

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Harbingers and Healers:  
A Study of Contemporary Goddess Worshipers

by

Sharon Mae Gladman

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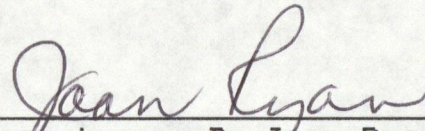
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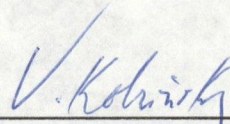
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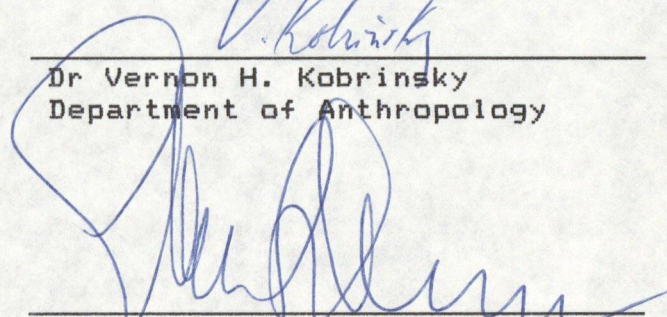
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "Harbingers and Healers: A Study of Contemporary Goddess Worshipers", submitted by Sharon Mae Gladman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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## ABSTRACT

For many contemporary women, traditional religions fail to provide psychological support, spiritual fulfillment, and social solidarity. These women, rejecting females' secondary roles in patriarchal Churches and considering any real identification with the concept of a male God impossible, are finding a meaningful spiritual identity through the creating of a female-centred Goddess religion.

Using data gathered primarily through a year's participant-observation at the rituals of a local Goddess group, a week-long workshop, and interviews with participants, this thesis analyzes the Goddess movement as a hybrid of feminist values, Witchcraft, and native spirituality, and examines it in terms of revitalization theory.

It was found that by revitalizing female, Wiccan, and native traditions, participants in the Goddess movement are gaining empowerment, both individually and collectively, through the creation of a transforming religion which offers new perceptions of womanhood.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: WOMEN DISREGARDED

#### Inequality

Simone de Beauvoir's characterization of females as "the second sex" is an apt description of women who, in many societies, have traditionally played secondary roles and who have been under-represented in anthropological studies of those societies.

While not all anthropologists agree upon the universality of male domination and female subordination, many researchers have stressed the marginality and invisibility of women in the public domains of world cultures. Sherry Ortner, emphasizing the wide-spread secondary status of women, points to factors such as statements of cultural ideology which devalue women, the concept of defilement associated with women, and the exclusion of women from full participation in areas of power, either religious or secular, factors which are common worldwide. Ortner states unequivocally that "everywhere, in every known culture, women are considered in some degree, inferior to men" (Kessler, 1976: 12-13).

Ortner's observations are echoed by other researchers such as Kate Young and Olivia Harris who, in a cross-cultural study of female status claim that women are



subordinate in all societies "known to anthropology and history" (1982: 451-471).

Michelle Rosaldo has observed that even when they appear to be powerful and influential, women everywhere lack generally recognized and culturally-valued authority: male activities are the important activities (Rosaldo, 1974: 17-25). Edwin Ardener has categorized men as the dominant group in most cultures in that they formulate the culturally-accepted models (meanings/theories/structures) and validate them by reference to other males. Women, whom Ardener calls the muted group, have been excluded from the formulation and validation of meaning and thus denied expression (1975: 1-28).

E.E. Evans-Pritchard, famous for his advice to fledgling field-workers to "behave like a gentleman, keep off the women, take quinine daily, and play it by ear", bemoaned the challenge threatening modern man's dominant position by insisting, even as late as 1955 in his Fawcett lecture (1965: 35-37), that "in all societies men are always in the ascendancy. The facts seem to suggest that there are deep biological and psychological as well as sociological factors involved" (ibid: 34).

This androcentric research-bias is understandable, since anthropology was developed as a discipline primarily by white, Western, middle-class males who, in addition to maintaining an inherent male bias, often were subject to cultural restrictions regarding access to female informants;

thus, they depended upon male interpretations of the experience of both sexes.

Other studies, including Tiffany (1979) drawing extensively from Leacock (1975, 1977, 1978), indicate that sexual equality exists in many cultures but has, in fact, not been observed by Western researchers; influenced by standards of gender inequality in industrialized Western societies, they have assumed that asymmetry is the norm everywhere.

### Equality

Until Margaret Mead began fieldwork in Samoa, women and children were almost ignored by ethnographers. Questions such as those concerning the socialization of children by means of the inculcation of societal values and traditions had rarely been asked previously. So child-raising, as well as cultural pressure on both males and females to conform to the gender rules of their societies, became major themes of Mead's work (Rensberger, 1983: 28-37).

Evans-Pritchard scoffed at Mead's study, Sex and Temperament, which claimed that temperamental and social differences between the sexes are a product of cultural conditioning (1965:35-37).

Fortunately, the increase in numbers of female anthropologists as well as a rising awareness of the validity of women's ideas and experiences are resulting in a

shift away from androcentricity as the only recognized frame of human knowledge. David Pilbeam comments (Leakey, 1981: 52-53) on the tendency in the study of human prehistory for prevailing cultural ideology to influence researchers' interpretation of data. For example, with the burgeoning of technology, man the tool-maker was emphasized; during the war years, man's "killer ape" ancestry was stressed; the media revolution led to theories of language as the keystone of human advance; recently, with the growth of the women's movement, females are claiming an equal role in the development of human culture. What we know is determined to a great extent by the kind of questions we ask (Rosaldo, 1980: 390).

Many questions have been asked by researchers in recent years to "fill in the gaps", examining the neglected side of studies which concentrated on male populations and which generalized from the experience of one section of human societies, men, to explain the whole.

Annette Weiner (Tiffany, 1979; Shapiro, 1981), for example, doing fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, discovered that Malinowski in his classic study failed, as had subsequent researchers, to recognize the important social/symbolic role of women in the system of exchanges. To a world depending on anthropological research for information, Trobriand women were thereby effectively rendered invisible.

Similarly, a study of the Tiwi, a northern Australian

Aboriginal group, by two male anthropologists, Hart and Pilling (Shapiro, 1981: 122-123), had focused solely on men and stressed the beneficial alliances formed for males through the exchange of female relatives. Jane Goodale's ethnography of marriage among the Tiwi (Friedl, 1983: 202-203) analyzed the marriage system from a female perspective. Goodale's work helped to balance the analysis by revealing the extent to which adult women were able to select their own husbands and influence the marriages of daughters and grand-daughters.

Sally Slocum and Sherry Ortner have challenged traditional male-oriented theories of cultural evolution. Slocum (1982: 473-483) questions the primary place that the "man the hunter" concept has been accorded in the reconstruction of human evolution. The widely-accepted theory proposes that while females, because of their reproductive roles, were homebound with dependent offspring, males, through hunting, were developing co-operative, communicative, and organizational skills and inventing tools, weapons, and language. The implication is that only one half, the male, of the human species evolved, presumably dragging the other half, the female, along behind. Slocum argues that it is probable that females played an important role in evolution: gathering food; developing tools used in gathering food; food-sharing; identifying, and eventually cultivating, plants; developing complex, long-term mother-infant bonds; and, passing on to infants the

accumulated knowledge and customs of the group, probably with attendant language innovation. Selection pressures for bigger brains would therefore apply to females as well as males.

Ortner (Kessler, 1976: 13-15) reverses Levi-Strauss's contention that the dichotomy between men and women is that of nature versus culture with men providing the raw food from nature and women acting as culture bearers who use fire to cook the raw food. Male virility and strength, according to Levi-Strauss, are constantly threatened by females' attempts to enculturate their men. Ortner claims that primarily because of their menstrual cycles/reproductive functions, it is women who are more in harmony with nature. Rather than being tied to nature, men are, in Ortner's view, representative of culture that seeks to repress and control the natural world.

Another step in the redressing of the undervaluation of women by male researchers has been taken by psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982: 6-20). The accepted model of human development based on the work of Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, is biased, Gilligan claims, because their paradigms were constructed from all-male populations. Because of women's characteristic tendency to empathize, to include others' points of view, to subordinate rules to relationships, females don't conform to the male model, and, consequently, have been considered psychologically and morally aberrant.

The double distortion extant in studies dominated by male researchers interacting with male informants is, as Gilligan has pointed out, blatant in Western thinking; the problem of male superiority and gender inequality in North America is a continuing one. The entry of many more women into social science research has exposed this.

The genesis of male domination can be extrapolated from evidence from foraging societies in which, although the female gatherers usually provide more than half the food, the male hunters attain a much greater degree of status through the distribution of meat. Ernestine Friedl says that "in any society, status goes to those who control the distribution of valued goods and services outside the family" (1983: 203); she goes on to observe that, despite varying degrees of male dominance common to foraging cultures, they are positively egalitarian when compared to agricultural and industrial societies in which male status has been developed to an extreme degree.

Manda Cesara, in Africa doing fieldwork among the Lenda, was able, from a distance, to see her own American culture more clearly and was struck by the "peculiar sexual asymmetry" common to North America. Cesara found that exposure to the strong, independent Lenda women forced her to shift her ingrained perception of females as those who borrowed their best qualities from men; because the dynamics of Lenda society focus on both sexes, she gained a new realization of the extent to which North American culture is



male-centred (1982: 5-6, 211-212).

### Imbalance

Women in North America currently are questioning and challenging sexism in all its societal manifestations. To them it is not enough to, in Marilyn Boxer's sardonic phrase, merely "add-women-and-stir" (Strathern, 1987: 283). Many are moving beyond an economic and political focus to ideological and philosophical concerns; they are examining and rejecting the belief systems on which our culture is based.

The realization that male-created western religion has been one of the major promoters of gender inequality and a primary tool of female oppression, and the discovery that the mythological understructures of the major religions are, for them, bankrupt have prompted a challenging of Judaeo-Christian theology.

Women in revolt against patriarchal theology vary in their responses: some deny the spiritual aspect of their lives; other stay within the church and attempt to counteract a system which often does not consider them "spiritual" enough to participate fully or to officiate as priests; still others have found spiritual validity in the Goddess religion, known also as Witchcraft.

Adherents of the Goddess religion claim that it is based on ancient worship of a female life force which arose

in Paleolithic times, continued well into the Neolithic era, was finally driven completely underground early in the Christian era by male-dominated Christianity, and then almost obliterated in the great persecutions of witches who carried on the traditions of the Old Religion.

The subject of this thesis is a Circle of women who regularly meet, perhaps as present-day members of this ancient line, to honour the Goddess. The study will attempt to determine why the women in this group seek out an alternative religious movement; to ascertain the function of the Goddess religion as a vehicle for female identity and for healing of the women in this Circle; and, to understand how these women, through the revitalizing of female symbols, archetypes, myths, and rituals, develop a sense of self-esteem, power, and spiritual affirmation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FEMALE AFFIRMATION: A SEARCH FOR CHANGE

#### Women's Place in Traditional, Patriarchal Religion

The Durkheimian postulate that a main function of religion is to sustain and celebrate societal norms and that, therefore, the form a religion takes is a reflection of the society that creates it (McColl, 1982: 306-307), is reflected in the history of Christianity which has traditionally provided a theological justification for female subordination. Christianity was born into a well-established tradition of misogyny. Robert Hertz, commenting on the dualism which dominates thought and, consequently, social organization in small-scale societies, maintains that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is the fundamental, universal factor of spiritual life. In general, man is considered strong, active, and sacred, and woman, weak, passive, and profane (1973: 95-98).

This concept of defilement, of male sacred/clean/good versus female profane/unclean/evil was continued in the sacred/profane duality of Christian doctrine, with the idea that the female body as a source of danger and pollution provides religious sanction for the subordination and confinement of women to the private domain (Hammond and Jablow, 1976: 8). The early Christian Church was influenced

by the patriarchal Judeaïc tradition, the worst of which was embodied in an early Hebrew prayer which begins, "Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman..." (Stone, 1976: 224). The Church was also heir to the legacy of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle who proclaimed that "The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled" (Papa, 1981: 33), and who insisted that woman is actually a deficient, incomplete man, a thesis which survived to culminate, over two thousand years later, in Freud's theories about women (Agonito, 1977: 41).

