, at one time, served as a substitute for an actual pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹⁷ The cathedral was said to possess the power to transform the pilgrim as they moved to the labyrinth’s middle point by replenishing their spiritual energy and refreshing their soul. Today, the Chartres labyrinth provides inspiration for contemporary labyrinth models as a tool for spiritual insight and growth.

In her soulful book, *Walking a Sacred Path*, theologian Lauren Artress shares her vision and passion for a “labyrinth network” to guide seekers to the transformative power of the “spiral circle.”¹⁸ She describes this power as a spiral of energy:

When walking the labyrinth, you can feel that powerful energies have been set in motion. The labyrinth functions like a spiral, creating a vortex in its center. The path into the center of the labyrinth winds in a clockwise pattern, and the path back unwinds counterclockwise. The spiral is a basic form in nature – although the labyrinth spiral is more complex. The circular path inward cleanses and quiets us as it leads us in. The unwinding path integrates and empowers us on our walk back out. Walking out of the winding path, we are literally ushered back out into the world in a strengthened condition.¹⁹

I was surprised to read how Artress’ description of the energetics attached to the inward and outward trips correlated exactly with my own journey within the Unitarian church’s labyrinth. Apparently, the circular form, along with the associated spiral, contains an empowering energy that connects to us on a primal, instinctual level.

In her book, *Exploring the Labyrinth*, Melissa West quotes labyrinth maker and lifetime sacred geometry student Robert Ferre as saying:

I think the power of the labyrinth is that it takes us way back to a prescientific time when our minds didn’t rule our bodies, spirits, and souls. The labyrinth speaks directly to the proportions that we are all actually even made of. The idea of sacred geometry was to discover the sacred building blocks of creation itself. There’s something very elemental about the labyrinth that speaks to who we really are at our deepest level, a much deeper level than the shallow one of modern society.²⁰

The energies contained within the labyrinth have been compared to a “tuning fork” with the ability to unblock the traveler’s energy field through the power of “symbols and sacred space.”²¹ Throughout history, the circular symbol of the labyrinth has represented the inner journey toward wholeness and the discovery of Divine within.²² Opening to

this sacred space within the labyrinth can be a profound journey – a journey to one’s center of being.

Unlike mazes, labyrinths have no high walls, dead-ends or wrong turns; they do not tease or challenge those who enter. As opposed to the linear, rational thought process necessary to traverse a maze, the labyrinth encourages the intuitive, creative, symbolic mind to emerge. Labyrinths are ancient unicursal (one path), two-dimensional paths that can be three, seven, or eleven circuits around the center within the great outer circle.²³ This mystical ritual gently offers the participant to journey to the center – of the labyrinth itself and of the individual. According to Jung, the unconscious is often symbolized by the labyrinth; the journey through its circuitous route can be analogous to the psychoanalytical quest for self-discovery.²⁴ Inside the labyrinth, we have the opportunity to meet those parts of ourselves, what Jung named the shadow and the Creten myth referred to as the Minotaur, which we have rejected and attempted to hide. The labyrinth provides a place to meet, own, and integrate all parts of ourselves. As Artress shares, “In the space of the labyrinth, we can feel our fear as well as our yearning.”²⁵ As the traveler meanders through the labyrinth, they are drawn near to the center and then away again, much as in life itself, until the explorer finally arrives at the center.

“God makes himself known to the world; He fills up the whole circle of the universe, but makes his particular abode in the center, which is the soul of the just” said theologian Lucian over eighteen centuries ago.²⁶ As stated earlier, Jung also regarded the center as the symbol of the divine. This does not necessarily mean that the labyrinth walker will meet God, Buddha, Christ, or the Goddess in the center of the labyrinth. Each individual has their own unique experience with each occasion within the labyrinth.

However, for many, the center of the labyrinth can symbolize connection between their consciousness and their higher symbol of unity, or “the sacred circle within the sacred circle of life.”²⁷ Essentially, it is a place to connect with their higher selves and to realize their wholeness. Whatever the individual experience in the center though, eventually, the sojourner turns and starts back out of the labyrinth.

From the center of the labyrinth, the individual walks the same path out. The outward trip represents the return to the world, in which the gifts of illumination are brought back to be manifested in life. Artress beautifully describes the outward journey as:

Realistically and symbolically the act of taking what we have received out into the world. This is an empowering and integrating part of the walk. We can honor what has happened in the labyrinth. We may only have a vague sense of the emotion stirring in us...Other times we may have a clear sense of what has come to fruition.²⁸

In my opinion, this symbolic act of stepping “out into the world” can free energy which can then be channeled back into the world in the form of service. In this manner, the labyrinth reveals its power in not only personal transformation but, perhaps, in community or global transformation.

Artress’ vision of a network of labyrinths throughout the world appears to be a worthwhile goal for troubled communities, perhaps providing a tool for spiritual healing. Most labyrinths today are used primarily for meditative or ritual purposes and are found in hundreds of private and public locations across the globe, including churches, schools, museums and gardens. One form of the labyrinth which has been used for hundreds of years by a particular culture is the Native American labyrinth, commonly referred to as the “Medicine Wheel.”

The Medicine Wheel

The Medicine Wheel is a springboard of power that
will allow you to link up with all the energies of the Universe.
~ Sun Bear

The sacred circle has long been a basic form in Native American artwork, dwellings, clothing, and dances as well as in healing practices and rituals. Sacred drums, rattles, and dream catchers represent the circle and mirror the shape of the sun, moon and earth. One of the most prevalent Native American structures to embody the powerful energy of the circle is the medicine wheel. A typical medicine wheel is a structure of stones, which contains a central circle, spiral or cairn of stones from which lines of other stones radiate, often as “spokes” to an outer circle of stones.²⁹ Since ancient time, Native Americans have created many such arrangements of stones and held them sacred.

Created over the course of the past 4500 years, medicine wheels guard the mysteries of their ancient origins and uses, while tantalizing us to want to know them better as a vital part of this continent’s heritage. These stone circles continue to draw people to them for sacred, ceremonial and healing necessities. Many seem to exude sheer power and energy and some astronomers believe them to have astronomical significance.³⁰ The famous Big Horn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, for example, is believed to act as a calendar.³¹

Whatever the location of the medicine wheel, at its heart is the circle, spiral or cairn of stones. From this center radiates lines of stones and the ends of these lines become points on an outer stone circle. Sometimes the outer circle is closed, but it

usually has one or more openings.³² The size, the form of the center, and the number of spokes vary in different medicine wheels, but the sacred circle is a constant theme.

Native Americans saw life as a circle, cyclical in the passing seasons and the nature of birth, death, and rebirth and the interconnectedness of life. They realized the importance of living within these rhythms and connections and brought these intrinsic beliefs into physical form through the medicine wheel.³³ Creating sacred space in which to pray, fast, seek visions, focus on group needs, or predict the seasonal behavior of game animals or the weather was natural for peoples living close to nature in much earlier times. The prehistoric medicine wheel sites, mounds, and earthworks in North America suggest the heightened spiritual quality of particular places that seem to have served as primal cathedrals – shrines on the land.³⁴ We can only guess about ancient ceremonies and honoring rituals but these sites still exude a source of power that many visitors feel upon visiting them.

Today, the medicine wheel remains a crucible of healing, a spiritual center, an altar, an energy center, and a meeting space around which to celebrate life. Some people go alone to the medicine wheel for vision quests, prayer, self-knowledge and personal renewal. Others see it as a place to gather people together for drumming, fire ceremonies, celebrating, teaching and singing.

The medicine wheel has particular appeal for us today because it is a powerful spiritual structure that we can create for ourselves. Within this wheel of life, we can be drawn closer to nature and native peoples and affirm our personal ties with the earth, but we can also move into new healing and spiritual realms. More and more, Native Americans are sharing the wisdom teachings embodied in the medicine wheel with all

humankind. In her inspirational book, *Shamanic Healing within The Medicine Wheel*, healer Marie-Lu Lorler states:

The Medicine Wheel is the universal power of love given to all people since the very beginning of human life on Earth. It is not wisdom from the Indians. When Mankind split into different races, the Indians had the task of keeping the wisdom of the Medicine Wheel – this they did in a holy way. Now, in the beginning of the Aquarian age, a new inspiration takes place in the human heart: it is the communication of all traditions, religions, culture and harmony in the Oneness of God within.³⁵

With this in mind, I located a nearby medicine wheel so that I could experience first-hand the power within this sacred circle. This medicine wheel was located in the backyard of a healing center, which also served as a personal residence. I was given a tour of the wheel by the center's owner, Lynn, and briefly informed as to how to make use of it. After I asked a few questions, Lynn led me into the wheel and called in the four directions. Then, I was left alone to fully experience the wheel. I had been instructed to walk clockwise until I felt drawn to a specific location within the wheel. I had brought the process of my emerging Master's paper into the circle; I wanted to experience how the forces of the wheel's four directions fit together to give me guidance in the completion of my paper.

I turned to the east – that place of sunrise and new beginnings – and asked, “What is yet to fully emerge into clarity? What needs to be developed before it can be birthed?”

I turned to the south – the place of the noontime sky, where everything is at its fullest – and asked, “What is in the fullest light, or clear? What has reached its peak?”

I turned to the west – that place of sunsets – and asked, “What is coming to completion? What is leaving seeds for next season?”

I turned to the north – the place of the North Star, always constant, never changing – and asked, “Where am I stuck? What remains unchanged?”

Each turn inside the wheel brought new awareness to my consciousness; east, creativity and inhaling; south, ripeness and full inhalation; west, dissolving and exhaling; north, emptiness and full exhalation. Eventually, the cyclical nature of things, even within a Master’s paper, began to take on a balanced, whole perspective; there was nothing which was separate. Everything within the medicine wheel was one and there was nothing outside of the circle. For me, the medicine wheel promoted a “whole systems” outlook and I began to feel the cohesiveness of my paper which, until that time, had eluded me. As I left the wheel, I was ready to move forward and participate in the unfolding of my paper.

Conclusion

God is a circle whose center is everywhere
and whose circumference is nowhere.

~ Empedocles

Obviously, the mandala, labyrinth and the medicine wheel are complex structures that contain multiple layers of awareness. One concept that moves to the forefront as I studied each circular form was how each holds a true center, contrary to a linear perception. I believe when we enter a circle, our minds expand into a circular manner of thinking. With linear thinking, we develop an affinity to establish beginnings and endings, losing the “big picture” aspect which reveals the circular nature of time and space. Rather than focusing on linear goals, when we look at situations through a circular, “big picture” lens, we realize that what really matters in life is the *way* we

journey in our wheel of life. In other words, it is not our spiritual achievements that hold meaning, but *how* we accomplish them. After all, as we learn from the medicine wheel, we all return to the same place at one point or another. This clearly illustrates the wisdom in cherishing the *journey*, not the destination.