Jesus himself, as a champion of the weak and powerless, had many female followers. "The first man who broke through the androcentricity of the ancient world" (Moltmann-Wendel, 1978: 19), he often preached directly to women, using examples from their lives to illuminate his lessons. His teachings did not reinforce the prevailing patriarchal order which required women to submit to men and he was concerned that women be justly treated. Women in the early Church did important work in liturgical, administrative, and sacramental capacities (Papa, 1981: 27-37).

Despite this advocacy of equality, the Church's function as a liberating force for women did not last long. Christian scribes, for example, zealously altered an earlier creation myth of Adam and Lilith, who was created at the same time as, and by implication equal to, Adam. The new Eve, in a strange inversion of the female birth-giving role,

was created out of one of Adam's ribs; undoubtedly one of his left ribs, representative of the profane side of the body (Hertz, 1973: 102). Adam and Eve became Christianity's entrenched images of man and woman, with woman in a derivative, secondary role, ultimately responsible for humanity's suffering, disgrace, and loss of immortality.

The early Church fathers relentlessly continued to promote a misogyny which has prevailed into modern times. Tertullian and Augustine condemned women for the Fall. Tertullian proclaimed, "You are the devil's gateway. How easily you destroyed man, the image of God. Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die" (Storkey, 1985: 122). Augustine argued that only man is made in the image of God (ibid: 123). Paul, continuing in the tradition in his letter to the Ephesians, established that "Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is head of his wife....As the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Papa, 1981: 135). Fifth-century St. John Chrysostom reinforced both woman's profane nature and her place in the private domain: "The woman taught once and ruined everything. On this account, let her not teach" (Stone, 1976: 226). In 1971, a San Francisco Episcopalian bishop, objecting to the ordination of women, insisted, "The sexuality of Christ is no accident nor is his masculinity incidental. This is the divine choice" (ibid: 238).

In language as well as in doctrine, the Church promotes

the secondary status of women. The politics of naming are profound and complex; names provide order and meaning, and those who have the power to do the naming are in a position to influence reality. Women, Ardener's "muted" group, have been denied this power (Spender, 1980: 76-78; 163-165).

Paulo Freire, referring to the basic human rights necessary to live in dignity, said, "To exist, humanly, is to name the world" (1970: 76). Ex-Catholic theologian Mary Daly insists that, like the Third-World oppressed of whom Freire wrote, women have had the power of naming stolen from them. "We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God" (1973: 8).

In the Christian tradition, it is significant that it was Adam who named the creatures of the earth, including woman.

Even though God, according to many biblical references, is actually to be considered neither male nor female (Storkey, 1985: 50), the language used in worship and prayer refers to "Him" in exclusively male terms: "God the Father, God the Son"; "the Kingdom of Heaven"; "Our Father who art in Heaven"; "Father, forgive us for we have sinned". Hymns sung in praise of God are laden with references to males to the exclusion of females: "Good Christian men rejoice"; "Onward Christian soldiers"; "Faith of our fathers living still". According to Dale Spender, "The effect of making the Deity masculine should not be underestimated because it



establishes one of the primary categories of our world as a male category" (1980: 166).

Thus, women have been kept in a secondary role in the Church which has reinforced societal patterns of patriarchy by denying women full participation, leadership, and expression. They have been forced to internalize the debased image of Eve and they have found themselves confronted with a masculine deity with whom, for many, it is impossible to indentify.

The ramifications of this androcentric theology have spread far beyond the boundaries of organized religion, even into contemporary times when only a minority of the population belongs to any Church. The perceptions of women inherent in patriarchal religions inform societal systems of law, education, politics, economics, and medicine, and are accepted as "natural laws" by even the most atheistic of citizens (Spretnak, 1982: xi).

### Women's Need for a Self-Affirming Religion

#### 1. Betrayal

For many women, the realization that religions promote the suppression of women is experienced as a spiritual betrayal. The options facing women who have been virtually locked out of patriarchal religions and who choose not to remain in the Church, are to concede, to withdraw from spiritual concerns, or to develop female-affirming religious

concepts.

According to many anthropologists, theologians, and psychologists, for women to concede or to deny spirituality, to remain muted, is to deny well-being and growth. In the structuralist perspective of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, religion functions to increase social solidarity; Malinowski recognized that the practice of religious rites serves to reduce anxiety in participants (Lehmann and Myers, 1985: 3-5). Women, who desire but are refused full participation in religion, are therefore denied the benefits of social solidarity and reduction of anxiety.

Yet it is not the churchgoers alone who suffer. Clifford Geertz stresses the importance to all individuals of a religious system: even if rejected by the conscious mind, religious symbols provide models for human existence. They enable people to come to terms with "limit" situations, such as suffering; and, to pass through transitions, such as death. Geertz insists that the mind abhors a void. If traditional religious symbols are rejected, or inadequate, they must be replaced (Christ and Plaskow, 1979: 268-274).

Presenting a theologian's perspective, Paul Tillich defines religion as the ultimate concern of humanity - "the articulation of longings for a centre of meaning and value, for connection with the power of being" (Christ and Plaskow, 1979: 1-2). This needs to be seen as the articulation of longings for fulfilling, not degrading, centres of meaning.

Many Jungian practitioners are concerned that

patriarchal religions betray women: their images and symbols ignore women's strengths and fall short of providing female models for life.

## 2. Countering Betrayal

The need for female myths and archetypes which guide perception positively has prompted many feminists to reject patriarchal religions and to look to the past for a religious tradition which supports the dignity of women.

The past to which these women look is an ancient time of celebration of the feminine image of the divine. Feminist writer and historian Merlin Stone (1976: 4), advocating a return to ancient pre-Christian religion, says that, "a religion in which the deity was female and revered as wise, valiant, and powerful, provided different images from those of male-oriented religions" (1976: 4). Appealing images indeed, compared to those provided by the Christian Church: Eve, guilty, sinful, pain-filled, and servile, and Mary, a sexless, sinless, impossible combination of mother and virgin.

Jean Shinoda Bolen (1984: 1-34), examining the psychology of women from feminist and Jungian perspectives, is a psychiatrist who has discovered the immense value of myth as an insight tool. She has found that psycho-analysis can be facilitated by using Greek goddesses to provide personifications for the exploration of women's inner forces

or archetypes. The Greek myth of Amor and Psyche, for example, by mirroring women's situation and giving a mythic dimension to their struggle, may help women struggling with seemingly insurmountable tasks. Bolen has used the story of Psyche, who was given an enormous heap of seeds to sort into piles according to type, to guide women such as a graduate student who was overwhelmed by the demands of organizing a mound of data into a coherent term paper.

Sylvia Perera writes (1981: 9-19) that in order to celebrate the powerful, independent, many-sided feminine, it is necessary for women to reject identity as Eves, as "spiritual daughters of the patriarchy", and to return to Goddess worship for spiritual renewal.

### The Goddess Religion in Ancient Times

Some contemporary anthropologists understand the current concern with the status of women but question what they see as a romanticizing of matriarchal values of the past. Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, for instance, maintain (1976: 2-3, 124) that the anthropological evidence is scanty that goddesses were ever worshipped to the exclusion of male gods; nowhere has this phenomenon occurred in historic times. The Mother-Goddess-matriarchy complex they see as part of a growing tendency to sentimentalize the "primitive".

Other anthropologists and historians present a

different picture.

Evelyn Kessler (1976: 29-34) insists that the 25,000 year old exaggeratedly-female Venus figurines found all across Europe are indications of a complex belief system incorporating woman and her cycles - a Mother Goddess cult which revered the female life-force as creator and nurturer. In Neolithic times, 10,000 years ago, female deities were conspicuously associated with agriculture and its cyclical rounds of dormancy and fertility. These Neolithic goddesses were continuing manifestations of the Mother Earth cult of fertility goddesses who appear to have been the first deities formally worshipped by human beings (French, 1985: 43-47; Preston, 1982: 330).

Rosemary Ruether has noted (Christ, 1980: 50-51) that as societies became urbanized, culture-creating males used myth, symbol, philosophy, and theology to emphasize their relative distance from the body and nature. Traditional values derived from the body and nature then became associated with women who are immutably nature-bound in their reproductive and child-nurturing roles.

In the earliest of human times, when the concept of fatherhood was unclear, women's reproductive and nurturing role undoubtedly gave them a prodigious power. In historian Joseph Campbell's words (1969: 315), women's power as progenitors and sustainers has remained one of men's "chief concerns to break, control, and employ".

The feminine principle as the fundamental cosmic force

seems to have lost its widespread importance after the "urban revolution". As a hierarchical system of powerful male rulers and priests became predominant, the status of the goddess diminished (McColl, 1982: 304-307). Women, who as Earth's daughters had heretofore been accorded esteem through identification with the Goddess and with Earth, also lost status (Chicago, 1979: 57).

Charlene Spretnak (1978: 1-17), who dedicates her anthology of pre-Hellenic myths to "our foremothers", writes convincingly of the Great Goddess, the deity whose worship evolved from the awe in which our ancestors held the female as the source of life. At various sites of worship, differing attributes of the deity were stressed, resulting in many derivative forms of the original Goddess. According to Spretnak, the revered pre-Hellenic goddesses which Classical Greek male philosophers incorporated into their pantheon were severely transformed: Pandora, for example, revered by ancient peoples as the Giver of Gifts such as food and tools, was made into the "troublesome, treacherous source of human woes" (ibid: 91). Athena, originally a Cretan goddess and patron of wisdom and the arts, was transformed into the goddess of war, having sprung, fully armed and Eve-like, without the intervention of a mother, from the head of Zeus.

In Christian tradition as well, earlier female deities were brutally eliminated. Astarte, the Great Goddess, became Ashtoreth, the detested pagan deity of the Old



Testament (Stone, 1976: 9). "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" may have been a prohibition against once powerful female deities.

I.M.Lewis claims (1986: 48) that once the "male" Holy Spirit was established as the official Christian deity, other spiritual entities were automatically disenfranchised, leaving their followers exposed to charges of consorting with other gods and the Devil. Those who reject the accepted moral order, in Lucy Mair's definition (1969: 230-232), are witches; therefore, "evil" is attributed to them by members of the dominant religion to which they do not ascribe.

People, mostly women, who in Western Christian cultures clung to the Old Religion which included worship of female deities were thus considered to be witches.

#### Witches - Guardians of the Old Religion

The modern revival of the Goddess Religion/Witchcraft was due, in large part, to the influence of Egyptologist Margaret Murray who published The Witch Cult in Western Europe in 1921. Murray claimed that European witches persecuted in the Middle Ages were believers in the cult of the Mother Goddess and her consort, the Horned God. Secretly, in female or mixed groups of thirteen, called covens, Murray's followers gathered to keep alive the ancient beliefs. Her anthropology currently is considered

dubious; she has been accused of manipulation, exaggeration, and even fabrication of data to support her theories (Klaits, 1985: 10; Macfarlane, 1970: 9). Many historians can find no evidence to support her assertions of an organized pagan theology, and question her claims that as many as nine million women were executed as witches (Ruether, 1984: 118-120). Others concede that there were, indeed, populations which clung to pagan beliefs (Weyant, 1987: personal communication; Kors and Peters, 1972: 4), and that "survivals of this pagan cult were stigmatized during the Middle Ages as witchcraft" (Eliade in Adler, 1979: 330).

In any case, the slaughter, during the European witch-craze, of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women (Achterberg, 1985: 67), offers both a chilling example of the scapegoat function that women served, mainly at the hands of the Church, and a rallying point for those modern women who have resurrected the witch as a symbol of female wisdom and rebellion.

#### 1. Witch Beliefs in Small-Scale Societies

Understanding of European witch persecutions has been facilitated by the many anthropological studies of witchcraft beliefs in small-scale societies all over the world, inspired by Evans-Pritchard's pioneering work in the 1930's on witchcraft among the Azande. Medieval and early modern Europe shared with other technologically-

unsophisticated societies such as the Azande a conviction that unseen, mysterious forces governed the world (Klaitz, 1985: 12).

In these societies, supernatural beliefs function to explain the unexplainable and thereby reduce anxieties. Freud, addressing the problem of human helplessness in a frightening world, recognized the importance of personifying terrifying forces so that they can be controlled (Spiro, 1966: 102): he was referring to god-personifications, a reflection of the child's experience with his father, an all-powerful human being. The witch may serve a similar function as the personification of a malevolent force which can be identified and, to some extent, controlled.

Witchcraft beliefs operate not only as a theory of causation which explains unnatural conditions such as barren-ness and winds that destroy the crops (Krige, 1986: 265), they also produce convenient, controllable scapegoats and act, according to Kluckhohn's study of Navaho witchcraft (Collins, 1975: 434), in an educational and moral sense to reinforce social values. Because the witch embodies the antithesis of proper behaviour, he or she serves as a model of how not to behave.

Monica Wilson, in her field work among the Nyakyusa of what was then Tanganyika (1986: 277), described the value of witch beliefs as a social control. The people resist being conspicuously successful for fear of witch vengeance and they share food generously; above all, witches are believed

to attack those who are miserly with food. The Nyakyusa also believe that witches wreak vengeance on people with whom they have quarreled, so the Nyakyusa are careful to maintain friendly relationships with their neighbours.

S.F.Nadel demonstrates (1986: 286-299) how witch beliefs may arise from, and act upon, areas of social tension. Among the Nupe of Northern Nigeria, women's market trading activities give them a great deal of independence from, and a superior economic position to, their husbands. By levelling witch accusations against the women, the men are able, in their annual witch hunts, to maintain a sense of power and worth.

There are generally considered to be two witch categories: nightmare, or night, witches, and everyday witches. Night witches, invariably women, are said to prowl nocturnally and to be sinisterly opposed to the most fundamental tenets of human decency. Everyday witches are said to exhibit anti-social, bad-neighbour qualities: greed, miserliness, isolation, and unfriendliness (Lehmann and Myers, 1985: 148; Krige, 1986: 264-265).

The double fear of being attacked by witches or being accused of witchcraft helps to maintain social order by controlling nonconformists. People are wary of angering witches and those whose behaviour conflicts with the social norms of their culture are most likely to be accused of witchcraft (Offiong, 1986: 165).

Ironically, by considering themselves witches, women

may derive some power and satisfaction otherwise unavailable to them in their cultures. In a similar way, some African women's ritual groups offer a measure of catharsis and identity to women who, through possession by evil spirits, are able to gain attention and ease the resentment of being excluded from the mainstream of religious life (Lewis, 1986: 43).

Women, already stigmatized under the concept of ritual impurity which depicts the female body as a source of danger and pollution (Hammond and Jablow, 1976: 8), are even more open than are men to witchcraft accusations if they fail to conform to the prevailing norms of female behaviour. Hammond and Jablow echo Mary Douglas's description (1966: 35-36) of pollution as essentially "matter out of place", when they state that "whatever violates a society's sense of order will be seen as threatening, nasty, disorderly, or wrong" (1976: 31). Women in conventional roles of wife and mother are not threatening. The danger arises when a woman fails to bear children, or when her children or husband have died. Barren women in a Guatemalan village, for instance, are usually reputed to be witches (Paul, 1974: 291).

Thus, the social strictures imposed upon females in small-scale societies are so rigid that they make women extremely vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. As has been seen, Nadel's Nupe women, moving out into the public domain to become successful traders, are open to denunciation as witches by jealous husbands. When

witchcraft beliefs and accusations are a response to psychological and social stress, and females have less access to public power, it is understandable that women frequently resort to levelling witch charges against each other. The mother and daughter-in-law relationship and the co-wife situation are common areas of conflict and of witchcraft accusations; and, in patrilineal societies in which new wives are incorporated into the household from an outside group, a woman may be suspected of maintaining loyalties to her former family - she is virtually "an enemy within the gates" (Mayer, 1986: 68-69).

The characteristics attributed to people, usually women, accused of witchcraft are remarkably similar across cultures (Mayer, 1986: 56).

Physically, witches are distinguished by stigmata, covert or overt. Internal peculiarities may include mangu, described by Evans-Pritchard as the source of evil in the Azande witch, located in the upper part of the belly (1937: 9), or an abdominal python, believed by the Nyakyusa to be the source of the witch's power (Wilson, 1986: 277). External markings such as a red eye or a devil's mark (Mayer, 1986: 56) are considered as obvious witch stigmata.

Night witches can fly through the air (Krige, 1986: 264; Fortune, 1932: 105) to attend ghoulish rituals which may involve the exhumation of newly-buried corpses and the killing of their own children (Shapera, 1986: 111). Indeed, witches are believed to have a predilection for human flesh:



they may fly by night on pythons or on the wind to meet in covens for cannibalistic feasts (Wilson, 1986: 276). This passion for human meat is a common characteristic in witch beliefs, and is typical of the perception of witches as people who practise a total inversion of socially acceptable conduct.

Also defining the character of witches are the animal familiars such as baboons, wild cats, hyenas, and snakes with which they are usually associated (Shapera, 1986: 111; Wilson, 1986: 278; Hammond-Tooke, 1986: 366). Animals of the night, such as bats and owls, are, in many cultures, closely related to witches; the owl is considered both spy and messenger who hoots chilling nocturnal warnings of misfortune (Marwick, 1986: 213; Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 30).

The role of "witch" is societally-ascribed; as Philip Mayer states, "The witch does not exist in his own right, it is the judgement of society that creates him. Society creates the image of the witch, and pins this image down onto particular individuals" (1986: 61). It is non-conforming women who are most often the particular individuals accused of witchcraft.

## 2. Witchcraft in the Western Tradition

Clyde Kluckhohn has remarked on the probability that, in view of the world-wide distribution of witch beliefs, "a complex of certain witch beliefs was part of a generalized

Paleolithic culture which, in some sense, forms the basis of all known cultures" (1972: 71).

Such speculation is intriguing; however, the first documented evidence of witch beliefs in the Western tradition is not found until classical Greece and Rome. Witches then were described as women who could fly through the night, make spells to further their love affairs or inspire hatred for others, and bring about storms and illness. They met after dark and appealed to the goddesses Hecate and Diana for aid (Baroja, 1986: 79).

With centuries of witchlore behind them, it is not surprising that the European populaces of Medieval and Early Modern times included witchcraft in their folk beliefs. Beginning in the twelfth century, though, witch accusations began to escalate. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a full-scale witch hunt swept Europe, giving vent to many thousands of accusations and executions of witches, mostly women. This witch craze resulted from a complex mixture: pagan beliefs, folklore, and sorcery at the popular level were combined with accusations of Christian heresy at the ecclesiastical level and fired by a catalyst of misogyny from both laymen and theologians.

The functions of witchcraft at the village level in Europe were similar to those observed by anthropologists in small-scale societies.

An important function was explanatory, a way of dealing with terrible, unseen forces. The Middle Ages were a time

of fear and uncertainty: people were helpless in the face of diseases such as the bubonic plague, the first onslaught of which wiped out twenty percent of the population of Europe (Klaits, 1985: 26); and, with developing cities and an inadequate water supply, fire was another omnipresent threat over which people had little control.

Witches were the scapegoats who could be blamed for plagues and fires as well as for injury, crop failures, unusual meteorological conditions, demonic possession, and human failure and incompetence (Thomas, 1971: 540; Kors, 1972: 10).

As in small-scale societies, fear of witches also reinforced social values which stressed neighbourly behaviour such as generosity. Many accusations resulted from village quarrels: if a supplicant was seen to have been refused charity and some misfortune subsequently befell the household, the beggar was suspected of witchcraft which, observers were quick to point out, the householder had invited through miserly behaviour (Klaits, 1985: 86; Thomas, 1971: 564).

In addition to those probably innocent people who were labelled "witch" for a number of socially-functional reasons, there undoubtedly were many who worshipped pagan gods and goddesses and conducted arcane magic rituals. There were also those who practised healing arts (Weyant, 1987: personal communication).

The distinction between maleficent and "white" magic

was blurred in the early Middle Ages. Those who performed magic, cast spells, and conversed with spirits, could be either male or female, and could be referred to as "witches", as well as "sorcerers", "cunning men", "wise men", or "wise women". The practitioners of beneficent magic healed the sick through ritual and with natural medicines, acted as midwives, found lost goods, and divined the future (Thomas, 1971: 13-15).

The wise women, or witches, are considered by some historians to be the most advanced scientists of their time (Achterberg, 1985: 60). Relying not only on extensive knowledge of herbal remedies, they understood as well the power of incantations, conceived of as magical, which acted on the sufferer's imagination. Their ability to soothe and heal was invaluable at a time when "most of humanity was cursed with aches of one kind or another" (ibid: 59). One woman healer, Trotula, who died in 1097, wrote a treatise on gynaecology and obstetrics which was still consulted for seven hundred years after her death even though the male doctors who depended on her expertise dismissed Trotula as a witch and chose to believe that her book had actually been written by a man (Chicago, 1979: 73).

Unfortunately, in an age of transition, fear, and conflict, all witches were extremely vulnerable to charges of evil-doing. In cases involving the "loser" in a love triangle, against whom the witch's spell worked, or of the thief pin-pointed as in possession of lost property, grudges

would predictably be held against the worker of even "good" magic.

By the fourteenth century the village witches, who could be compared with the everyday witches of small-scale societies, were transformed by theologians of a fear-dominated religion into nightmare witches with many of the characteristics of their demonic counterparts in other cultures.

### 3. Witchcraft as a Christian Heresy

In early Christian times, churchmen expected Christ's immanent return, which afforded a measure of security (Merton, 1968: 18-19). As the centuries passed without Christ's return, demons became more and more feared, and Satan gained potency as the embodiment, to Christians, of evil. By 1100 A.D., in an attempt to counter the satanic threat and create some order and control, Christian cosmology began to be more rigorously defined (Klaits, 1985: 23).

The fear of evil forces, zealous defining of Christian theology, and intolerance of nonconformists, led ecclesiastics to link witchcraft with heresy, and witches with the Devil. The organized, systematic transformation, by theologians, of folklore into demonology resulted in the witch craze in the fourteenth century, and reached its peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Kors, 1972: 6;

Trevor-Roper, 1972: 445) when virtually everyone appears to have joined in.

Like the night witches in small-scale societies, demonic witches were thought to meet in the dark at dreadful sabbats where they honoured Satan. Some historians think that the Medieval superstition arose out of the nocturnal gatherings of itinerant beggars around bonfires in farmers' fields (Thomas, 1971: 525).

To get to a sabbat, the witches were said to fly through the air on sticks, shovels, broomsticks, pigs, or goats (Kors, 1972: 10; Cohn, 1975: 142). They were also accompanied by animal familiars, often cats (Thomas, 1971: 524).

Jean Bodin wrote in his De Magorum Daemonomania in 1580,

Witches eat human flesh, especially the flesh of children, and publicly drink their blood. But if they cannot procure children, they exhume human corpses from the grave or take off from the gibbets the bodies of hanged men (Holmes, 1974: 111).

At the sabbats, their greatest delight was reputed to be cooking, killing, and eating unbaptised babies (Cohn, 1975: 140).

European witches, like their Azande counterparts, were often believed to have physical peculiarities, such as a devil's mark somewhere on their bodies. Some theologians claimed that it was impossible to cut off a witch's hair (Thomas, 1971: 42).

The association of evil with ugliness was well-established: a physical deformity in itself was enough to arouse suspicion. A typical victim of witchcraft accusation was an ugly old woman (Klaits, 1985: 72). John Gaule in 1646 wrote of witchcraft accusations being levied against "the old woman with a wrinkled face, a furr'd brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squinty eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue" (Thomas, 1971: 567).

Fear had filtered so deeply that, presumably, even ugliness was considered a demon's mark.

#### 4. Misogyny as an Element of Witchcraft Accusation

Several factors were involved in the development of European witchcraft into an almost exclusively female crime. Before 1400, when witchcraft and sorcery were primarily folk beliefs, only sixty percent of those accused of malignity were women. As witchcraft became equated, by the Church, with diabolism, it became a gender-linked offense: women accused finally outnumbered men four to one (Klaits, 1985: 58-62).

As in small-scale societies, Europe during the witch age was characterized by extreme intolerance toward any social deviation or nonconformity. Women, if only the outspoken scolds who did not adhere to standard behaviour, were liable to be accused of consorting with the Devil. Indeed, the scolding tongue was a sure indication that its

owner was a witch. Outspoken women, obviously lacking in deference, were vulnerable to accusations, often by other women whose own security may have depended on conforming to acceptable standards of female behaviour (Klaits, 1985: 96).

It was inconceivable that a woman should have a role in society outside marriage; a disproportionately high number of accused witches were unattached females - widows and other unmarried women (Klaits, 1985: 70).

Many of the females persecuted as witches were old, poor, and defenceless - often beggars. Typically, witch accusations were directed downward on the status hierarchy (Wyllie, 1973: 132). Marvin Harris (1974: 238-240) claims that since old women had been considered witches from classical times, in Europe they were convenient, expendable scapegoats and red herrings. The ameliorating effect of directing the misery of the masses towards these "demons in human form" (239), enabled the corrupt clergy to divert attention from themselves.