But, more than the concept of the “big picture” view of life, through my exploration of my topic, I was consistently made aware of the nature of the circle center. To the Buddhist, the mandala represents the universe with a divine center.³⁶ Jung concluded that the mandala was the center of a person’s being. The ancient labyrinth has proven over and over again to provide a pathway to divine knowledge for the seeker; it is a physical representation of how all paths lead to the center of being. And, according to Native American teachings, the medicine wheel’s center transmutes the “spokes” of the four directions “into pure wisdom” and provides cosmic guidance.³⁷

Even in a women’s circle, “there needs to be an understood authority that resides within the circle,” declares Christina Baldwin, a facilitator of PeerSpirit circles since 1991.³⁸ She warns that this “authority” should not be embodied by any individual, as there is a danger of the circle becoming unstable and morphing into a triangle, with its hierarchal concepts of inequality. Baldwin continues, “On the other hand, if authority is held as a spiritual concept, the circle can remain intact, operating as a peer group of people who choose to imbue the center with their vision of the whole...”³⁹ In a circle with a spiritual center, the group takes on the same divine energies present in the mandala, labyrinth, and medicine wheel.

What I found within each of the circles discussed is that they all can inspire change, a sense of peace and a deeper connection with the divine. They are, in fact, each

a container for “sacred space.” Within such structures, we are able to journey to our hearts, where the immortal abides. This quiet presence is always within us; it is the still voice at the center of our souls. At this center, we can align ourselves with the energy-flow of the divine and become absorbed within the power of the universe.

Sacred space is created when we set apart a certain spot or formation and imbue it with reverent feelings. It is through intention that a particular place or structure is instilled with sacredness. I have come to believe that the circle symbol contains the energy of sacredness, which was set by the intention of our collective consciousness thousands of years ago and continues today. Our ancestors recognized the cyclical nature of life through observation of their surroundings and life events and moved toward the still, silent center of this circle of being. It was there that early humankind found the sacred. I believe every human being tends, even unconsciously, towards this center, where he can find integral reality – sacredness – and the point of connection between human and Divine consciousness. There, we quiet the mind and open the soul, evoking a feeling of mindfulness and love... and step into wholeness.

Essay 2 Endnotes:

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- ³ John W. Perry, As quoted by Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York, Bantam Books, 1973), 89-90.
- ⁴ James Churchward, *The Sacred Symbols of Mu* (Albuquerque, NM: BE Books, 1988), 119.
- ⁵ Tony Allan, *The Symbol Detective: How to Decipher Mystical Motifs – and Know Where to Find Them* (London: Duncan Baird, 2008), 10.
- ⁶ Carl Jung, As quoted by Martin Brauen, *The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 122.
- ⁷ Chetwynd, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 319.
- ⁸ Bailey Cunningham, *Mandala: Journey to the Center* (New York: DK Publishing, 2002), 44.
- ⁹ About.com, s.v. “circle symbol,” <http://altreligion.about.com/library/weekly/aa062003a.htm> (accessed August 25, 2008).
- ¹⁰ Cunningham, *Mandala*, 12.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, 243.
- ¹³ Brauen, *The Mandala*, 10.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 124.
- ¹⁵ Helen Curry, *The Way of the Labyrinth: A Powerful Meditation for Everyday Life* (New York: Penquin Compass, 2000), 28-29.
- ¹⁶ Chetwynd, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 255.
- ¹⁷ Cunningham, *Mandala*, 54.
- ¹⁸ Lauren Artress, *Walking the Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 66.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 66-67.
- ²⁰ Melissa West, *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 42.
- ²¹ Ibid, 43.
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- ²³ West, *Exploring the Labyrinth*, 6-7.
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- ²⁵ Artress, *Walking the Sacred Path*, 78.
- ²⁶ <http://www.causeofliberty.com/resources/liberty-quotes/> (Accessed August 27, 2008).
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- ²⁸ Artress, *Walking the Sacred Path*, 78.
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- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ancient Observatories, Timeless Knowledge, <http://solar-center.stanford.edu/AO/bighorn.html> (Accessed August 27, 2008).
- ³² Sun Bear, Wabun Wind, and Crysalis Mulligan, *Dancing with the Wheel: The Medicine Wheel Workbook* (New York: Fireside, 1991), 60-62.
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- ³⁵ Marie-Lu Lorler, *Shamanic Healing within The Medicine Wheel* (Albuquerque, NM: Brotherhood of Life Publishing, 1998), 16.
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ESSAY 3:
TOWARD WHOLENESS THROUGH HEALING THE FEMININE AND WOMEN'S
CIRCLES

Imagine A Woman

Imagine a woman who believes it is right and good she is woman.
A woman who honors her experience and tells her stories.
Who refuses to carry the sins of others within her body and life.

Imagine a woman who has acknowledged the past's influence
On the present.
A woman who has walked through her past.
Who has healed into the present.

Imagine a woman in love with her own body.
A woman who believes her body is enough, just as it is.
Who celebrates her body's rhythms and cycles as an exquisite resource.

Imagine a woman who embraces her sexuality as her own.
A woman who delights in pleasuring herself.
Who experiences her erotic sensations without shame or guilt.

Imagine a woman who honors the body of the Goddess in her
Changing body.
A woman who celebrates the accumulation of her years and her wisdom.
Who refuses to use her precious life-energy disguising the changes in her
Body and life.

Imagine a woman who has access to the full range of human emotion.
A woman who expresses her feelings clearly and directly.
Who allows them to pass through her as gracefully as a breath.

Imagine a woman who tells the truth.
A woman who trusts her experience of the world and expresses it.
Who refuses to defer to the thoughts, perceptions, and responses of others.

Imagine a woman who follows her creative impulses.
A woman who produces original creations.
Who refuses to color inside someone else's lines.

Imagine a woman who names her own gods.
A woman who imagines the divine in her image and likeness.
Who designs a personal spirituality to inform her daily life.

Imagine a woman who refuses to surrender to gods, gurus, and higher
Powers.
A woman who has descended into her own inner life.
Who asserts her will in harmony with its impulses and instincts.

Imagine a woman who is interested in her own life.
A woman who embraces her life as teacher, healer, and challenge.
Who is grateful for the ordinary moments of beauty and grace.

Imagine a woman who authors her own life.
A woman who trusts her inner sense of what is right for her.
Who refuses to twist her life out of shape to meet the expectations of
Others.

Imagine a woman who participates in her own life.
A woman who meets each challenge with creativity.
Who takes action on her own behalf with clarity and strength.

Imagine a woman who has crafted a fully formed solitude.
A woman who is available to herself.
Who chooses friends and lovers with the capacity to respect her solitude.

Imagine a woman who refuses to diminish her life so others will feel better.
A woman who brings the fullness of her years, experience, and wisdom
Into each relationship.
Who expects others to be challenged and blessed by her presence in
Their lives.

Imagine a woman who assumes equality in her relationships.
A woman who no longer believes she is inferior to men and in need of
Their salvation.
Who has taken her rightful place beside them in the human community.

Imagine a woman who refuses to use her precious life-energy managing
Crisis and conflict.
A woman whose relationships deepen in satisfaction and contentment
Without depleting her.
Who chooses friends and lovers with the necessary skills to navigate through the
challenges of life.

Imagine a woman who values the women in her life.
A woman who sits in circles of women.
Who is reminded of the truth about herself when she forgets.

Imagine a woman who has relinquished the desire for intellectual safety
And approval.
A woman who makes a powerful statement with every word she speaks,
Every action she takes.
Who asserts to herself the right to reorder the world.
Imagine a woman who has grown in knowledge and love of herself.
A woman who has vowed faithfulness to her own life and capacities.
Who remains loyal to herself. Regardless.

Imagine yourself as this woman.

~ Patricia Lynn Reilly

The Search for Wholeness

The eternal feminine draws us upward.

~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

When my daughter left for college years ago, I was unexpectedly plunged into a descent into darkness. Because it coincided with perimenopause, I was confused as to whether the depression that was seeping into my mind was hormonal, mental, situational or otherwise. After a year or so, it no longer mattered what precipitated the ongoing depression, I simply surrendered to the feelings and thoughts stirring within my heart and mind, and I slipped into the abyss of the cave. I had the image of flowing down a giant slide, far below the earth, and living my life in darkness. Along the way, I was filled with anger, desolation, confusion, and grief. I became disillusioned about all I once “knew” and lost my old point of reference to reality. While in this abyss of darkness, I was stripped of my identity and perceptions of life. There was a sense of being naked and abandoned. There, in the dense silence and cold, I came face-to-face with death and contemplated stepping into the other side.

Instead, I chose to live with no fear of death, which liberated me to be myself. I felt as though I had to begin from scratch to discover exactly who “me” really was. I had discarded or given away most all of “me” in order to conform to others’ or society’s standards. For the first time, I actively pursued getting acquainted with *my* emotions, values, thoughts, beliefs, body, sexuality, mind, and intuition. Along the way, I found a deeper sense of compassion, connection, and divinity – I had rediscovered my feminine nature.

Since that time, I have learned to appreciate the dark, enigmatic side of life. The cave which once was so frightening is now where I occasionally visit to know myself more fully. I am attracted to the vast depths of the human mind and I purposely try to stay in touch with my unconscious. I am learning to trust my intuitions, love my body, be in tune with nature and value the feminine wisdom that emerges from my depths. My journey thus far is every woman's journey. It is the journey to themselves – to that deep, dark, juicy place within each woman that yearns to be whole unto themselves and, yet, connected to all there is.

Women today are on a tremendous spiritual search. A glance around theological-based seminars, spiritual conferences, therapy groups, and retreat centers reveals that the majority of attendees are female. Behind this surging feminine energy is a yearning to understand who we are and what our purpose in life is. We long to live meaningful lives in harmonious rhythm with the sacred energies of the earth and heavens. Many of us hunger to know how to live with a sense of spiritual connectedness and belonging each day and are at a loss as to the source of our feeling of disconnection. The sense of connection and wholeness which we seek appears obscure and tenuous. I believe modern women's search for wholeness must begin with reclaiming our feminine Self and a women's circle can provide a structure to facilitate our transformation.

Healing the Feminine

The Feminine interprets 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' to mean, 'Be whole and complete, in both shadow and light, just as your Mother, the Cosmos, is whole.'