Old women often earned a living as midwives, another female category susceptible to witch accusations. The midwife possessed skills and privileges which were often resented by men (Klaits, 1985: 96), and they behaved in ways generally proscribed for women, including walking about alone at all hours of the night (Paul, 1974: 296). The high infant mortality rate made them extremely suspect in the eyes of the Church; because unbaptised infants were denied salvation, midwives were often charged with being in league



with the Devil (Weyant, 1987: personal communication). As well, as indicated earlier, witches were said to need infant bodies to eat at their sabbats.

The first three witches accused during the Salem, Massachusetts, witch-scare are a revealing example of the kinds of nonconforming women who were vulnerable to accusation. Tituba was a black servant, an outsider from Barbados who had a vast knowledge of the art of magic; Sarah Good was a pipe-smoking beggar who wandered around the countryside and cursed those who refused to give her charity; Sarah Osbourne had lived with a man for a year before she married him and had not been to church in fourteen months (Bednarski, 1968: 192).

Much of the witch-craze misogyny, of course, was generated by the Church itself. Christian theology, playing upon the concept of female defilement, led ecclesiastics to believe that women's spiritual weakness left them, like Eve, particularly vulnerable to temptation by Satan (Kors, 1972: 55). The female body and sexuality were considered an unfortunate obstacle to salvation; witches were feared and hated above all other women because they were considered to be sexual partners of Satan himself (Klaits, 1985: 17,51).

The most influential treatise on witchcraft was the fifteenth-century Malleus Maleficarum or Witches' Hammer, written by two Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. In this tract, the authors, insisting upon women's physical, mental, and moral

inferiority, derived the word "femina" from "fe" and "minus" to indicate women's lack of faith, and painstakingly explained how to identify and deal with witches. Compiling the misogynistic wisdom of the ages, the two men used classical and biblical sources to denounce women as dishonest, disobedient, and disgusting - subject to insatiable carnal lust and responsible, since Eve, for the downfall of man. Such was to be expected from a creature made, not only from a rib, but, as the friars claimed, from a bent rib (1488).

Impetus for the witch-craze, as opposed to witch beliefs, came from the elite; the educated upper classes were responsible, too, for its abatement. The growth of scientific knowledge and a shifting from narrow religious into broader secular views meant an increasing control of the environment, more tolerance, and less need for witch scapegoats (Klairs, 1985: 161-168).

### Ritual and Sacred Symbols

The role of witch adopted by many modern Goddess worshippers, unlike that of their counterparts in small-scale societies and Medieval Europe, is not societally-ascribed but deliberately chosen as a reclamation of a traditional symbol of female wisdom and nonconformity. In his introduction to The Rites of Passage (1960), Solon Kimball writes of Van Gennep's concern with "regeneration"

as a universal law: the energy of any system gradually becomes spent and must periodically be renewed. Rites which accompany the changes of the year, the seasons, and the moon, Van Gennep considered ceremonies of passage; the moon's correspondences with the "growth and decline of plant, animal, and human life is one of humanity's oldest beliefs" (180). As part of its regenerative function, ritual often provides an opportunity for self-transcendence (Lowie, 1985: 369), a glimpse into the "other world" which Geertz described.

Through ritual, the modern Goddess worshippers honour pagan deities, practise magic in terms of celebrating the power of the will, promote healing of themselves and others, and love and venerate nature. In ceremonies which involve drumming, chanting, and the use of symbolic objects chosen by the group for their significance, the women find new spiritual strength.

In the Goddess Religion as in most belief systems, ritual serves important communicative, integrative, and innovative functions.

Kluckhohn (1972: 98-100) analyzed ritual as a system of "object and act symbols" which promotes social solidarity and integration of the society by providing a formalized statement of its values and attitudes. The highly repetitive nature of ritual acts as a cultural restatement: "a declaration of form against indeterminacy" (Partridge, 1977: 62). In fact, the ritualistic use of multiple-

meaning, condensed-message symbols is an extremely efficient means of information storage and communication (Leach, 1972: 333).

Every religion, in the opinion of Clifford Geertz (1966: 175), offers "another world to live in": ritual functions to fuse the world as lived and the world as imagined, to fuse world view and ethos.

This fusion of world view and cultural ethos in ritual is important because it not only reflects the social order but because the social order is shaped by it. Turner, referring to the influence of ritual on behaviour, says that ceremonial impact is greatest beyond the boundaries of the ritual itself: the ritual recreates the categories through which participants perceive reality (1981: 5-6).

Thus ritual may, as well as allaying anxiety in participants by integrating and stabilizing existing values, promote innovative cultural behaviours. Talcott Parsons (1972: 91) found that magical beliefs and practices give people a sense of control in areas in which rational techniques are powerless. An investigation of contemporary satanism by anthropologist Edward J. Moody (1974: 355-382) reveals a resurgence of interest in magic in the Western world. Moody theorizes that "the gods of progress, science, and technology" (381) upon whom so much hope rode, are dead. In order to counteract the meaninglessness of the times, some people turn to new gods or try to refurbish the old ones.

Rodney Needham, in analyzing ritual (1973: 392-395), comments on the universal use of percussion in ritual which permits or accompanies communication with the other world. Thomas Johnston (1977: 217-225) describes initiation and exorcism rites among the Tsonga in which drumming is a prime factor in achieving an altered state of consciousness.

The sound waves produced by percussive instruments - drums, rattles, sticks, rocks, bells, gongs, clapping hands - have not only aesthetic but neural and organic effects on human beings. A single drum beat contains many frequencies which, transmitted along different nerve pathways, stimulates large areas of the brain. Drumming in multiple rhythms has a profound effect on a group of individuals each of whom possesses a different basic brain wave frequency.

Pavlovian psychologist William Sargant (1959: 92-93) also found that drumming and chanting in ritual serves to disorganize the normal patterning of the brain, particularly if the rhythms are played in different tempos. Rhythmic drumming helps to create in participants a transmarginal state of consciousness. As well, repeated, monotonous sound stimulation in the form of songs and chants is often used to change the focus of awareness. Chants, sometimes just strings of phonemes repeated over and over, may bypass the logical left hemisphere to directly affect the intuition of participants (Acterberg, 1985: 41-42).

In this way, ritual functions as a focusing mechanism and a control for experience (Douglas, 1984: 63) through the

use of auditory stimuli such as drumming and chanting and conceptual and visual stimuli in the form of symbols.

According to Susanne Langer who expanded on Whitehead's idea (1958: 62) that humankind has to have symbols in order to express itself, symbols are objects (events, acts) which serve as vehicles for conceptions. The conception is the symbol's "meaning". Ritual, the formalization of behaviour in the presence of sacred symbols, Langer sees as people's response to the concepts represented. The product of the articulation of feelings promoted by symbol and ritual is a complex, permanent, attitude (1982: 18-19, 153).

Not only philosophers, but many anthropologists have been interested in the use of symbols in rite and myth. Durkheim considered that a society maintains its value system through the use of symbols which stand for revered values; Radcliffe-Brown was concerned with the content of sacred symbols, with why one object was chosen over another; Levi-Strauss has stated that symbols are selected because they permit the embodiment of abstract ideas in terms of the easily perceptible realities of common experience; Victor Turner believes that ritual affords an opportunity for the playing out of themes, while the themes themselves are contained in the ritual symbols (Lehmann and Myers, 1985: 11-55).

Turner (1981: 5) also perceives symbols as "multi-faceted mnemonics", models for behaviour which provide cognitive and ethical cultural landmarks.

Anthony Wallace (1985: 38-40) has outlined five major categories of ritual. The first three of these are technological (attempts to influence nature), therapy and anti-therapy (concerned with human health), and ideological (behaviour and values). The last two categories, those of salvation and revitalization, are most relevant to an examination of the Goddess movement: salvation rituals attempt to restore damaged self-esteem and other forms of impaired identity, often through identifying with a sacred being; revitalization rituals are aimed at the identity crisis of an entire community and attempt to create a better culture.

Using percussion, chants, and symbols, women who gather to honour the Goddess in ritual are attempting to establish new cultural landmarks: they are participating in a movement which seems to truly seek "another world to live in".

## CHAPTER THREE

### GODDESS RELIGION - MODERN MANIFESTATION

#### Finding the Goddess

##### 1. Genesis of The Women's Circle

The focus of this study is a women's Goddess group which meets for ritual every two weeks and for special ceremonies on other occasions. It is one of two groups in Calgary and one of several in Alberta.

Research has been conducted through regular participant/observation at the bimonthly rituals over a one-year period (October 1986, to October 1987). Additional data was obtained through intensive ninety minute "spiritual life-history" interviews with twelve of the women; two Native Spirituality seminars attended in March of 1987, one organized by the Gnosis Society of the University of Calgary, the other sponsored by the Social Justice Committee of the University of Calgary's Catholic Community; and, in August 1987, participation in a week-long workshop led by Starhawk (Marion Simos), a San Francisco feminist witch, teacher, writer, and peace activist. The half-dozen core members of the Women's Circle, as the Calgary group designates itself, were themselves inspired to form the Circle in the Summer of 1986 after attending a Starhawk workshop the previous Spring.



Starhawk is a leading activist in a Neo-Pagan revival which can be traced back to Margaret Murray's theories of witchcraft as a survival of the "Old Religion", and to the early twentieth-century writings of American folklorist Charles Leland which extolled the ancient matriarchal religion in which the feminine principle was predominant and women were accorded a superior place (Adler, 1979: 56-59). Gerald Gardner, amateur anthropologist and folklorist, resurrected organized witchcraft in Britain during the 1940's and '50's and was influenced, not only by Murray and Leland, but also by Robert Graves, whose book The White Goddess, published in 1948, argued poetically and persuasively for the existence of an ancient and widespread cult of the Goddess (Russell, 1980: 152-154). It is from these sources that many modern North American feminists such as Starhawk have found an antidote to traditional patriarchal religions in female-valuing, Goddess-centred Witchcraft.

In a culture in which there have been few images of female strength, these women insist that "the witch is an extraordinary symbol" (Adler, 1979: 128) born out of a rebellious refusal to give up the Old Religion in favour of Christianity. They consider witches to be the liberated women of Medieval times: independent, anti-establishment, strong, proud, healers and herbalists, the wise women of their era (ibid: 208-211).

The rehabilitation of the word serves as a metaphor for

the rehabilitation of women. Unlike its masculine counterpart "wizard", which is derived from the same Old English root "wicce", meaning "wise" (Miller, 1976:120), the term "witch" has long created the same chilling effect as does "snake": an involuntary reaction that poet Emily Dickinson aptly called "zero at the bone". Phrases such as "He is a financial wizard" indicate uncompromising praise, whereas the connotations of "witch" are almost always derogatory.

## 2. The Starhawk Workshop

### Participants

The Starhawk workshop, jokingly referred to by participants as "witch camp", was held in a remote forest reserve in British Columbia. A week-long immersion in the Goddess religion, it consisted of seminars, discussions, stories, and ritual, and was attended by eighty people, all but three of whom were women.

The three men included a young Metis actor who had been taking part in native men's sweatlodge ceremonies and who wanted to experience the balancing effect of a women's spiritual movement; a Jungian psychotherapist; and the owner of an alternative bookstore, active in a neo-pagan group in his home state of Alabama.

Ranging in age from twenty to over sixty, the women had gathered from all across Canada and the United States - one

came from Germany. Their backgrounds were equally diverse: librarians, counsellors, social workers, artists, film-makers, actors, and one university professor. Some were long-standing members of covens, others were novices; a few were active in Churches such as the United and the Unitarian. They had in common a high level of education, a commitment to feminism, a concern for the environment, and an interest in the Goddess religion.

### Beliefs

In seminars and discussions, participants learned about the Goddess religion. Called Witchcraft by most, though not all, of its adherents, it is non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian: there are no sacred books, no buildings designated as "churches", and there is no dogma. There is a body of common beliefs, though, beginning with the celebration of the female principle, embodied in the Goddess.

To Goddess adherents, the cosmos is modelled on the female; the Goddess, called by many names, is immanent in all life forms. She is seen as the Earth, the nurturing Mother who brings forth all life. She is seen, too, as the Moon whose cycles are linked to those of women and whose waxing and waning corresponds to the three stages of women's lives: the Maiden stage, represented by Diana and the new moon is the period of independence and freedom, not only for

young women, but for any women who remain alone for long periods of time; the Mother stage, Gaia and the full moon, is the nurturing, creative time which may involve giving birth to and nurturing children, creative works, or a career; and the Crone stage, Hecate and the waning moon, is the period of wisdom and insights gained from long life experience.