~ Sufi Order of the West, *Hearts and Wings*

The complex, circular nature of the feminine, as opposed to the masculine linear nature, has been greatly dismissed by our Western culture. This denunciation of an integral part of humankind has caused an internal fragmentation which is detrimental to the spiritual growth of both genders; reintegration of the feminine nature is a task that must be faced in order to realize the wholeness of men *and* women. But, in my opinion, this discord seems to be especially devastating to the feminine soul and is the focus of this paper.¹ The feminine nature is not easily understood by those entrenched in rational thinking. There is a softness – an inclusiveness – of the feminine and to be *excluded* in society goes against the very essence of who we are. While the primary nature of men is upheld and honored, the inherent feminine spirit of women is largely only tolerated.

Our culture holds the masculine energy in high regard. Collectively, we maintain values such as logical thinking, goal-oriented movement, control, aggression, and hierarchical power; these are values associated with the masculine.² The principles of nurturance, holism, surrender, intuition and life-affirmation are linked with the feminine.³ While both the feminine and masculine qualities are present in both genders, in a society where masculinity is considered power and being in control, many men debase or fear feminine qualities and repress them in themselves.⁴ It follows that, with our society's strong allegiance to the "doing" qualities of the masculine and the spurning of the "being" feminine qualities, many of us women have found ourselves with increased disdain for our own nature.

In her insightful book, *Kaleidoscope*, Jungian psychologist Helen Luke rebukes the early feminist demand for "equality" between genders and encourages us "to discriminate and accept *difference*" in our *psychic* nature.⁵ She writes:

Whether a woman is efficient or brilliant in some sphere hitherto deemed masculine, or whether she remains in a traditionally feminine role, modern woman must discriminate and relate to the image of the masculine spirit within her, while at the same time maintaining her roots in her basic feminine nature – that which receives, nourishes, and gives birth on all levels of being through her awareness of the earth and her ability to bring up the water of life from under the earth.⁶

Another respected Jungian psychologist, Esther Harding, warns that the “awakening” of the modern woman’s heretofore latent masculine side has moved her far from her feminine instinctual nature, creating an internal conflict which may surface in physical or mental disturbances.⁷ I am reminded of a female patient who presented at the ER with symptoms of asthma when I was working as a nurse years ago. She was a college student working on her dissertation and, as the end of the semester was rapidly approaching, her work on her research had come to a halt as her asthma symptoms escalated. Through the course of her college career, she was a frequent visitor to the ER, suffering from a multitude of diseases, skin conditions, and “accidents.” She eventually received her PhD, as her body deteriorated. I see now how her body was screaming at her, trying to get her attention. I fear she was not an anomaly but, rather, one among many women who plow ahead to achieve what their soul does not want. It becomes apparent that the healing of the feminine is an important aspect of woman’s general and spiritual health.

But, how do women in a patriarchal society resurrect their “basic feminine nature?” Inspirational speaker and writer Marianne Williamson declares that personal transformation “is the only antidote to the pernicious effects of society’s backlash against genuine female empowerment.”⁸ Women must go deep. We must dive down, far down, past the “shoulds” and “should nots,” past the spoon-fed beliefs, down into the earth of

our spiritual core. There, we must dig into the dirt to find the neglected seedlings of our original Self. It is there that we will find the feminine aspect of the Divine, the Goddess, also known as (among many names) the Great Mother, the Divine Feminine, Mother Earth, and Gaia.

In her provocative book, *Descent to the Goddess*, therapist Sylvia Perera asserts that “the return to the goddess, for renewal in a feminine source-ground and spirit, is a vitally important aspect of modern woman’s quest for wholeness.”⁹ Williamson also declares the “worship of female gods” to be “a powerful tool for reclamation of our glorious feminine identity.”¹⁰ These women voice the popular theory that a significant step toward spiritual healing is through the “resurrection” of the Goddess.

According to archaeological evidence, there was a time, thousands of years ago, when men and women lived in an egalitarian society and the values of the feminine were vital elements of daily life.¹¹ Women were priestesses and healers and revered by both genders. The archeologists surmise from their findings that, before there was the worship of God, there was the worship of Goddess.¹² Since then, it has been speculated that history has been rewritten to expunge the collective memory of the veneration of all that is female.¹³ Today, however, the local bookshelves groan under the weight of material available for those who desire to learn about the revival of the Divine Feminine. Many women’s circles incorporate ancient traditions and rituals of the various goddesses into their meetings.

Another way to reconnect to the Goddess and her feminine energy is through the study of myths. C. G. Jung, in his studies of the underlying structure of the human personality, paid particular attention to myths. Myths are literature not written or created

by a single individual, but produced by the imagination of a culture.¹⁴ Through myth, levels of reality of both the outer and inner world can be depicted and symbolically understood. Because the feminine principles emerge from a source not of the rational or intellect, but from the language of images and symbols, it is through myths that the instinctual nature of the feminine can best be understood.

Many psychologists, such as Luke, Bolen, Harding and Perera, have reintroduced and interpreted the classic myths associated with the Goddesses to bring forth the images of a woman's journey toward self-knowledge and integration. Other female authors, namely Maureen Murdock and Jean Raffa, have rewritten the perennial classic myth, *The Hero's Journey*, to offer how one "returns to the inner feminine instead of focusing solely on the outer masculine world of doing."¹⁵ These authors have altered the original myth of the outward heroic quest to slay the dragon into one depicting the internal turmoil of the heroine as she descends to the dark underworld to be stripped to the bone and arises to eventually assimilate the feminine and masculine energies.

Transformation through darkness is associated with the Goddess because the feminine nature is found in the earth, the moist, the dark, birthing and the unconscious. Personal transformation requires rolling up our sleeves and getting dirty for, in this process of change, the very foundations on which we have built our identity is taken apart and reexamined for cracks, unidentifiable objects, and instability. Mythologically, this stage of transformation is correlated to a descent into the underworld or a cave, the meeting with the dark goddess, or being swallowed by a whale, among many stories. The descent experience can manifest through dreams, meditation, active imagination, or even through hallucinogenic drugs or depression.¹⁶ Women often find themselves descending

to the depths when they experience a life-changing loss, whether it be through a death, a role change, a relationship dissolution, or an altered physical state.

The descent to the cave, also called the dark night of the soul, is not for the faint-hearted. Many of us encounter our worst fears and abandoned parts of ourselves. All that is inauthentic is torn to shreds and we are left adrift in darkness. This time is marked by obsessive rumination, unabated grief, and passivity. It is through this death of our former selves that our true, authentic Self emerges. Our authentic Self includes the once discarded parts of our feminine Self.

Descents are experienced by women every day. It is not a one-time occurrence, but is usually experienced continually throughout our lives. Some are dramatic, some are barely noticed. A descent is not a horror story, but a story of change and growth, death and rebirth, tearing apart and reuniting. Therapy and medical offices are, no doubt, filled with female patients who are frantically attempting to resolve, avoid, or suppress the descent experience through medication or some other “quick fix.” This is analogous to applying a Band-Aid to an arterial wound; the pain and bleeding will continue underneath.

The dark goddesses – Hindu Kali, Sumerian Ereshkigal, and others – love us too much to allow us to be anything but whole. “The descent is a compulsion,” states Maureen Murdock in *The Heroine’s Journey*.¹⁷ The dark goddess whispers to us, pulls us down, and “fills the all-receptive emptiness of the feminine with feminine yang strength...and gives a woman her own wholeness, so that the woman is not merely dependent on man or child, but can be unto herself as a full and separate individual.”¹⁸ From there, we can arise and emerge from the darkness.

Women are changed when we have encountered the darkness and emptiness of the cave. We take a long, hard look at narcissistic relationships, uncaring friends, unfulfilling careers and a lack of joy or play in our lives. We step into our natural intuition and receive clarity, perhaps for the first time. We realize whom or what to cherish and whom to cull. We own our so-called “weaknesses” rather than feeling ashamed of them. We begin to speak from our hearts.

Many in our outside world are disturbed by our changes. When we begin to assert ourselves, we are often seen as disagreeable and unwilling to please. The label “bitch” comes to mind. The feminine nature is not all sweetness and light. One merely has to observe the weather – Mother Nature, herself – to understand the principle of holding both sunshine and hurricanes within one being. For a woman to be whole, she must claim the dark mother in herself.¹⁹

As we change, we may become aware that what once seemed important may no longer hold any charm. We may feel the urge to surround ourselves with “like-minded” people, creating new friendships and support systems. The feminine energy is one of connection and unity and that naturally manifests in relationship and community. The need for community for women runs very deep.²⁰ The company of other women who are in their power and the absolute acceptance and love of other women has been and is, incredibly nourishing. For the woman in search of the authentic in her life, I believe a women’s circle can provide the supportive community that incorporates the values of the feminine.

Women's Circles: A Structure for Transformation

Step out of the circle of time
And into the circle of love.
~ Rumi

Whether scrubbing wash at the riverbed or plying thread to a quilt, women have sought each other's company through shared tasks for hundreds of years. Even today, when household tasks are done within individual homes, we continue to seek connection with one another. For many of us, the motivation and longing behind this drive may seem elusive or even superficial but others are aware of an internal need or *push* to step into a community of women in search of more than a cursory stroll through life. We women who choose to embark on our own quest for spiritual meaning often come together to form groups, called women's circles, in which to facilitate and nurture our journey.

When our women's circle was newly formed, I was not fully aware of the impact this group of women would have on my life. I knew I greatly respected and admired each member and considered them all to be powerful, vibrant females. But, at that time, I had no previous experience with women's groups, much less a circle, and I had no expectations. With beginner's mind, I stepped into this circle of protection, embracing whatever appeared, and ready to safely contain all possibilities. For me, the circle was able to hold all that I placed in the center – my fear of abandonment, my shame of my past, my dreams of the future, my joys and my fledging steps toward growth. From within this group, those parts of myself that I had retrieved in the abyss were heard, honored, and eventually embodied by me. Although, at that time, I had no understanding of the energy within the symbol of the circle, I knew my experiences in this community

had no resemblance to any other group of which I had ever been a part. I could feel myself gaining more confidence, greater spiritual strength, and the *solidity* of being authentic. I was stepping into my wholeness through the connection within the circle.

As discussed in the previous essay concerning circle symbology, circle structures naturally promote equality, connectedness, and unity. These same qualities resonant deeply within the feminine energy of nature and women. According to Barbara Walker in *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*, the circle is “one of the primary feminine signs.”²¹ The feminine energy contained in a circle is, in itself, a significant reason why we are attracted to these gatherings but, in structures with a spiritual center – meaning that the divine is invited into the center – the intention of the community includes the promotion of self-discovery and spiritual growth. This is exactly what many of us are seeking but rarely finding elsewhere.

In their compelling book, *The Feminine Face of God*, Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins relate the significance that women's circles can have on the members' spiritual growth:

A circle of women can provide a container for emergence in a way that a woman alone or even a one-to-one relationship cannot. Intimate relationships and even friendships can break or at least be greatly strained by life changes. But from the combined wisdom and energy of a small group of women who are committed to 'hearing each other into speech,' continuity and trust can develop that can be relied on over the long term. And, witnessing each person's direct knowing of her truth, we can be empowered to live our own.²²

It is the authentic presence of who we are that empowers others and ourselves. The possibility of empowerment is a strong motive to consciously seek a community of women dedicated to finding personal truth.

As an “authentic community,” a women’s circle offers a safe environment in which to communicate individual and collective needs through an earnest search for authenticity and meaning.²³ There is a solid intention to meet each member with compassion at deep levels of inner wisdom. This requires heart-to-heart communication skills, such as receptive listening, and respect for the “still small voice within.”

Psychotherapist Beverly Engel speaks to the healing power of finding one’s voice within a circle:

...healing takes place when we meet in a circle for the purpose of telling our stories about being misunderstood, mistreated, used or abused. The circle provides a tribal experience of acceptance, support and shared experiences, which in turn allows catharsis – not only for the individual, but for all those who surrender to the healing. Those who are listened to without judgment experience a sense of dignity, hope and self-worth they have never felt before.²⁴

For those women who have been silenced, the sharing of long-held secrets can open the dammed up well deep within their heart, creating a flow of love and acceptance of Self. For women who speak loudly and often because they fear silence, they can learn to trust that it is safe to turn down the frenetic noise and begin to listen to the whispering of their heart. The act of speaking absolutely truthfully and through strong emotional blocks in the presence of a nonjudging, loving, but uninvested group of women can be an amazing growth experience.

A women’s circle with a spiritual center is a sacred space that promises each member that they will be treated with respect and confidentiality when a circle sister shares her stories, vulnerabilities and insights. However, it is important to note that a circle is not a therapy group, although many members may find themselves healing past wounds. Advice-giving or labeling does not promote a safe environment, which is

crucial for the emergence of deep truth-telling. Women do not come to the circle to be “fixed;” we come to be heard and accepted. There can be a fine line between a “doing” circle and a “being” one when it comes to story listening. We so often shift into fixing the issue, instead of serving as a witness. I am sure many women have experienced sharing a “problem” with a male and the frustration that follows when he attempts to “fix” the issue, rather than merely listen. “Doing” is the nature of man; “being” is the nature of woman. In a circle of women who have embraced and now live from society’s masculine principles, it can be difficult to recognize or honor the difference. I was recently given the privilege to experience a pure “being” circle.

A few months ago, I began to reevaluate my perceptions of a particular situation. In other words, I was metaphorically in the cave. I had stripped off my former beliefs around the situation, sat with the emptiness, and was engulfed in a profound sadness. Most of the time, when I hold sadness, I avoid groups. However, it was the birthday of one of my circle sisters and I had committed to seeing her and delivering a gift. She had recently formed a small “Artist’s Way” group of women to explore their creativity and the group was to meet later that night. It was my intention to stop by, deliver the gift, and return home. Instead, the members of the group arrived early and I stayed for the meeting. In the course of the time together, each member shared events, issues, or concerns that had arisen during the week. When it was my turn, I simply stated that I did not want to share the details of my situation but that I was feeling immensely sad.

“We don’t need to know the circumstances. We will hold your sadness.”

With those words, we held hands and formed a container of unconditional love. This container held my sadness, my dying beliefs, and my dream of what “could have

been.” My heart instantly reached out to this circle of women who acknowledged and accepted my pain, my wound, without knowing my story, without knowing me. What I witnessed were women trusting that the Divine in the center of the circle was enough; there was no need for them to “do” anything. This was a circle firmly planted into the feminine energy of “being.”

Along with avoiding “fixing” or advice-giving, it is also imperative to mention that a circle does not act as a spiritual “parent.” The intention of a healthy circle is not to create dependents or stunt the growth of its members. It would be natural to look to the circle or its individual members to nourish us at deep levels where we feel incomplete. Much is written about codependency, in which an addictive personality is looked after by another who appears to be the stronger person but who is, in fact, addicted to being needed. This can be a death knell to a circle, as its life-blood is slowly drained in the attempt to fill a need in an individual who refuses, either consciously or unconsciously, to take responsibility for their own growth. The empowerment of others, a major principle in a women’s circle, requires that we receive each other in love, accept one another just as we are, and then hold space as each individual *does their own work*. This does not imply that a circle does not support those in search of themselves.

There are times on the spiritual path when we feel lost and can not seem to find our direction. While we are not looking for another to do our work, we can become fervent in our need for clarity. In his insightful book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer shares a process called the “clearness committee” which comes from the Quaker tradition and, I believe, would create a forum within a women’s circle for hearing our inner truth. This process brings forward two fundamental Quaker principles: 1)

“guidance comes not from external authority but from the inner teacher;” and 2) “we need community to help us clarify and amplify the inner teacher’s voice.”²⁵ The clearness committee consists of four to six people, plus the person (a “focus person”) who is struggling with an issue. The committee has been given a written or verbal statement of the problem before assembling together in order to meditate or contemplate on the issue beforehand. At the meeting, after the focus person reiterates the problem, the committee members are guided by a “simple but demanding rule: *the only way they may speak to the focus person is to ask brief, honest, open questions.*”²⁶ There is no intention on the part of the committee members to nudge the focus person toward another’s view but to only listen and speak from a space of receptive neutrality and to draw the focus person closer to her true Self. In my opinion, this challenging process can facilitate deep soul work not only on the part of the focus person, but for the committee members involved; it can be a significant gift to the entire group. It is the gift of holding the soul of another in a safe place as they journey toward their wholeness.

According to circle facilitators Robin Carnes and Sally Craig, the overall intention and touchstone of any women’s circle “is to focus on and foster the members’ spiritual development.”²⁷ Of course, each member’s spiritual journey looks different at various times and not all women are empowered by the same thing. One member may be taking art classes, while another is enrolled in the university. Still another may be moving to another state, beginning a new career, and another is learning to fully appreciate the job she had previously loathed. Within these seemingly opposite circumstance, lessons emerge, similarities are found and, once again, the unity of life is exposed. Divergent experiences are actively welcomed, embraced, and celebrated. Differences create

richness within the group and can produce a collective synergy that generates spiritual growth which may not be possible individually.

A women's circle's first teaching is to love oneself.²⁸ This tenet immediately challenges a childhood edict fed to most all women today. I venture to say it is a rare woman who has not been taught to put other's needs and wants before her own. If a woman has rebelled against such a principle, she has most likely been stamped with the label of "selfish." Even though today's psychology endorses and encourages individual self-love as a necessity before one can receive or give love, I believe this concept remains a hurdle for many women. Our childhood scripts run deep. Within the energy of love inside a women's circle, this detrimental ingrained dialogue, along with other scripts, can be closely examined and eventually transformed.

Women's circles are not "group-think" structures, generating paper-doll cutouts of women reciting communal beliefs or doctrine, but rather, they can be a forum to retrieve our self-love and individual wholeness with which we were born. As we mature, we attempt to discard, squelch and hide those parts of ourselves which we or others deem "undesirable" in the hopes of "fitting in." For many women, those abandoned aspects of ourselves are the very characteristics which define us as female.

One of the foundations of a women's circle is reclaiming and celebrating our female energy. In our desire to heal the split from our inner feminine, many circles have created rites to honor the cycles of Mother Nature and Gaia, returning to the time when the phases of the moon guided our lives. This was a time when women were aware of their interconnection with all there is; they were aware of magic. We are still magicians. From our wholeness, we have the ability to create a new world, not only for ourselves,

but for humankind. As we reconnect with our many gifts as women, we create a vision for others, both women *and* men, of the possibilities of a world of whole individuals connecting with each other and realizing that separation was an illusion. It is only *through wholeness* that we can truly see and feel that unity. We can walk alongside each other on our journey toward wholeness, within a circle of women.

Conclusion

The healing and integration of the feminine is my own journey. As I scan back over the ground I have traveled thus far, I still find stones left unturned and know I will be circling back over the path, perhaps on another level, much like traveling a spiraling path. Not exactly the *same* path, but the similarities make themselves known.

Along the path, I have come to know that we women must refuse to look to the world for approval of our inherent nature. We were divinely created to be wholly who we are and require approval from no one. Women must remember how important it is to honor women. This is also a directive for men but, I believe, it will only reach them as we women learn how to do this ourselves. A gender, race, nation or community turned on itself is a cannibalistic group, devouring the very essence of what is necessary for the hunger to be met. We women hunger for unity – within ourselves, with others, and with the universe. When we debase, judge, and reject other women, they are inflicting a wound onto our own psyche. It is only through compassion, respect, and holding sacred space that women will lay down their weapons, tear down their protective walls, and step into the courage and love necessary to face all parts of themselves. In my opinion, this can be done more effectively through a women's circle because our shared feminine

experiences creates an immutable bond of trust and love that is lacking in most other forums.

Although the descent to reclaim our feminine nature can be an excruciating experience, I believe it is a sacred journey. Just as a flower turns toward the sun for its health and well-being, I believe our soul draws us toward what it requires to flourish. When I faced fear in the abyss with only darkness surrounding me, there was one other essence present – Love. It was love that took me down to the cave and it was love that pulled me back into the light. This love was not outside of myself, but deep within my being. It was a love of Life, love of Self, love of All There Is – it was the Divine, Goddess, God, Brahman, Allah, Great Mother... it was in all forms. This Divine Love wants nothing more from me than to be what I truly am. It sounds so simple, yet I still find it a challenge. Love remains my companion, and when I lose myself, she reminds me – “Become yourself.”