In Witchcraft tradition, according to Starhawk, the individual is made up of the Talking Self, the Younger Self, and the High Self. It is interesting to note that witches have understood intuitively what research on brain function is now bearing out (Starhawk, 1979: 21-22). The Talking Self corresponds to the conscious mind, the analytical, logical, and linear. Research now indicates that these are left hemisphere functions. The Younger Self, the unconscious mind, represents the right hemisphere which responds to images, emotions, and sensations. The High Self is considered to be the Divine Spirit within, connected to the Younger Self which communicates to the Goddess Within through symbols, art, poetry, myth, music, and "the actions of ritual that translate abstract concepts into the language of the unconscious" (ibid: 22).

The Goddess religion is one of ecology: nature is sacred. Life in all its manifestations is loved and revered, and the interconnectedness of all life forms is recognized. Time is considered, not as a linear progression, but as natural and organic, a spiral of

circular, repetitive cycles of birth, growth, death, and rebirth.

The emphasis on organic time appeals to Goddess adherents who, as well as being aware of natural cycles and the interrelatedness of all life, tend to be individualists who do not generally like to join groups. The Goddess religion stresses the value of individual will and the responsibility of each person for her or his own life, decisions, and behaviour. Because it involves a divinity of immanence which is within all forms of life, power comes not from without as in the Christian concept of God who has "dominion over the Earth and all the Creatures of the Earth", but from within. Indeed, during rituals, each participant becomes Goddess.

Individual will, witches believe, can be altered by magic; not the traditional concept of magical spells and incantations used to manipulate or to influence others, but the changing of one's own consciousness. According to Starhawk, wicce, the Old English root of "witch", means "to bend" - it is possible to bend the will using visualization and imagery, drumming, chanting, dancing, and singing.

### Storytelling

In helping women to transform consciousness, Starhawk uses storytelling. As Carol Christ says, "There is a dialectic between story and experience. Stories shape

experience; experience shapes stories" (1979: 229). Women's stories have not been told. Starhawk's tales at the workshop were long, meditative, poetic sagas, told to the beat of a drum, honouring women's strengths and experiences: paeans to the stages of life, celebrating birth, growth, becoming, decay, letting go, death, and rebirth; fables of the creation of the world using the female body as metaphor for the earth, filling up with vegetation and animal life, all children of the Mother; a "water trance" in which a drop of water represents the beginning of an individual life, falling to the ground, moving through the earth, gaining strength and power as it becomes a trickle, a stream, a river, smoothing and changing everything in its path, washing away or going over obstacles until it enters the sea to begin the cycle yet again.

The stories may be accompanied by a refrain, "These are the stories we like to tell ourselves", or may incorporate chants such as,

for the stages of life:	Welcome little one
	Welcome new one
	You're here at last
	We have been waiting for you
	You're here at last
	We are so glad to see you
	You are a gift to us
	A precious gift to us
	Farewell old one
	Farewell wise one
	We have loved you well
	We will remember you
	We have loved you well
	We are so glad to know you
	You are a gift to us

A precious gift to us

for the creation  
of the world:

The earth is our Mother  
We must take care of her  
The earth is our Mother  
We must take care of her

Unite all people, be one  
Unite all people, be one

Her sacred ground we walk upon  
with every step we take  
Her sacred ground we walk upon  
with every step we take

for the water trance:

We all come from the Goddess  
And to Her we shall return  
Like a drop of rain  
Flowing to the ocean

Like other professional storytellers such as Doris Lessing, Starhawk believes that the psychological truths in such stories help to "explain ourselves to ourselves" (Starhawk, lecture: August 13, 1987). Lessing's perspectives, derived from Sufi teaching-stories (Christ, 1986: 55), are also those of Goddess adherents who celebrate the experiential, stress individual responsibility, and believe that enlightenment comes holistically and intuitively.

## Ritual

Ritual is the essence of the Goddess religion. Although the focus may change, all the rituals observed followed a pattern which reinforced participants' connections with nature, with each other, and with the

Goddess within.

Each ceremony was preceded by a purification. Because salt and water are both considered by witches to be cleansing agents - water washes and salt preserves, salt water was passed in a bowl around the circle for individual purification or, in a large gathering, sprinkled on each person. Ironically, during the witch-burning times, witches were reputed to hate salt because it counteracted malediction: a common method of determining whether or not someone was a witch was to put salt under her cushion - if she refused to sit down, she definitely was a witch (Visser, 1986: 77).

Once purified, celebrants often performed a "grounding" visualization, imagining themselves drawing energy from the earth like a tree with roots extending into the depths and branches open to the benedictions of the sky, the sun, and the moon.

The ritual itself was begun by creating a sacred circle, a space where power raised by the ritual could be contained. The spirits of the four cardinal points, East, South, West, and North, which correspond to particular elements, colours, animals, time, and personal strengths, were invoked. East is linked with the element Air, pale colours such as violet, the eagle, spring and dawn, and to the mind and its power to know; South corresponds to Fire, oranges and reds, the lion, noon, and the will; West evokes Water, blue and purple, whales and fishes, evening, and



daring; North represents the Earth, black, brown and green, the bear, night and winter, the ability to listen and to keep silent.

The Goddess, and at times in deference to the men, her consort the Horned God, was invoked through rhythmic chanting and drumming. Each chant was repeated over and over for several minutes, and as a result of this rhythmic chanting, participants' consciousness appeared to be affected. The work of Ornstein (1972: 65-89) indicates, and personal experience supports, that ritual appeared to subdue the critical, analytical left cerebral hemisphere so that right brain functions were emphasized: sounds and images were intensified, creativity was stimulated, and inhibitions were lowered - some people removed some or all of their clothes to dance unrestrained around the circle. One enormous, nude woman twirled unabashedly like a contemporary Venus of Willendorf. There was a sense of transcendence of the ordinary world.

Chants used included:

Air moves me, fire transforms me  
Water shapes me, earth heals me  
And the balance of the wheel  
Goes round and round  
And the balance of the wheel  
Goes round.

Or,                   She changes everything she touches,  
                      And everything she touches changes.

Or,                   We are the new people  
                      We are the old people

We are the same people  
Stronger than before.

Or, the many names of the Goddess were simply chanted repeatedly: Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna.

At the camp, the ritual pattern emphasized the exorcising of negative energy and emotions, and the calling forth of positive energy and strengths. At the beginning of each ceremony, feelings such as anger, fear, and guilt were symbolically projected into the purifying salt water. Again, at the ritual's high point, participants often "threw away" into the cauldron's fire in the centre of the circle anything they wanted to be rid of; once freed of negative energy, they would envision attributes such as courage and compassion which they wanted to maintain in themselves.

The tremendous energy built up by ritual drumming and chanting was visualized as a "cone of power" which, at its peak, could be released to the Goddess or to a specific goal such as a healing. The energy generated in ritual was increased through a self-augmenting feedback loop. Apparently calling forth a strong, archetypal image of a multifaceted female symbol, through the celebration of such power within themselves, participants appeared to be creating a projection which for each participant was an externalized image of internally held or desired qualities. On one occasion, each participant hugged her neighbour and said "Thou art Goddess".

As one of the participants said, in a later discussion, "I am Diana, Inanna, Demeter, in a new form".

Following the climax of the ritual, the energy was "earthed", or dissipated back into the earth through each circle participant who rested her palms or her entire body on the ground. The quiet time that followed was for meditation, sharing of thoughts, and sharing of food and drink. The Goddess was thanked, bade farewell, and the circle formally opened, signalling a return to "ordinary" time and space:

The circle is open but unbroken,  
May the peace of the Goddess go  
in our hearts;  
Merry meet, and merry part.  
And merry meet again.  
Blessed be.

### Sequel

Yet time and space proved to be not so ordinary. Personal experience at the week-long workshop and communication with other workshop participants indicated that, toward the end of the week, left brain functions were actually impaired: it became increasingly difficult to carry through on linear thought processes such as remembering people's names and writing in a journal. R.Wallace's analysis (1987: 56) that, in such ritual, after a seven-minute period the neocortex "lets go" and primal connections take over, supports this observation: during the workshop, six hours a day were spent in rituals and in listening to metaphorical

stories. For several days following the week-long workshop, disorientation was manifested in difficulty in analytical reading, writing, and discussion.

Although all the observed rituals generally followed a similar pattern, Starhawk and other feminist witches emphasize the flexibility and adaptability of the Goddess religion. Its fundamental ethic is simply love for life in all its forms; its only "rule" is the Three-fold Law which stresses responsibility for one's own actions - "What you send returns three times over", a commonsense interpretation of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Starhawk encourages people to make the rituals their own, to interpret and adapt to suit their own environment and needs. This is what the Calgary group, the Women's Circle, has done.

### The Women's Circle

#### 1. Dynamics

Through the past, first year of its existence, the dynamics of the Women's Circle have altered steadily. A few months after its inception, members of the Circle began to question the direction the group was taking. Some felt uncomfortable with the loose, open structure which permitted any interested woman to join - they wanted the group closed until it coalesced with a strong base in ritual. These women found the constant "dropping-in" of new participants,

some of whom did not return again, disconcerting and inhibiting.

Others felt that the Circle should be closed to gain strength and develop a focus which would enable the women to learn to work with energy as a healing force. One, who enjoyed wholeheartedly the concepts of witchcraft, wanted to have a "real" coven, limit the numbers to the traditional thirteen (corresponding to the lunar year, or in the Christian perspective, a perversion of Christ and his disciples), and have a system of initiations which would lead to greater commitment and group stability.

Many appreciated the addition of new people who brought fresh energies and talents to the Circle and, in the end, by consensus, it was decided to leave the group open. A core of about twelve women, whose names have been changed in this study to protect their anonymity, has maintained the Circle throughout the year with several others attending less regularly and many more dropping in just once or coming only occasionally.

For most of the year, with inspiration from Starhawk's workshop still fresh, the traditional Wiccan pattern of ritual was followed closely at the bi-monthly meetings. As well, an attempt was made to follow the witches' Wheel of the Year, observing the Sabbats of: Yule (Winter Solstice), Brigid (Candlemas, February 2), Easter (Spring Equinox), Beltane (May Eve), Litha (Summer Solstice), Lughnasad (August 1), Mabaon (Fall Equinox), and Samhain (Hallowe'en).

The rituals have gradually become more casual, less structured, and the Sabbats are not as regularly observed. This change has caused some consternation among the long-standing members of the Circle who attribute the diminished focus to the many new participants who are not familiar with ritual, and to the non-hierarchical nature of the Circle which has no designated leader. As well, four of the original founding members have left the group: two have moved away, one has been travelling for a six-month period, and the fourth left the Circle because of a minor conflict with one of the other women, the only observed dissension throughout the year.

Interestingly, the women who have left were the four who most emphatically considered themselves part of the witchcraft tradition - they all found the concept of "witch" an empowering one and thus probably worked more diligently at observing Wiccan format.

## 2. Participants' Perception of "Witch" Label

Of the remaining members, two absolutely disclaim any identification with "witch", considering the word "too loaded with negative connotations to be empowering". The rest of the women treat the witch aspect of the Goddess religion with more equanimity although it is not a primary identification for any of them. One describes recoiling at the word "witch" when she first encountered it at a Starhawk

workshop; she now sees it as honourable and having "nothing to do with controlling other people and making things happen the way you want them to....it means tuning in to what's going on, understanding the forces of nature so you can change consciousness".

She goes on to say that once she gained an understanding of witch as "wise woman", she realized that it had always been an aspect of her being; since childhood she has had a vision of herself "living on the edge of the forest and knowing all about herbs and healing and looking after the animals".

A woman who earns her living as a herbalist feels a link with the witches of the Middle Ages who also were herbal healers:

Witches just happened to be the healers, the herbalists, and the counsellors - that's all they were. They were just humble people who went about their business and when people needed help, they'd go help - walk to the next village and doctor somebody or counsel somebody or whatever.