Essay 3 Endnotes:

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- ¹ M. Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern* (Boston: Shambhala, 1971), 10-11.
- ² Barbara Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 6.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Urgent Message from Mother: Gather the Women, Save the World* (York Beach, ME: Conari Press, 2005), 46.
- ⁵ Helen Luke, *Kaleidoscope: The Way of Woman and Other Essays*, Edited by Rob Baker (New York: Parabola Books, 1992), 14.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Harding, *Woman's Mysteries*, 11-17.
- ⁸ Marianne Williamson, *A Woman's Worth* (New York: Random House, 1993), 24.
- ⁹ Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women* (Ontario, Canada: Inner City Books, 1981), 7.
- ¹⁰ Williamson, *A Woman's Worth*, 19.
- ¹¹ Bolen, *Urgent Message from Mother*, 32.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Williamson, *A Woman's Worth*, 16.
- ¹⁴ Harding, *Woman's Mysteries*, 14.
- ¹⁵ Jean Benedict Raffa, *The Bridge to Wholeness: A Feminine Alternative to the Hero Myth* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1992), 17.
- ¹⁶ Maureen Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey: Women's Quest for Wholeness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), 88.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 91.
- ¹⁸ Perera, *Descent to the Goddess*, 40.
- ¹⁹ Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey*, 105.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 131.
- ²¹ Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 4.
- ²² Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women* (New York: Bantam Book, 1991), 23.
- ²³ See Essay #1: Toward Wholeness Through Community.
- ²⁴ Beverly Engel, *Women Circling the Earth: A Guide to Fostering Community, Healing and Empowerment* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2000), 65-66.
- ²⁵ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 134.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 137.
- ²⁷ Robin Carnes and Sally Craig, *Sacred Circles: A Guide to Creating your own Women's Spirituality Group* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 41.
- ²⁸ Scout Cloud Lee and Carol Washburn, *The Circle is Sacred* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 2003), 197.

ESSAY 4:
TOWARD WHOLENESS THROUGH A PAPER NAMED GRACE

An epiphanal community
of two or more people
expands the imagination of the culture around them.
The more organic, less structured the community is,
the more powerful the pace of change.
A group of people who are inspired
from imagination that has been illuminated by Nature's presence,
and has contact with the Voice of the Sacred within each of them,
generates a great deal of power
to move through large, organizational structures.

~ David T. Kyle,
Human Robots and Holy Mechanics

Note: This essay was written in a spiral, as a woman in process, through flow and force. It was an integration of my feminine and masculine energies in my search for wholeness; it was Me as Circle.

A Master's Journey

Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.

~ William Wordsworth

What is a “Master’s” paper? I have been told it denotes that one has “mastered” a topic. Become an expert of sorts. Is that possible? Could I actually *know* everything there is to learn about any subject? I rather doubt it. I believe any subject or topic is like a multi-faceted gem. We can look at it directly, observe it, feel it, smell it, even hear and taste it; we think we *know* it. But, if you put it up to the light, turn it around so all the facets are shown from different angles, and then take it into the closet and experience it in the dark, you begin to realize you really do not know the subject. You may know bits and parts, but not its entirety. Sit it down, leave it alone for a few days or years, and when you return, you may find it (or is it *yourself*?) has completely changed. Did you even know it *at all*? You have certainly not “mastered” it. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it “My Perception-Thus-Far Paper.” In any event, I did not create my paper; *the paper created me*. It was a journey into meaning, into my belief system, and a way of being.

Dissolution

These four essays that make up my Master’s thesis were supposed to be easy. I had them all planned out. I had mapped out the direction of each essay as they pertained to women’s circles, purchased several books on each topic, and had even indicated in pen (!) on my calendar the day each essay would be finished. My mind was geared toward

producing an informative scholarly paper in a timely manner so that I would be ready for graduation the following Spring. I was ready to “master” my topic. My soul, however, had other plans.

After all my preparations, when I sat down at my computer, I found the words would not come. How could that be? I had a schedule! I spent hours in my office at the computer, eeking out a paragraph or two, only to delete them in the light of the next morning. No amount of complaining, whining, or gnashing of teeth could produce a coherent paragraph. I had writer’s block. How could that be possible when I was not a writer? I was merely a university student trying to finish my degree. Redefining myself did not help break down the wall which had imprisoned my academic mind.

I purposely single out my “academic” mind as opposed to my “normal-everyday” mind because my “normal-everyday” mind was unquestionably still functioning. It was working overtime searching for solutions to rectify my dilemma. It was still churning out chatter at night while I lay in bed. Not all the inner talk was friendly. I felt as though I was caught in the middle of a psychic war and I was an unarmed civilian. I began waking in the wee hours of the morning, sitting at my computer in my robe, hoping that something would leap onto the screen from the fog of my sleepy brain. It slowly seeped into my consciousness that I was in the process of descending into the abyss. I also realized this was not coming from my mind, but rather, from my soul.

In my mind’s eye, when the soul hurts, it sends out messengers to our body and mind to alert them that something needs attending. Little beret-capped soldiers, scattering out along nerve pathways, energy fields, chakra vortexes and such, searching for an effective landing site to carry the message to my consciousness. For some people,

they are so attuned to their bodies that a sniffle will be cause enough to sit down and have a “body talk” session to check in for possible trouble. For me, the most efficient conduit to reach my awareness is through my inner critic. His name is Sammy and we have had a long-standing relationship since childhood. Over the years, we have garnered a truce, but I would not go so far as to call it a friendly one. One thing I have learned is that when Sammy is on a rampage, something needs to be examined.

It was not a coincidence that at the same time I was in turmoil with writing my paper, our women’s circle was falling apart. Many events had led up to this point, including members moving and changing careers, a lack of commitment, an ambiguous intention, and the cessation of the energy classes around which the Circle had revolved. In amongst these issues, tension arose between one member who was in the midst of a descent and another member who could not hold space for her. This conflict inflicted a wound directly into the heart of what a circle is – a safe, loving container. While I now believe a circle can survive such a wound, at the time, we were novices at circle principles; and that combined with all the other factors, transformed our Circle into a leaky vessel, as member after member pulled back her energy and quietly slipped away.

As the Circle dissolved, so did my paper. Along with that, my image of what a circle “should” be dissolved as I asked myself searing, soul-searching questions. I began to experience visions pertaining to circles through dreams and active imagination. The following is taken from my journal at that time:

...I dismounted my horse at the pool’s edge and submerged myself into the water. I stopped in the middle because I heard the sound of tribal drums coming from the surface.

All of the sudden, I found myself strapped to a huge wooden circle and being hoisted out of the water. I was suspended over the water, my neck was bound by a wide leather strap, keeping me

from speaking or screaming, and a wooden stake was through my heart, protruding from my chest. I was strapped in the sign of the Peace Symbol and the rim of the circle was on fire. The fire had been burning even when I was in the water and continued as I was raised above, moving toward an opening at the top of the cave. I could see the sky through the opening and the sun shone down on me.

As I had come up out of the water, I had glimpsed tribal people, beating drums, around the water. Off to one side was a group of women, all dressed in white gowns. I did not see any faces but I felt that I knew them. They felt like family, although not birth family. I also felt that they had given me to the tribe as a sacrifice. I was not afraid, nor upset. In fact, there was a feeling that this was necessary. I was sad, yet not upset, if that makes any sense. I was amazed that I was alive because my heart was bleeding profusely. My blood fell from my heart, filling the pool and splattering on the white gowns of the women below. As the last drops of blood drained from my heart, my body became limp and I slipped out of the circle and plunged into the water. I sunk to the bottom and lay there. Tiny water creatures began to clean me up by eating any dried blood or dirt off of me. I lay there in the water, empty and lifeless, barely breathing. The blood in the pool was washed clean and re-entered my veins. The water creatures healed the hole in my heart. I stood up and walked out of the pool. I was alone. I walked out of the cave, dripping wet, and my Virgin draped a white cloak around my shoulders.

Dreams and shamanic journeys can be rife with information. Lifelong dream explorer and lecturer Robert Moss shares “recent research confirms...dreams not only review the past and pretest alternative futures, but may also reveal future events.”¹ Rather than suggesting I avoid tribal ceremonies that involved women in white gowns, my vision metaphorically foretold the process I would be experiencing not only with writing my paper, but in my relationship with women’s circles. At that point in time, I felt my paper and I had already been drained of our life-blood and had slipped into the pool of water. I was ready for emptiness.

Emptiness

The Circle was in emptiness, as were I and the paper. Emptiness is not a popular concept in our culture. We will go to almost any length to fill up our lives, fill up our “holes.” All it takes is one evening in front of the television (which is a perfect example of a “hole-filler” itself) to get countless examples of what we utilize to fill our emptiness – drugs, technology, food, wealth, shopping, power. The list could go on and on. I am a part of this culture and I, too, was uncomfortable with the emptiness that had settled around me. But, I cannot say I was not warned.

Many many months ago, a few weeks after our first Circle meeting, I had experienced the following dream:

I was asleep in bed when I was awakened by Rachael (my daughter) touching my shoulder, saying, “Something’s happening...this is strange.” I followed her to a bathroom, where she had been sick. Chris (her husband) was in the background. On the floor were piles and piles of green mothballs, which Rachael had vomited up. The toilet was full of green, digested waste. She was no longer sick and went to lie down. I began cleaning the room. For some reason, I tried to hide the mess from Chris, but then, I began to feel that he was not upset with the mess. As I cleaned the room, a voice said, “Look at the mothballs. They are circles. Women’s circles.”

I like the way my subconscious sometimes gives “voice-overs” during my dreams to help me see what I most likely would miss. I guess she knows I am a remedial student in dream interpretation. It is like watching a movie with subtitles or listening to the play-by-play announcer on Monday Night Football. However, at the time I received this dream, I was flush with joy about our new community and I did not realize its complete meaning, although I knew it was not just a warning against eating mothballs. As I revisited this dream during my emptiness, I finally fully comprehended its meaning.

Rachael was a symbol of my young, naïve self who was full of my “knowing” of women’s circles. This knowledge (my preconceived ideas of what a circle – and my paper – should be) was being purged. After Rachael was empty, she rested. Chris depicted my masculine side and he was comfortable with the process of emptying and resting.

Emptiness is about letting go of whatever is in the way of one’s relationship with oneself or others. Emptying is about healing through change. For change to take place, we must mourn what we are giving up. I was mourning. I was mourning the loss of a vision, the loss of a time schedule, the loss of security, the loss of relationships, the loss of my ideals, the loss of a Master’s paper. I was mourning the loss of my Circle.

In his book, *The Different Drum*, M. Scott Peck includes “emptiness” as a stage in his model of building community.² Emptiness can be either the barrier or gateway to true community, depending on how the fear of emptiness is dealt with. If the fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and fear of conflict can be acknowledged and engaged with curiosity and reflection, this openness can lead to genuine listening and the capacity to generate shared meaning within community. If the fear is met with a need to control, fix, pretend, lie, or avoid, then the tendency to generate answers rather than questions typically wins. If the latter reaction is taken, the group does not become an “authentic” community and either disbands or moves into a superficial or chaotic existence.³

Peck claims that to reach “true” community, the only pathway is “into and through” emptiness.⁴ In my opinion, the stages of dissolution and emptiness must be traversed not only to reach true community, but also to *authentically* connect with anything, whether it be a relationship, society, the world, or a Master’s paper. We must

release our preconceived ideas and expectations of how something or someone “should” be and rest in the unknowing before acceptance, truth or authenticity emerges. In the case of my Circle, we did not acknowledge our fears as a group, but instead, remained in a state of inertia, perhaps waiting for either burial or rebirth. As for my paper, I acknowledged the fear, let go of all I “knew,” and slipped into “I don’t know.”

What does the land of “I don’t know” look like? When I first entered, it was a bleak, colorless vastness with indistinguishable shapes and forms. Nothing made sense and there was uncertainty about how things worked or acted. I felt a loss of identity and was incredibly uneasy. “[It] can be like rain falling on the hard-packed soil of our lives. If we are willing, it can soften us....” claims Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins in *The Feminine Face of God*.⁵ After a while, I began to notice that I was, indeed, relaxing and softening. Just as Rachael did in my dream, I was resting. I once read somewhere that the ability to tolerate ambiguity is central to being human; I suppose I was becoming more human. Soon, the land of “I don’t know” began to change to fertile fields of green, ready for the tiny seedlings of new thoughts, ideas, and ways of being to poke through the earth.

Authentic Biking

During this time, I began biking with Carmen. Carmen is a Circle sister and a fellow compatriot in this dance of life. We would meet on a nearby trail and doggedly pedal while philosophizing about life, both in general and ours in particular. This time together became one of my most anticipated parts of my day. Yes, it was physically

demanding (especially the LLLOONNGG hill at the end of the ride) but an element of “magic” entered our time together... what I came to think of as the magic of “kindred spirits.”

“Kindred Spirits” is a lovely term I picked up from Anne Shirley, the main character in the book *Anne of Green Gables*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery. This was one of Rachael’s favorite childhood stories and she must have watched the movie and listened to the audio book a gazillion times. The story is about an orphan girl who is adopted by an older brother-sister couple and worms her way into their and everybody else’s heart. Along the way, she learns much about herself and relating to others, and eventually grows up to be an upstanding citizen. What I especially liked was how the author illustrated the interconnection between all of the characters, each one supporting the other and growing in love. That is what happened between Carmen and me.

The times Carmen and I went biking began to take on the qualities of “authentic community,” the topic about which I wrote in Essay #1. In that paper, I lay out my definition of what I believe comprises an authentic community, as opposed to a superficial one. The ingredients I came up with were safety, effective communication, collective spirit, authenticity, commitment, and servant leadership. It soon became apparent that Carmen and I were organically integrating all these elements into our bike rides. In Carmen’s company, I tentatively opened my heart to expose my tiny, under-developed sprouts of thoughts and ideas that were beginning to break through to my consciousness. Time after time, she would hold them in safety and water them with acceptance and love. This was not the type of emotion that the world sometimes passes off as love, as in pity or a “yes-man” attitude; Carmen did not hesitate to warmly

communicate any different views when she felt I was veering away from the truth. I never felt less than whole as I revealed my shadows and wounds. Her steadfast commitment to our rides and being there for my gropings toward authenticity were apparent as many times darkness fell on the bike trail and, yet, still she patiently midwifed my newborn insights. A spirit of community descended upon our Circle of two and a synergy pulsed between us as we took turns communicating the questions in our hearts.

I love questions. They perk me up and shove me into a land of wonder. They open my eyes and bring details to life that may have stayed in the dark corners of the world. Carmen and I wrestled with many questions. Like, what does “safety” look like and is it possible in community? How do we learn to trust? Is community necessary or can I just live in the monastery? Can a circle function without a specific leader? Should I let my hair go gray? We wrangled with questions concerning the meaning of life, group and family dynamics, and theology, among many subjects. I can not claim to have answered all the questions, but half the fun was bouncing the thoughts back and forth between bikes. Two of the most challenging questions were what to do about helmet (or “hat”) hair and why could nobody invent a comfortable women’s bike seat.

[Note: Carmen and I eventually widened our Circle to include two more Circle sisters, Trace and Linda, and we biked 200 miles across Missouri. The adventure was tremendously empowering but I feel that it is another story for another time. I still want to graduate this coming Spring and that will only happen if I finish my paper.]

In the meantime, between bike rides, I would slink up to my office to try to solidify the insights and thoughts which came to light during my talks with Carmen.

Words from the Darkness

Again, I sat at my computer, ready to unleash whatever spilled out of my mind onto the emerging paper. Again, nothing came. What? Did I not just spend months dissolving and emptying? Like a true artist, had I not suffered? Was I not spewing forth deep, meaningful dialogue while biking with Carmen? Why was nothing coalescing on paper?

I sat in my room and meditated. I read my research books. I prayed. I fasted. I practiced yoga...and Qigong. I ate chocolate. I breathed. Finally, one morning during meditation, a voice said simply, “Put a puzzle together.”

When I was a child, I loved to put jigsaw puzzles together. I mean *lots* of puzzles. We lived in a house with wood floors and large room-sized rugs. I would put puzzle after puzzle together, slipping them under the rugs so I would not have to tear them apart. After all the puzzles in the house were finished, I would then disassemble them. For Christmas each year, I would receive a puzzle and *this* was the gift I most anticipated. Even more than Barbie or Lincoln Logs. As I matured, I virtually stopped putting them together because they were so time consuming. (I liked the large, complex ones.) Here I was, sitting at my altar and I was being told to “put a puzzle together.” I did. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

A few days later, I heard the words, “Go to the movies.” I did. I loved it. “Read a book...for pleasure.” “Make a collage.” “Draw.” “Ride a bike.” “Spend time with Randy (my husband).” Day after day, I would sit down at the computer expecting the paper to begin taking form. Still nothing appeared. Finally, one morning, out of

desperation and frustration, I cried out, “What *is* this paper?” One word came forth from the silence, “Grace.”

Grace and Balance

I was first introduced to the concept of “Grace” as a child in my strict fundamentalist church. I was told that Grace was a gift of God, even though we do not deserve it. At that time, it was a hard pill to swallow because the concept did not align with how I perceived the world worked. How could God give a gift to someone who had not “worked” for it by being “good?” In fact, one could be “evil” and still receive Grace. Where was the justice in *that*? More importantly, why was I bothering with being “good”? These questions were never answered to my satisfaction and I just dropped the issue.

I was not yet clear on the subject of Grace when I received the word in meditation. Since I still had one foot in the land of “I don’t know,” I immediately began researching the concept. I found the following quote, which instantly resonated within me and brought tears to my eyes:

“Grace is an energy; not a mere sentiment; not a mere thought of the Almighty; not even a word of the Almighty. It is as real an energy as the energy of electricity. It is a divine energy; it is the energy of the divine affection rolling in plenteousness toward the shores of human need.” -Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893)⁶

This gift of “divine energy” was a gift from the Goddess and it had taken the form of my paper. It was “communion with the sacred source” which surfaces “when balance is realized in its fullness across all dimensions of our being.”⁷ Grace has been described as

“divine assistance” that reveals the road “out of our pain and compulsion.”⁸ My paper had been trying to teach me about the true nature of balance. I was attempting to formulate Master’s Essays concerning women’s journey to heal their feminine energy in order to realize their wholeness and had little experience in that journey myself. “Live the lesson,” this gift of Grace whispered and I stepped away from my computer and turned out my office lights.

When I sit with the issue of balance, my thoughts can become twisted in knots, trying to follow the various directions into which this subject can branch off. I am well acquainted with twisted thoughts but, when I attempt to communicate them to others, most people form a glaze over their eyes and start making mental “to-do” lists. While I am happy to assist others to organize their days, I become frustrated that I am unable to effectively convey what it is that I feel needs to be understood.

Nonetheless, the subject of balance was staring me in the eyes and demanding that I pay attention. Although I believe that my paper would approve of me balancing my diet, balancing my emotions, and balancing my checkbook, what issue provoked a “ping” in my inner radar was the matter of balancing my feminine and masculine energies. Looking back over the manner in which I had approached writing my paper, I realized I had been fully entrenched in my inherent masculine nature of force. This did not exactly surprise me because most all of my academic endeavors had come to fruition through the use of this powerful energy. What sent a dagger into my heart was the knowledge that my way of being within my circle had also been through force.

As I revisited my interaction within my Circle, I was reminded of the many times that I had attempted to corral the perceived chaos into a structure in order to assuage my

discomfort. As I had researched the topic of women's circles, I had plucked what I considered to be essential elements to form a "proper" circle and presented them to the community. At the time, this was met with some resistance by a few members and a slight energy of tension was beginning to hum around our group. I was now able to candidly examine my motives and stance on the issue. Rather than truly absorbing the essence of the *flow* of feminine nature, I had attempted to dam up the river, flooding some parts and restricting access to other parts of the community. Instead of enjoying the mystery of the expansive unknown, I had operated out of my more familiar, limited, constrictive masculine energy. With this knowledge, I opened up my awareness to my way of relating in the world.

I love answers. They calm me down and help me to sleep. When I was in the land of "I don't know," I didn't sleep very well. My mind was looking for answers when it should have been sleeping. Even when I did sleep, my mind was attacking the door to my unconscious for answers. I thought I had the answers for writing a Master's paper about women's circles and found I not only did not know how or what to write, but I did not know how to be *in* a women's circle. And so I let go. And, as I let go, I moved to the other side, away from force and answers (masculine), and dwelled in flow and mystery (feminine).

How does one live in "flow and mystery"? For me, I get up in the morning and ignore the "to-do" list that my masculine side produced the previous evening and then wait to feel what my intuition suggests for the day. Sometimes my intuition actually suggests something on my to-do list but other times I am directed in an unexpected direction. That is the mystery part. It can make for an adventurous day or life, but I fear

it can also be mysteriously unfocused. I suspect my pile of unfinished projects would accumulate until it would be necessary to have a garage sale. No...wait. A garage sale takes too much force to get done through flow and mystery. A women's circle based entirely on "flow and mystery" never accomplishes anything, either. It runs the very real risk of becoming an amoeba, splaying out with no form, adapting to its environment but never really having any purpose or identity. Therein lies the challenge. How does one balance the masculine and feminine energies, as in the qualities of force and flow, within us all?