Another woman responded to a question about her relationship to witchcraft by talking about a trip to ancient sacred sites in Britain where she experienced an uncanny spiritual connection through what she considered a previous incarnation, "with witch energy, with the Craft". She went on to say, "That energy is with me, but to me the word 'witch' has had such a negative connotation in our society that I don't use it with myself. I don't call

myself a witch." As she talked, she went through a process of self-discovery:

That word intimidates me; I don't use it personally, but I guess I see it as a wise woman....What I am doing in integrating the wise woman, the witchcraft in me, is I'm learning, I'm relearning, relearning from my ancestral memories how to do that, how to work with energies for healing, for white magic if you want to put it that way. So I'm having...this is new stuff I'm saying...to remember all the energies that I worked with, how I did that...hmm, that's really interesting. Yeah, I feel that as I'm talking I'm integrating that witch in me. Because I have had a block against the word, because I've had association with witches as being evil. So as I'm talking I'm, I'm...the thing is when you integrate that part of yourself you're integrating your power as a woman.

Even among the four women who enjoy the empowerment afforded by the concept of witchcraft and who left the group, three feel some ambivalence. One, a social worker, reported having a recurring dream in which she raced frantically from place to place in search of a job for which no one would hire her because she was a witch. A second woman, a family counsellor, has trouble reconciling the dichotomy of her everyday life with that of her spiritual life as a witch: she visualizes herself dancing with one foot in, and one foot out of, the Circle and wonders what her clients would think if they knew that their therapist was a witch. A third, a young student, moved out of her apartment, frightened and ambivalent about being a witch because someone had smeared "Jew" and "Witch" in red paint across the door.



Thus the group has made several adaptations: calling itself a Circle rather than a coven; foregoing any initiation ceremony; conducting rituals clothed, rather than "skyclad" or nude as is common in many covens which consider that the naked body represents truth and is sacred in itself; not having a priestess; and choosing not to invoke the Horned God, the male principle, in rituals.

### 3. Symbolic Ritual Objects

Many of the traditional tools of witchcraft are also not part of the Circle ritual. Totally absent are the athame or double-bladed knife with which coven priestesses trace the boundaries of the sacred space; the wand, used to channel energy; or the cord which symbolizes membership in a particular coven (Starhawk, workshop, 1987). In place of the traditional cauldron, candles are substituted; instead of a censer for burning incense, a large clam shell contains burning sage or sweetgrass.

A concession to Wiccan tradition, a pentacle, the five-pointed star which is one of the primary symbols of witchcraft is traced on the large red cloth around which the women sit during rituals. The pentacle symbolizes the body: four limbs and head. It also symbolizes five stages of life: birth, initiation, love, repose, and death.

The cloth, a six-foot circle of red felt in the centre of which the altar is arranged, was brought one night by two

of the women who thought the group might like to practise the "traditional women's art of creating an altar cloth". A crystal ball was passed around the circle and each woman talked about the image she received concerning the shape and decoration of the cloth. All wanted it round, "like the circle, like the moon"; some thought it should be embroidered, incorporating natural objects such as sprigs of sage and shells into the stitching; one could envision it covered with a design of buttons "like Coastal Indian blankets". Someone donated a circle of old white lace, perhaps from a Victorian petticoat, which was sewn around the altar space in the centre, "a circle within a circle". Although neither the embroidery nor the button design has ever been done, the women agree that the cloth provides a beautiful and symbolic base for ritual, incorporating the red of blood with the white circle of the moon.

The altar space in the centre of the circle is filled with symbolic objects. There are always candles which, with the moon, provide the only light during rituals. Other objects may change from ritual to ritual, varying with the seasons - they may include Indian corn in the autumn, spruce twigs in the winter, pussy willows in the spring, and flowers in the summer. One evening, one of the women contributed the first bloom from her gardenia plant and its perfume mingled with that of the sage and sweetgrass. One ritual altar featured a pottery goddess head; on others, there have been Kachina dolls and other native artifacts,

carved African figures; and, always, there are crystals, feathers - eagle for strength and owl for wisdom, and the large shell in which the grasses burn. Often a woman will place her own object such as an amulet, a crystal, or a piece of jade on the altar to be energized during the ritual.

#### 4. The Rituals

Rituals are held in the homes of Circle members; the hostess for the evening is responsible for the format of the ceremony. In Circle idiom, the woman directing the evening is "goddessing" it.

Before the rituals begin, the women seat themselves on the floor on the edge of of the red cloth with the altar in the centre and chat quietly about concerns or events in their lives; herbal tea may be shared at this time. When the group is ready, the grounding exercise previously described may be performed. The shell containing burning sweetgrass and/or sage is passed around the circle and each woman smudges her neighbour with the smoke by fanning the shell with the owl wing. This part of the ritual is intended to prepare the participants by purifying them of negative, unhappy thoughts. The shell, burning sage, and feather are a symbolic combination of the elements: shell from the water, sage of the earth, bird of the air, and fire.

The ritual begins with the ceremony of closing of the sacred circle: this ceremony serves as a transition into a state of receptive consciousness. The power raised by the ritual is to be contained within the circle which is cast by the joining of hands and the invocation by four of the women who volunteer to call the spirits of the four directions, or quarters of the universe.

Once the circle is cast and the directional spirits summoned, the Goddess is invoked through a simple chant such as "Moon mother, bright light of all earth, sky, we call you", repeated over and over. As the chanting, accompanied by the drums, rattles, or sticks played by each woman, proceeds, it varies in rhythm and melody, one chant flowing into the next, perhaps:

We are the new women  
We are the old women  
We are the same women  
Stronger than before

or  
I am a strong woman  
I am a story woman  
I am a healer  
My soul will never die

or  
Air moves me, fire transforms me  
Water shapes me, earth heals me  
And the balance of the wheel  
Goes round and round  
And the balance of the wheel  
Goes round

Often the chant is one adapted from North American Indians with whom many of the women have had association:

Hey yana Ho yana Hey yan yan  
Hey yana Ho yana Hey yan yan

Sometimes a new chant will be shared, perhaps a song learned from some native women in Tofino, or a chant one of the women has devised to bolster her own confidence. Often simply a single syllable or a series of phonemes will be intoned repeatedly.

The drumming and chanting of this opening ceremony are mesmeric, becoming stronger and more intense until the energy level is almost palpable. After about half an hour, often much longer, the evening's ritual leader directs the "cone of power", perhaps in the autumn season to the female principle of the Goddess in a chant of thanksgiving for beauties and bounties of the Earth and for the richness of the participants' lives.

The energy may also be focused in a specific healing. One ritual celebrated Candlemas (February 2), dedicated to Brigid, Goddess of fire, creativity, and healing. On the altar was a cauldron filled with sand in which stood a single candle. Following the drumming and chanting, the candle was lit and each woman in turn around the circle lit a candle of her own from it, simultaneously expressing her hope for inspiration or healing in the coming season. When one of the participants lit her candle for her mother who was critically ill in hospital, the Circle held hands and focused on the mother, visualizing a shower of energy descending in "rainbow colours" to strengthen and heal her.

Another ritual was dedicated to the healing of the women in the Circle. On the altar that evening was a round

stone ball - allegedly an Indian medicine stone. After the raising of the energy, Sandra, the evening's ritual leader, passed the stone counterclockwise around the circle, "widdershins" as witches say, which is the direction of banishing. Each woman in turn held the heavy ball in both hands, meditating quietly, visualizing sorrow, pain, anger, and bitterness flowing into the stone and being absorbed by it. Some verbalized their feelings; others were silent. After meditating, each woman washed the stone with water, dried it, and passed it on to the next participant. When the stone had been around the whole circle, Sandra took it and blessed it, saying that all the negative feelings of the group had been replaced by positive energy. She then moved around the circle "deosil", or clock-wise, taking the stone in the direction used for increasing power. As the women, in turn, held the medicine stone, Sandra anointed the backs of their hands with attar of roses, murmuring, "Your pain is gone, you are filled with love". This done, the group held hands while Sandra described her vision of the energy rising and showering down upon them.

Sandra enjoys the planning and execution of ritual. For the Summer Solstice celebration she asked each person to bring a piece of fruit with her to the Circle and place it on the altar. She talked about nourishing the body, putting one's own energy into the careful preparation of food and blessing it as a gift from Mother Earth. Each woman then cut up the fruit she herself had brought and deposited it in

a large communal crystal bowl to be shared with the others.

Sometimes the ritual is completely impromptu. One evening the African carvings on the altar reminded Tanya of an article she had read on the clitoridectomy and infibulation of Nilotic female children and the resulting years of suffering they often endure. The healing that night was directed toward the courage and well-being of "our sisters in Africa".

Occasionally the ritual focus is a story such as "Song of Bear" from Anne Cameron's book of Nootka myths, Song of Copper Woman, which was read by one of the women and dramatized by two others. One evening led by Sky, who has had extensive experience working with native mentors, was spent in a story/trance search for power animals. Members of the group believe that the power animals, who function as muse, guide, and guardian, can be found through dreams and visions, often evoked during Sky's storytelling, a technique she uses in her work with young native delinquents to put them in touch with their own power.

Once the group energy, which is described as the cone of power, has been raised, directed, and released, any remaining energy is earthed by deep breathing, meditation and quiet sharing of insights gained during the ritual. The "talking feather" (owl or eagle) is handed around the circle during this time and anyone who wishes to speak may do so. Holding of the feather ensures that the speaker may talk without interruption; she is listened to quietly and

attentively. It also seems to provide a stimulus for talk, perhaps in part because of the symbology associated, in the group, with the courage of the eagle and the wisdom of the owl. A woman may talk about coming to terms with her husband's critical illness; Mary told of the emptiness she felt facing the coming year without the baby which she had miscarried the month before; one young woman who appeared in the Circle only twice expressed the sorrow which had overwhelmed her since her mother's sudden and unexpected death when the girl was sixteen. Distress is eased with expressions of empathy and comfort by other Circle members; the suffering one is hugged and may be talked to by other women who have had similar experiences. Mary was heartened by Fran, a nurse who had also lost a baby a few years previously and who could understand how Mary was feeling. Fran remembered how people, especially her husband, didn't realize the extent of her pain and would not allow her time to grieve.

The talking times are also often affirmation of the women's strengths. Beth, who had twice brought her eleven-year old daughter to rituals, talked on another occasion of women's affinity with the earth and the moon and asked the Circle if they would be interested in helping her to perform a ritual at the onset of her daughter's menses. The women agreed enthusiastically; some spoke of the traumatic, misunderstood beginning of their own menstrual cycles and all felt that it would be a wonderful opportunity



to "celebrate women's power".

During this talking time, many affirm the benefits of participation in the group. Mary, a quiet, shy woman, expressed her gratitude that in the group she could reveal her feelings without fear and be accepted and understood; Marni said that she finally had gained the courage she needed to leave the job she had detested for years. Most of the participants felt moved to speak of the strength, peace, and spiritual growth they had attained through the practice of ritual, and through communication, sharing, and acceptance in the Women's Circle.

This quiet period is followed by a time of relaxation, a sharing of tea and food, news, and announcements of concern to the group. At the end of the evening, hands are held around the Circle which is formally opened with the thanking of the Goddess and a chant of "Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again. Blessed be." The ritual is concluded.

### Participants in The Women's Circle

#### 1. Occupations

Twelve women from the Circle were interviewed. They range in age from twenty to about forty-five; most are in their early to mid-thirties. Of the twelve, nine have university educations (one is currently a student): two in

Anthropology, two in English, three in Sociology and Psychology, one in Theatre Arts, and one in Nursing. Five of the twelve have trained as, and make their livings as, holistic healers in herbology and irridology, nutritional therapy, Shiatsu, dance therapy, and holistic counselling. The holistic counsellor had a career as an occupational therapist which she left a few years ago when bureaucracy and "narrow-mindedness" in the health-care field became overwhelming to her. Two other women have careers in the field of traditional medicine, one as an operating-room nurse, the other as a government-employed family therapist; like the holistic counsellor, both of these are disenchanted with, and eager to get out of, "the system". One of the twelve is a professional actress and dancer, one is a free lance writer, another a student of fashion design. The women exhibit an unusual diversity of interests and talents - theatre, dance, writing, weaving, painting, and beadwork. Many are involved in the teaching of workshops, ranging from "Finding a Power Animal" to "The Goddess Within" to "Visualization Exercises" to "Mask Making".

## 2. Connecting with the Group

The women who come to the Circle hear about it from friends who are members, or through participation in workshops or therapy sessions conducted by members. Some have sought out the group after having been part of similar

Circles in other places such as Victoria, Edmonton, and Toronto. Of the twelve primary informants, six took part in the Starhawk workshop which inspired the formation of the Circle; of these six, two are sisters, three friends, and one learned of the workshop in a class given by one of the other women. Among the other six, one became interested in the Circle through her professional association with one of the dancers, three through friends, one during a series of Shiatsu treatments, and the sixth as a result of contact with a Circle member in another feminist organization.