I am reminded of my relationship with a horse. I grew up as a horse-crazed child but did not realize my dream of owning a horse until my teen years when we moved to a farm. I bought a young, unbroken gelding, believing my love would suffice in training him to the ways of riding. I spent a lot of time with Tonka, grooming and feeding him, coaxing him to accept the bridle and saddle. Getting on his back was another matter; he did not like it. Eventually, after I had a few "spills," my father mounted him and, using a great amount of force, brought Tonka into submission. I believed Tonka had been mastered.

After a period of time, Tonka decided he had enough of doing things my way. He resisted my efforts to corral him when I wanted to ride by bolting for the far corner of the field just as I was reaching out to slip a noose around his neck. He also began the annoying habit of walking next to a barbed-wire fence, scrapping my leg, when he was tired of carrying me around on his back. I was hesitant with him and he soon learned that he could do as he pleased. Our rides became endless strolls of stop-and-go, depending on

Tonka's mood or what caught his eye. I believe this is when Tonka believed he had mastered *me*.

With every concerted effort to control Tonka through force, I was met with equal resistance. It was not until I relaxed and lightened up energetically, while applying gentle strength, that Tonka became my ally. M. Scott Peck once wrote that there was "an art to drive hard with a light hand"⁹ and I have found that to be true in my life. "Driving hard" is the focus, the rules, the structure. Tonka meandering around the trail, plucking at the grass, is the flow, the openness, the mystery. The "light hand" is the balance.

I want to live lightly. I want to dwell where there is no teeter-totter of existence that constantly takes me off kilter and weighs me down because I moved to one side more than the other. This is teeter-totter way of life is called dualism, which is the prevalent view in our patriarchal society. It is described as the concept that nature is comprised of "two opposite and opposing forces usually seen as good and evil."¹⁰ Good vs. Bad, Right vs. Wrong, Life vs. Death, Female vs. Male, Light vs. Dark, Order vs. Chaos. I could list these all day. The teeter-totter goes up, the teeter-totter goes down.

As a child, very few playmates wanted to teeter-totter with me. I was a tiny little girl who did not weigh much. Most every time I could dupe someone into playing with me, they would be stuck on the ground and I would be viewing the world from up above. The only way I could achieve balance was to stand in the middle of the board, but even then it was precarious because it was difficult to stay in the middle. The necessity to remain *exactly* at the fulcrum required intense concentration. It became a serious matter; I could not allow others to approach me for fear they may cause me to lose balance. I would develop a sort of "dogma of the middle" complex, you might say. Tyrant of the

teeter-totter. No wonder no one wanted to play with me. The playground teacher would make me get down anyway. You can easily fall. I propose we move to the merry-go-round.

On the merry-go-round, there is no up vs. down; they are both inside the circle. No matter where you stand, you are with all there is. This is the principle of duality where “each individual part of nature has two opposite aspects that are complementary.”¹¹ The terms “dualism” and “duality” are often confused and used incorrectly, causing much confusion. Jung used the Greek word, “enantiodromia,” to describe the play of opposites.¹² I am personally opposed to using words that I cannot pronounce and are over five syllables so I like to use the Chinese term “yin/yang,” which symbolizes this same principle of duality. And it sounds more fun.

Speaking of fun, try this. Take any one set of the above examples of dualism. Lay them on a circle and smear them around. The terms get intermingled. Each half of the dualistic terms contains a particle of the other. Neither quality has more or less value than the other. Yin/Yang. They are two halves of a whole, each of equal value. Playing with circles can be fun; changing your conception of the world can be life-changing.

So, get off the teeter-totter and step onto the circle. Walk around in it and feel the sense of wholeness. There is no thing that is not there. Move to the middle and find your balance. Spin the circle around and note that the center stays still. There, in the stillness, is the Divine, welcoming you home to yourself.

The Birth of a Paper

This paper was not my foe or adversary. I named my paper “Grace” and she became soft. She is my gift from the Universe. She took my hand and led me, with a “light hand,” to discover what I most needed to learn. She was Kali, the destroyer, and I learned to see the value of death and rebirth. She was Puer, the boy-child, and I learned to play. She was Aphrodite, the lover, and I learned to appreciate beauty. She was Pallas Athena, my higher self, guiding me back to wholeness. And, finally, she was Brigid, who holds the fire of inspiration, and I was able once again to write.

As I related in a previous essay, my impetus for the selection of my topic was my own women’s Circle. When I entered this group of incredible women, I was caught off guard by the energy present within this community. I had never experienced this level of caring (without an agenda) as I opened myself up to them, warts and all. This was not only happening to me, but was the experience of most all of the members. Whenever we met, each one of us would undergo a palpable shift in our personal energy. I began to suspect that there was a hidden aspect to the energy that surrounded our times together.

What I found in my research was that the circle symbol itself contains the energy of the feminine, of unity, of wholeness, of the Universe itself. In short, the energy of the Divine. It is my belief that when a woman steps into the circle, she has come home to herself. I am not implying that we have only to attend a circle meeting and voila! we are enlightened, spiritually healed, finally at the end of our journey. What I *am* suggesting is that, in a women’s circle, we can be held in a container which unites us with Divine love. From there, we are able to recognize the feeling of wholeness, *feel* the love and grasp the

courage necessary to do the work to capture those aspects of ourselves that we have let slip away since our birth.

What does a woman look like who is whole? She is soft, sharp, dark, light, loving to others and to herself, adventurous, introspective, creative, ecstatic, quiet, responsive, reclusive, truth-seeking, wild, domestic, affirming, and so much more. She is reunited with all that she is. She is reconnected to all of her ancestors, including the ancient goddesses. She steps into her authentic power. She is the lioness who loves the pride deeply but knows boundaries and when “enough is enough.” She is the bear who protects the defenseless but devours the foolish. She is the Crone that loves us so fiercely that she strips us of all aspects that does not serve us. She is the eagle that soars to the heavens to bring down messages from the gods. She is Mother Nature who holds the power to destroy and give life. She is complete unto herself and capable of seeing the wholeness of others, even when they are not aware of it themselves. All of this is what I felt when I stepped into my circle of women. This is what ignited a vision within me.

Visions and Visionaries

When the Circle emptied, I felt I was left holding a vision with no interested parties with whom to share it. How could they jump ship when I was just beginning to form a vision to save the world? Did they not know they were the focus of the plot? As I descended into my cave and emptied of all that I thought I knew about circles, the vision shrank into a minute pinprick of energy implanted in my heart. Indeed, I assumed it had disappeared, along with my paper and Circle. Instead, as I began to emerge from the emptiness, I became aware of a set of events that finally caught my attention.

First, I had the following dream which featured a woman and her daughter who lived in a town in which I once lived:

Sue and I were trying to organize a two-story, white farmhouse. There were male workers who were there to move the furniture, as we supervised. Sue and I were walking from room to room, surveying what needed to be done. We came to a staircase where Sue's daughter, Summer, had stopped a worker from taking a desk upstairs. It was to be her desk in her office upstairs. She said she did not want to take the worker's time away from our work in order to do something for her; she felt it was selfish. I said, "Summer, you *are* the work." We hugged and she went upstairs with her desk.

In this dream and in reality, Sue is a woman in her power. Summer, her daughter, represents a woman not yet aware of her worth and, thus, not claiming her power. The dream speaks of the work to be done; the empowerment of women who are hesitant or unaware of their inherent worth.

Next, I had a dream which featured the individual members of my circle. In the dream, I was told by a voice what each woman's spiritual challenge was at the time. At the end of the dream, the same voice announced, "This is woman's pain." I awoke and understood immediately that I had been shown the collective pain of *all* women.

Finally, I became aware of magazines, books, and newspaper articles leaping out at me from library shelves, newsstands, and even my parents' trash bags which featured the need for the world to return to wholeness. (Of course, most of the authors of the materials did not couch it in those terms.) One synchronistic event which certainly caught my attention was when Amazon Books sent me a book I did not order, only to find that it related directly to my vision.

Eventually, it leached into my consciousness that my vision remained intact, albeit emaciated from lack of attention. It felt like those tiny barbed seeds that your dog

gets when she romps through the brushes outdoors. The thorny pods burrow into dog hair and the only way to remove them is to cut them out. My vision had burrowed into my heart. It would have required a “heartectomy” to rid myself of it. Since I am morally opposed to living without heart, I decided to dust it off, nourish it, and bring it out into the light. I decided to step into my “Visionary” archetype.

What is a Visionary? According to *Encarta* online, a Visionary is “full of foresight: characterized by unusually acute foresight and imagination.”¹³ I had never considered myself a Visionary until I captured a vision. The word still feels grandiose and BIG. It topples me over when I try to hold it. So I placed it in my heart and found that it fit. I have learned that when we embody a quality, we can truly be without fear of it. It is only when we poke around the edges, toss it up and down, and do not fully own a quality that we continue to fear it. What I have learned about being a visionary is that I need only to bring forth questions and carry a torch. I do not have the answers or even a plan at this point. All answers I have are for me, in this moment, but they may not necessarily be the answers for others. The plan will develop later, by others called “Planners.” The torch is for those who resonate with my vision and want to join my Circle. Everything begins with a question; I have many questions. For instance, if the energy within a women’s circle engenders wholeness and connection, what would it look like if we women brought those qualities to the world? Can we heal the world?

I am well aware that this is not a new vision. I never claimed to be an *Innovative* Visionary. My initiation into this vision was through Jean Shinoda Bolen’s book, *The Millionth Circle*, as I related in Essay #1. Bolen postulates that forming one women’s circle after another, until they number at least a million, would bring the energy within

the circles out into the world and, thus, heal the planet.¹⁴ I found this very appealing and inspirational and I continue to believe it possible even today. However, in my research, I was introduced to ancient prophecies from indigenous tribes that spoke of spiritually healing the world through the women in order to ease the transition of an upcoming shift in the world consciousness *by 2012* which, if you do the math, seems to increase the *urgency* of the call to action.

To me, prophecies can be scary. Most all of them tend to be harbingers of doom and gloom, illiciting fear. As a rule, I do not like fear. I *acknowledge* it and use it as an indicator of when I need to deeply examine an issue or situation but I do not display it on my walls, wrap it around me like a blanket or groom it like my cat. So, when I learned about the prophecies circulating around 2012, I was hesitant to bring the premise into my house.

In my research, I found several ancient prophecies – the Mayans, Iroquois, Mongolians, and the Waitaha of New Zealand, for example – which contained amazing correlations. I consider it to be astonishing that these tribes are scattered over the globe, and yet, their divinations from thousands of years ago converge to reflect changes predicted to take place around the same time period. These prophecies are complex and detailed, including ancient teachings, rites, planets, and tribal knowledge much too complicated and large for the scope of this essay. The following is a concise overview of the tribal prophecies of the Mayan and Mongolians.