### 3. Relationship to the Women's Movement

The relationship of the Circle women to the women's movement is an interesting one. Only two are active "politically" in feminist organizations. As well, one of the two does volunteer work at a women's shelter and the other writes for a feminist publication. The second woman, Sarah, says, "Feminism is my religion; it now has a formal guise called the Goddess, the spirituality of the feminist movement made visible."

While not active in feminist organizations, the rest of the women consider themselves feminist in principle; all are conscious of maintaining the Circle according to non-hierarchical, egalitarian, consensus-seeking, feminist ideals.

Some of the women resist being categorized as

feminists, much as they refuse to be labeled as witches. Sandra feels, "That word, 'feminist', like 'witch', has been used over and over in a certain way and has taken on connotations that I can't connect with - I believe so much in the balance of male and female energy."

Beth, strongly independent, says,

When the feminist stuff started back in the sixties, I agreed wholeheartedly with what they had to say but I wasn't going to get on the bandwagon because then it wouldn't be personal anymore - I'd just be lumped together with all these women saying 'This is what women think and believe' - and I felt too...I guess too attached to my individuality at the time to do that. All my life I always felt I would get a fair shake because I demanded it (emphasis Beth's).

Marni, who claims no active involvement in the women's movement, insists, "My awareness is certainly feminist; women have been put down because their values, things like nurturing and softness, have been misunderstood and unappreciated. Those qualities are there in everyone, of both gender, but they have to be valued."

Several of the Circle members consider that they are promoting women's causes through their own work.

Joanne, a nurse:

I don't belong to a feminist group per se, but as I work through things from my own background, I can see how my grandmother, then my mother, then myself - except that the buck stops here and I'm getting turned around - how they allowed a lot of things to happen to themselves: they played the martyr, they gave themselves away and never found out who they were. One of the major frustrations in my job is dealing with non-assertive women who are allowing the same

things to continue. I see male surgeons constantly treating females in an unacceptable manner and we don't even realize they are treating us in an unacceptable manner because it's been going on so long.

Sky:

I think people are sometimes afraid of the word 'feminist' because they relate it to anger. Women are angry because of the focus that men have been taking, they become fearful and angry at what men have done. Most of us have repressed our anger so much, that when you do feel it, it's like, hooray, now you can work. You open to the anger. We don't need to be angry anymore, we just need to own our own power, just own the feminine, find out that the feminine is very nurturing. We realize that we don't need to try to heal the world through anger and hate, which is what males have done. That was needed initially, that feminist 'get out there and fight'..we've passed that now, we've got past anger. It's just like on a personal level, get past the anger, face the hurt, and you start to heal the hurt. That hurt is basically needing to nurture. So as women, as feminists, we need to nurture ourselves... and men, and the world.

Tanya:

Right now, I'm teaching a course in balancing, centering, teaching people awareness of what goes on inside their bodies so that they can listen and find out for themselves. I find this is really a big part of my work with women - they've always been told what to do and how to do it.

For me, working on the level of politics and lobbies and things like that is beyond what I'd even care to bite off. I just don't feel connected with that and yet that's where some people work the best because of the way their minds work and the way their energies are. But for me, my big political thing is to teach women to be powerful as human beings. And that has to do with recognizing the power of touch, the

healing qualities that we all have within us, the patience and the nurturing and the acceptance. How important that is, to balance everything, and yet at the same time to be very conscious of our own needs and not give all that away.

The whole women's movement was kind of a forerunner, it was getting the ideas out there politically, and now the work is more personal, spiritual, a changing of consciousness.

#### 4. Spiritual Backgrounds

The Circle women share remarkably similar spiritual backgrounds: two were raised as Roman Catholics and the remainder attended the United Church as children and adolescents. For many of them, their religions did not prove meaningful; all had rejected the Church by the time they were eighteen.

For one of the Catholic women, the process of rejection, beginning at the age of fifteen, took three years - "They really manipulate you with guilt" - but she was disgusted enough by what she perceived as the hypocrisy of Catholicism to persist in breaking away.

It was the lack of any real substance to the ritual that got me. In retrospect I look back at it now and it's beautiful but it had no meaning. I could see it, I could see all this incredible hypocrisy, that people would be just total jerks all week long and then go to Church and sit or stand or kneel or whatever through this ritual that the priest mostly did and they would just be there as observers and that was supposed to absolve them of all the bullshit they did all week. I just thought, I don't buy this. If you're going to be a good, honest, spiritual person

within, then that's going to be twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; you're not going to have to go to a building and go through this hollow, shallow, ritual.

Some of the women, even as children, felt uncomfortable with the concept of "God". Tanya says, "The idea of having to accept God, the love of God, troubled me. I just hated the word, I just never, never, felt comfortable with it." Marni's perception of God "always had to do with guilt and fear as a child - a big power Daddy in the sky". Because she, like most of the others, associated spirituality with God, religion came to have no meaning for her.

Almost without exception, rejection of their Churches initiated life-long spiritual quests for these women.

Two, having suffered through turbulent adolescences, became Mormons. In the words of one, "seduced by the sense of belonging", they found in the Church of Latter Day Saints a sense of community and warmth which had been missing in their lives. One of the two, a young student, stayed for only a year during which her burgeoning feminism led to questioning and rejection of the sexism inherent in the Church. The other, who was the mother of small children at the time, remained in her congregation for a few years; eventually, because of her growing identification with the feminist movement, she, too, rebelled against the patriarchy of Mormonism.

Two other women were alcoholics who went back to traditional (albeit different from their childhood) Churches

for a time as part of their recovery in the spiritually-based Alcoholics Anonymous program. One, then in her early twenties, felt that it was important to go to a Church, "any Church - it happened to be Catholic". The other woman, who was coming out of a fourteen-year alcohol addiction, joined a Moravian Church where she benefited primarily from the personal growth and counselling sessions.

The rest of the women, while not attracted to conventional Churches, have also spent years in spiritual exploration. Three have traveled extensively in Africa and the Far East, experiences which represented a major shift in values and perceptions for them; two have gone on pilgrimages to ancient sacred sites in Britain.

Almost all of the women have deliberately spent time in isolation, either living on their own in the woods or in a strange city, or undergoing a vision quest/survival situation alone in the wilderness.

Of the twelve, ten have "dabbled" in Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, and four have studied Sufism. One used LSD in the sixties as a tool for spiritual understanding. Most have read widely in the areas of philosophy, religion, and native spirituality. Authors commonly read include Alan Watts, Jean Huston, Jung, Pirsig, Castaneda, and Marilyn Ferguson. Many have been moved by Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon, a novel which retells the Arthurian legends from a woman's point of view. Some enjoy Lynn Andrew's books such as Medicine Woman



which describe Andrew's alleged experiences with Indian mentors.

#### 5. Connections with Native Spirituality

Four of the Circle women have themselves had native mentors; four others report a strong identification with native spirituality. Some spend the summer months living in the mountains in teepees; many regularly visit Indian sacred sites. Sandra believes that "living in native land, we're all influenced by native energies" and she depends upon her Indian spirit guides which initially came to her in a vision and which apparently appear unsummoned to assist her during rituals.

Beth identifies so strongly with native people, she feels she "must have been an Indian in another life". Like many of the others, she has read everything she can find pertaining to native peoples of contact and pre-contact times; as a child, she used to dress up in "beads and feathers" and felt proud when people told her she looked like a "real" Indian. Beth's most powerful spiritual experience occurred in the foothills west of Longview where she was spending the summer and hoping for a sign that she was "on the right track with this whole ritual, Goddess thing". She had a powerful encounter with a cougar which she was able to observe for three quarters of an hour. The incident convinced her that the cougar had been given to her

as a spirit animal.

The cougar to me is the symbol of strength, grace, and courage, so whenever I'm faltering, I haul that cougar up and say, 'Hey, you're the symbol of this; please give me the gift, or make me realize I have the gift'.

Tanya, who, like many of the other women uses sweetgrass and sage smudges for purification not only in rituals but also in her daily life, also meets regularly with a group of people to do sweats in the native tradition. She has studied with Michael Harner, an American anthropologist who, she claims, teaches "barebones, or universal shamanism - stripped of all cultural variations" and she uses shamanic techniques in her therapy with women.

A shaman is someone who journeys to the spirit world, can go to the lower world where you meet power animals or to the upper world where you meet teachers and guides. I started drumming with Michael and using some of those journeying techniques. Now I've been using them with women here and they're very powerful...it's like somehow they just get right through all the stuff and they work. It shows people quickly that whole business of the other side. You wear a blindfold, the drum puts you into a trance, and you meet someone and talk to them or else you meet a power animal and find out what you need to be bringing into your life as an animal power.

Three of the women have had native mentors in other places.

Anne, living on Vancouver Island, had a Nootka woman friend who had been told as a child that she would be "a speaker of the people" - and, says Anne, she "grew up to be a psychic and pipe-carrier".

Kelly, whose interest in native spirituality surfaced twenty years ago, developed a close relationship with a native group while working as a social worker in Northern Alberta - she, too, took part in sweats.

The third woman, Carol, has had strong native influences throughout her life. Growing up in Southern California, she was very close to an aunt who spent ten years on a Navaho Reservation. The aunt, an artist, traveled and lectured on Navaho philosophy, taught Navaho weaving techniques and spent a great deal of time in Carol's home where she was a major force in the lives of the women of the family. Carol recalls,

I was raised in a family of positive-thinking, high-energy, high achievers; that was my father's side of the family. On the other side, my mother/grandmother/aunt side, was this really soft, Navaho way...as I was growing up, I worked a lot with that Indian philosophy.

Her aunt not only taught Carol to weave, but told her stories of the Navaho people and described "ceremonies, and the tests she had to go through in order to be at ceremonies, and how she had to act at ceremonies". As an adult living on Vancouver Island, Carol joined a women's ritual group composed of women she calls "medicine women" - midwives, herbalists, and healers. The group was led by a woman who had been taught by a native mentor to conduct ritual sweats and pipe ceremonies which she shared with the women's group.

They did traditional sweats in four parts:

the first sweat would be dedicated to...say, personal prayers. And the second one might be dedicated to the earth, the third to the brothers, working with the men, and the fourth one dedicated to the ancestors.

I really enjoyed learning about ritual; the pipe ceremony was beautiful. We did a meditation and she cleansed the pipe with sage and she talked while she was purifying it about how the Indians view smoking. When you smoke the pipe in a Circle you think of smoking a prayer. So as she was filling the pipe with a mixture of tobacco and sage and kinnik-kinnik, she tamped down each pinch, saying, 'This is for my ancestors, this is for whatever', four times. She then blew the smoke in the four directions and as she was smoking, she was focusing on her prayers; the pipe was then passed around the Circle. That was an incredible concept to me, smoking a prayer. I wanted to learn more about ritual, it was like a continuation of what my aunt had taught me. It meant feeling really connected as a medicine woman which is what the Circle in Calgary does too.

Sky, the woman who is most involved with native religion, is as many of the members describe her, "the key to the group". They also say she is an "incredible healer", "a mystic", and that "her spiritual power makes a tremendous difference to the people she comes in contact with". Sky's spiritual journey really began with an Outward Bound course at age twenty-five when she "connected with the earth's energies, with Mother Earth". She began to work with delinquent adolescents in a wilderness program which furthered her connection with nature: "I was so close to the mountains and I spent a lot of time just being in and of them and hearing. And they would speak to me, the trees and mountains, and I'd get a lot of information that way."

While doing a ten-day solo fast in the mountains, a

"vision quest", Sky was circled repeatedly one starry night by a bear which she interpreted as her "totem animal". Like the cougar for Beth, the bear has remained a symbol of courage and power for Sky.

Before her move to Calgary seven years ago, Sky was a Torontonion - "I didn't even know what an Indian looked like". Arriving in the West, tanned and with her long dark hair in braids, she was often asked if she had native blood. She says that when she went to the Stoney Reserve, "I had this incredible feeling that I had been there before, that I was coming back to the land. And a lot of my mystical experiences with the animals and the earth energies have been out on Stoney land."

A trip to Arizona resulted in Sky's meeting a Hopi wisewoman who became her mentor. The woman took her to meet Grandfather Menungi, a Hopi spiritual leader who recognized in her a healing power and who took her to the Hopi prophecy rock.