The ancient Maya people had an intimate relationship with the planets and used their knowledge to produce a complex calendar which included cycles of time with concurrent clockwise and counterclockwise motions. Their system allowed them to

calculate the great eras, behind and ahead, for millions of years.¹⁵ According to the Mayan calendar, the world is in the process of transitioning from the fourth to the fifth Sun, which began in 1987 and will finish around the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013. In her book, *Dreaming the Council Ways*, Native American shaman Ohky Forest shares:

The transition into the fifth Sun is symbolized in the ancient predictions as a fight between the arrogant and the humble man, a struggle in which true humility vanquishes arrogance, and survives as the ultimate winner. This heralds the end of pyramidal societies and the establishment of egalitarian societies...¹⁶

Forest warns that the transformation of the societies “will not just happen, but will require a ‘revolution by and for the Earth.’”¹⁷ How this will manifest is unclear but the prophecies include predictions of mass death and global ecliptic darkness. However, this shift of Suns will also give birth to an era of compassion and harmony. Where much of the societies today hold separatist views, the new societies will come to realize our unity through diversity.

The Mongolian prophecies are based on the less sophisticated, yet, accurate and powerful medicine wheel. According to the Mongolian system of time, we are “leaving the Era of Man to initiate the Era of Woman.”¹⁸ The transition period began in 1985 and will finish in 2010, at which time the world will be fully in the “Era of Woman.”¹⁹ Forest trumpets the possibilities of this new era:

Rejoice now, both men and women, for this Era of Woman symbolizes a celebration of the feminine forces of the universe. We can now start envisioning a true form of global balance between men and women.²⁰

Within the framework of these prophecies, it becomes obvious as to the importance of women wholly embracing their feminine nature and stepping into their power. “The female will be in control of leading humankind back into the Light,”

predicts spiritual healer Drunvalo Melchizedek.²¹ It appears this is no time to be scurrying for the hills or hiding behind the men.

Jean Reddemann, a wise Native American woman, shared with me that within Native American teachings women have always been in the middle of the circle of life.²² As in nature, we are the creators and the changes predicted in the prophecies place the females, once again, in the center of creation. We are capable of birthing this coming world and nursing our planet back to balance. We must first bring ourselves into our own wholeness so that we will be ready to answer the call for humanity. We must muster our receptivity, our creativity, our expansiveness, and all our numerous gifts, but most of all, we must offer our *hearts*. Our ability to relate to others through our hearts is, in my opinion, our greatest gift. Our intuition and love reside in our hearts. A world ruled by wisdom and love is a world that I, for one, eagerly await.

While waiting for our new world to take form, I have much work to do. For instance, I have to declutter my closets. I have clothes in there dating back to the 80's. I am not saying they fit, just that I have them. I have changed quite a bit since then, not only physically but psychologically and spiritually. What does one do with the ill-fitting clothing and beliefs when you realize they never were "you?" Looking at them now, they look a bit silly and some make me look downright scary. I do not really want to pass them on to someone else and clutter *their* closets, and besides, they were custom fit for who I was back then. But, they never really fit well; they were itchy and tight. I did not make them, even though I do sew. I believe most of them came from a tailor in town. He was commissioned by my parents and church and by society in general. I do not want

to give them to “Goodwill” because I feel that it would not be goodwill at all. I look forward to having room in my closet.

Rachael just visited from her home in California and we went through my closets then. She has the ability to look at my “clothes” and reveal to me what is outdated or no longer of service to who I am now. She also has an eagle eye for spotting stains which I tend to overlook. Daughters are like that; I love it. I value those in my life who hold me to my authentic self. This decluttering of our false masks is an essential task for us to accomplish as we move into the world of the future. For most of us, we will be digging into the closets of our childhood.

Bubbles and Circles

When I entered first grade, I was a shy, timid recluse who chose to stand by my teacher, Mrs. Long, when recess time dictated we move out to the playground. Standing there, eclipsed by Mrs. Long’s shadow, I observed what I considered to be the chaos and destruction of the unleashed energy of play. It was frightening to a child brought up in a fundamentalist military home, complete with order, rules and structure. Suffice to say, I eventually ventured out and joined the mêlée. I was soon intoxicated with the wild sense of freedom and recklessness. Once, I was even sent home with a bloody nose. It was wonderful.

As I matured, I wandered back to the sidelines of the playground of life. I could still appreciate the energy emanating from some of those in the fray of play and sense a bubbling inside my heart as old feelings of joy and abandon would struggle to surface

into action. Most times, I would squelch those rumblings with practicality, schedules, work to be done, or fear of bubbling hearts.

My heart continues to bubble. I love bubbles. As a child, they mesmerized me. Take that little “wand” inside the bottle of bubbles and swish it around in the air and circles of various sizes are released to the wind. I now want to release my bubbles out into the world. I want to whoosh my wand, releasing circles, and emancipate women from fear of bubbling hearts. I imagine bubbling circles of passion, laughter, and joy, wafting away on a breeze to parts unknown, seeding the world with play.

What would the world look like if women began to play? After the strange looks from onlookers subsided, perhaps these same spectators would notice a change within themselves – a bubbling in *their* hearts, reminding them of the delight and *wholeness* of childhood play. Maybe then the bystanders would join in. What if the people watching us were family members, loved ones who, just like us, were hungry for joy? It sounds like an equation for bliss. $Me + play = happiness + others = bliss$. That is the extent of my math skills, but I believe the sum represents Divine Union. Sounds divine to me. All of this, just because we choose to play. At the heart of play are love, connection, and a deep sense of wonder. “Play is about balance, mystery, belonging, inclusion, trust, sacredness, fearlessness, touch, reciprocity, love, kindness, openness, and joy.”²³ These same qualities describe the energy of the feminine. My vision involves bringing play back into the lives of women. Step into a circle of play and experience joy, laughter, love. Step into a circle of play and experience wholeness. Bring your wholeness into the world. Bring the world into your Circle.

Conclusion: The Gift of Grace

Because this story is true, there is no fairy tale happy ending as far as my Circle is concerned. The Circle remains empty. But, looking from a big picture view, I suppose you could say there is never an ending to *anything*. Only death and rebirth. I feel a rebirth coming from within me. I have been in gestation for some time now and am feeling the “quickenings” sensations even as I write. What is coming? I do not know. I purposely let go of any thoughts that attempt to define this new “being.” At this point, I feel that defining it, limits it. Right now, in this moment, everything is a possibility. I like that.

And so, I have come full circle. I am back in the monastery in which I initially found the guidance to seek a community of women. I am not meeting myself where I was at that time; much has happened, there have been many lessons brought into my heart. Out of the struggle have emerged many strange and wonderful blessings. I am moving up the spiral toward the Self I was originally created to be. What have I learned from this paper, this gift of Grace? Too much to numerate, but I can hit the highlights. Some of the lessons are old, but I tend to require repeated instructions.

- Breathe. Keep breathing.
- Save my work. Often. Just like human beings, the ocean, plants, animals and insects, computers are affected by the planets.
- Play. Integrate it in all aspects of my life – physically, mentally, spiritually.
- Just as in life, the work is done individually, within community.
- Curiosity creates expansion.

- The search is the thing.
- As my physical hearing diminishes with age, my “soul hearing” amps up.
- Go bicycling.
- There is great strength in softness – soft voice, soft touch, soft eyes.
- All I need to know is within me.
- Nurture silence.
- Only love really counts – not just for others, but for me.
- Writing from flow *and* force is fun.
- Intuition is one of the most valuable and profoundly powerful ingredients I have.
- I live within a circle of the Divine, loving, embracing, expansive, and safely containing all possibilities.
- My Circle sisters are a microcosm of the macrocosm. They dwell in my heart and, thus, so do *all* women. They are each a mirror of my weaknesses and strengths, as I am theirs. I have come to realize that as I love them, I am loving myself.
- I do not know where my path is leading. It may be simply an endlessly looping circle of meaning that will never be self-evident. I have come to appreciate the beauty of not knowing.
- The Universe does not follow scripts laid out like chapters within a book. Behind each character presented in a book is an entire story with its own twists to the plot, which, in turn, has its own story and so on and so on. Circles within circles, you might say, each bumping into others, creating a

beautiful collage of circles, some intermingling slightly, some not, but all interconnected. In my mind, when I anthropomorphize God or the Goddess, I see her looking at this stunning array of circles and smiling with joy at the unity of life. One burst of light in a seemingly insignificant circle ignites a chain reaction of light throughout the entire creation. The same happens when darkness descends. What matters is that we are not alone...ever. I know this concept is meaningful when we feel that we have been abandoned but it is also vital when we are feeling spiritually healthy. We have the ability to change the world through our thoughts, words, and actions. Imagine yourself as whole...now live it...and pass it on.

Essay 4 Endnotes:

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- ¹ Robert Moss, *Dreamways of the Iroquois: Honoring the Secret Wishes of the Soul* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2005), 40.
- ² M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 94.
- ³ Ibid, 94-103.
- ⁴ Ibid, 94.
- ⁵ Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 64.
- ⁶ http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/grace_quotes.html (accessed October 14, 2008).
- ⁷ Joel Levey and Michelle Levey, *Living in Balance: A Dynamic Approach for Creating Harmony and Wholeness in a Chaotic World* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1998), 192.
- ⁸ Christina Grof, *The Thirst for Wholeness: Attachment, Addiction, and the Spiritual Path* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 123.
- ⁹ Peck, *The Different Drum*, 176.
- ¹⁰ Mary Faulkner, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Women's Spirituality* (Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2002), 18-19.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 17-19.
- ¹² C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), vol. 7, para. 112.
- ¹³ Encarta.com, s.v. "visionary," http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary/_/Visionary.html (accessed October 14, 2008).
- ¹⁴ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and the World* (San Francisco: Conari Press), 11-18.
- ¹⁵ Ohky Simine Forest, *Dreaming the Council Ways: True Native American Teachings from the Red Lodge* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 2000), 204-207.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 209.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 213.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 219.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 221.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 227.
- ²¹ Drunvalo Melchizedek, *Serpent of Light Beyond 2012: The Movement of the Earth's Kundalini and the Rise of the Female Light, 1949 to 2013* (San Francisco, CA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2008), 265.
- ²² Jean Reddemann, telephone conversation with author, September 30, 2008.
- ²³ Levey, *Living in Balance*, 217.

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