We all saw the same image, we saw the earth coming to an end, we saw the Light. That's when it became clear that I was to do work to heal the land, to heal the earth on many levels.

When I came back here, I had a vision that I was to put a medicine wheel on Stoney land. I went to the Chief of the Stoneys and talked to him, and as soon as I met Chief Snow there was this amazing connection. I told him about the bear, I told him about the mystical experiences. He started sharing with me some of the stories about his grandmother who was a medicine woman - he started telling me some of his spiritual experiences. So, we had an instant

connection and he told me that I could go up there and do ceremony on that land at any time. So we started doing ceremonies on the land. The Stoney's are suffering because of the money that's come to them, they've forgotten their spirituality so I don't think it's arrogant of me to say that our going to that land has brought some spirituality back to those people. I've been working with native kids, doing medicine wheel teaching with them.

As well as teaching, Sky continues to learn in the native mode and from native people:

That drum is now a healing tool for me, and when I beat that drum, I know it's doing work for me, it's doing work beyond me. It's not my personal ego energies, but the drum that is healing...I have to go with it to where it takes me. With my rattles, it's the same way, and also through dreams, I'm taught through my dreams: the medicine wheel, my dreams, my rattles. Through dream-state and vision-state I'll get information on how to use these things...it's like they have spirits of their own and I go with them - they tell me how I'm supposed to learn.

At the Ecumenical Conference on the Stoney Reserve I met a man who told me all about the principle of the sweetgrass: it works on three levels, the upperworld, the earth plane and the underworld, they intertwine together. So when you burn the sweetgrass, you're opening yourself to the upperworld, the earthworld, and the lower world, three levels you can connect with.

Each of the Women's Circle participants, although decidedly independent, has connected through the group with like-minded people, all on a similar spiritual quest.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS: GODDESS RELIGION AS INNOVATIVE REVITALIZATION

#### Benefits of Belonging to the Women's Circle

For the members of the Women's Circle, rituals serve supporting, healing, re-energizing, and creative and enabling functions, and answer spiritual needs.

#### 1. Group Support

For many, the group provides the kind of female support often unavailable to women who, in fragmented urban societies, may live far from their families of origin.

Carol, for example, who grew up with close kinship ties with her mother, sister, grandmother, and aunts, has spent the last several years in an isolated professional and personal relationship with one man. The Circle helps to fulfil her need for female role models and confidantes.

Many of the members refer nostalgically to more traditional societies in which women have had greater opportunities for sharing of communal activities.

Sky asserts, "Traditionally, in most cultures, women have always gathered together; we need to reclaim our sisterhood in that way."

Tanya says that,

In a lot of traditional societies, women

would be together in the menstrual hut and that's when they shared the women's secrets and the songs and the stories and all the ancient teachings. It was a really sacred time and really powerful.

You know how anthropologists talk about menstrual taboos and how the women weren't allowed to touch the cooking utensils or the hunting utensils or whatever - if you stop and think about it and turn it around the other way, maybe it's not that they weren't allowed to touch them, maybe it's just that they weren't going to go anywhere near them because that was their sacred time and they weren't going to work. That's when they were priestesses and in touch with the goddess or whatever it was that they were in touch with.

It's such a revelation; most of this stuff has come through male anthropologists in the past. When you start to realize these things, it gives you a sort of grace. You know all this stuff is going on out there in the everyday world, but you know you've got something beyond that. If you're connected to the ancient, powerful rhythms, you can transcend, you can get through the daily grind.

That's the feeling that I get when I'm there in those rituals, connecting with people, comforting each other, sharing deeply - women need to connect, women need to relate, much more than men.

## 2. Healing

The support of other Circle participants and the rituals themselves have been a healing mechanism for two of the women who were victims of male brutality in the past; one raped, and one abused by a battering husband. A third reports that the Goddess religion has helped her to come to terms with a lifetime of control by men, "I realized how I had been victimized and controlled, which left me with a lot of rage and hurt".



While most of the other women in the group do not feel themselves to be victims of men, some have been, for at least periods of their lives, male-centred and/or controlled, and have found a strengthened identity as females in the Women's Circle.

Sky talks about the changes she has experienced:

I started to feel my own femininity in a different way, getting in touch with what it meant to be a woman for me, what the Mother Earth energy was within me, what the sister hood energy was within me.

Instead of being just male-oriented, I started focusing on my women friends and started accepting nurturing into my life from women - because I didn't have that nurturing from my mother.

My first connection was through the earth, feeling connected through nature, then starting to open to friends, women friends, which allowed me to open to myself, and to the Goddess.

Joanne tells of:

....a terrific fascination about just learning how to be a woman - I didn't have a good example, growing up. Certainly, if females tend to be more in touch with their feelings and more expressive of them, I didn't experience that. I would have identified more with males in that regard. I've been more of a male-centred person throughout my life.

It's fascinating just to learn how much more there can be of me. I've had a denial of the softer part of myself that I'm getting in touch with now.

### 3. Re-energizing

The connection with other women experienced by Circle members in rituals may extend beyond the group itself back

into history, perhaps to an identification with Medieval witches or beyond.

As Sandra reveals,

In the beginning, it was so new, I didn't realize what it (ritual) was doing for me. All I knew was that it was making me feel so incredibly wonderful that I had to keep going back. Now I realize that I have done those rituals before in many, many, lives and it is reawakening those energies and those memories and those experiences in other times which are coming back through me. As I do those rituals, I really get a sense of where I've come from.

Without exception, group members report increased self-esteem as a result of Circle participation. Sky speaks for all when she says,

There's a healing that happens there for me, for all of us. There's a common thread, the sisterhood, the feminine power. We are together as sisters, there's a feminine principle operating very strongly which is the healing force of the world right now, or which is going to be the healing force. The seed that we create here, that essence follows with me, it takes me a long way. What we create on those evenings is the focus for a lot of healing that happens until the next ritual.

#### 4. Creativity

For many of the women, the Circle serves as a creative outlet. They feel, as Sandra does, that "The Circle has provided an environment for me to express myself creatively". Sandra and Sky draw on visions and dreams for inspiration in planning rituals; others, with a background in theatre, enjoy the opportunity for dramatic

improvisation, dance, or poetry reading. For Joanne, who previously was unaware of her creative powers, the rituals have been a revelation:

When I am with this group of people who are so accepting and unconditionally loving, the creativity, things that I never knew about myself, can come out. And that has been such a gift that I have not experienced anywhere else. Getting involved in the drumming, feeling, 'Hey, I can do this', and there's such creativity, it's almost like jazz, improvisation. And the chanting, using my voice really takes something from inside of me and releases it and puts it out there.

I can't even describe what happens to me when I do the drumming. In the beginning, when I would think about staying with the Church, rather than the Ritual Group, the predominant thing is that I can never give up drumming.

Beth recognizes the value of the rituals as a release from the mundane world:

Drumming and chanting are primal - get you disconnected from all this stuff out here, like you know, the car you drive, the clothes you wear, and the house you live in. They just cease to exist the moment that drumming starts - you go right back to your roots.

Many of the group members incorporate ritual into their daily routines if only in purification ceremonies using smudges of burning sage or sweetgrass. Interestingly, the two women who were raised as Roman Catholics, rebelled against the Church's "empty ceremony", and felt quite profoundly the lack of meaningful ritual in their lives, are the most ardent practitioners of personal ritual. For one:

Ritual is nurturing myself, putting my energies into my food, creating an

atmosphere in my home - meditation, singing, drumming, chanting, candles, lighting the sage and the sweetgrass and the cedar. All these things help to remind me of what's valuable, important.

The other says:

I do a morning ritual to remind me about ritual and its importance in my life, then I try to do everything as a ritual throughout the day. I try to make my whole life a meditation. And that's a pretty major challenge so I fall short a lot of the time, but that's my goal because I don't see that there should be a separation of the spiritual and the physical. I bless my food and when I'm in a confrontation with someone, I'll do a mental ritual where I say, 'Bless my eyes that I may have clarity of vision, and bless my mouth that I may speak the truth'...that sort of thing.

## 5. Spiritual Needs

Although the members find that the Women's Circle serves important supporting, healing, re-energizing, and creative and enabling functions, all emphasize that its primary value is that of spiritual fulfillment. Kelly's attitude is typical:

This group is much more than a support group: a support group deals with ordinary life - the Circle transcends ordinary life. Together, in the Women's Circle, we create sacred space, suspend everyday reality, put a boundary around us, leave the world behind. In spite of new people coming and going, we can go deeper, contact a deeper place in ourselves. The group is not only personal but transpersonal. The symbolic invoking of the Goddess, of the spirits of the cardinal directions, is an invoking of what is in ourselves.

Marni agrees that rituals extend the group's focus

beyond the ordinary:

Initially, I found ritual embarrassing, although it felt good to make lots of noise. Now, I'm more respectful about ritual - recognize its value in the process of growing, sharing, and trusting. It moves energy faster: we couldn't get to the same place with just a support group.

It's not the robotish ritual of Churches, but a different sense of ritual, really connected with what it symbolizes - alive, spontaneous, open, receiving an energy that is there with the group that night. Universal energy, individual, yet shared.

Leigh finds the ritual experience moving but difficult to define:

That summer when Sky took a group of women up to Black Rock to do ritual under the full moon, it was my first experience with ritual, with women getting together and working with the energies and it was so powerful....I opened to something, an insight that was given to me in the group which I hadn't experienced before on my own.

Something happens when the sacred space is created, when we get together, something happens, and it's a very healing something. I wouldn't want to try to say what it is, but it's more than ordinary experience. We open to the higher energies we invoke.

The connection with the "higher energies" to which Leigh refers seems to be the most important benefit of Circle participation. The women stress that the divine is found within each person and, as Beth insists, it is not just "something out there". When pressed to define the Goddess, Beth laughs, "ME!".

She goes on to explain:

A crisis, for example, makes you learn about the Goddess within you. It's not like I pray and say, 'Take this horrible thing away'! It's like I get real quiet and real

still and really in touch with the Goddess in here so I can find my way through this trauma and learn and grow from it. I think that old-fashioned concept of male external God that you pray to is still based on that weird stuff that you're really not responsible for what you're doing or what's happening and maybe He'll race in and save you and pull this terrible thing out of your path. I don't think that's the way it works.

Carol reports a similar reaction to a crisis in her life:

The problem I've had with the Christian religion is that it focuses on a God outside instead of inside and it doesn't give me the responsibility for how I'm creating my life. Last January I got really sick so I started doing a lot of affirming work on my own as well as with the ritual group. The whole time for me was remembering that I have all these tools to work with: as a healer, as a medicine woman, as a goddess.

Repeatedly, Women's Circle members emphasize the importance to them of recognizing the "goddess within", of developing their own strengths and inner resources rather than depending on external controls and forces. One of the women, a recovered alcoholic, talks about her long struggle to find something in which she could invest her faith: "What I'm realizing now is that in traditional religions you're believing outside of yourself. In the Goddess religion you're believing inside of yourself. You're taking responsibility for yourself".

Sandra undoubtedly speaks for the group when she says:

I think the more you believe in yourself, the less you need external support. So many patriarchal religions involve guilt, fear, and punishment imposed from without. I give

myself the courage to do, to say, to create,  
explore. Goddess, or God, is within, not  
above, judging.

In the Circle, members draw strength from a Goddess who is invoked by the group during rituals but whom each appears to find within herself.

### Native Roots

Though the Goddess religion is generally perceived as feminist Witchcraft, rooted in feminist principles and Wiccan tradition, analysis of relevant literature and of the Starhawk workshop and the Women's Circle indicates that it also borrows extensively from native spirituality.

Starhawk (Lecture, August 1987) mentioned Indian spirituality affecting her perspectives, and many members of the Calgary Women's Circle, as noted previously, have had native influences in their lives. Sky, especially, has spent a great deal of time developing her spiritual life on the Stoney Reservation and among the Hopi. Similarities between the Goddess and native religions are profound, not only in world views and symbology, but also in ritual format, and in psychosocial functions and implications.

#### 1. World Views

Joseph Epes Brown (Capps, 1976: 25-34), while acknowledging immense differences between Native cultures of North America, describes core world views common to all

Native peoples; these perspectives are also represented in Goddess values.

For instance, by both groups, time is perceived as cyclical, in harmony with natural rhythms of sun, moon, and seasons, rather than linear and progress-oriented. Place is important in both Native and Goddess cosmology; spirit beings sanctify sacred places which may also be created by establishing a ritual circle. Recognition of the interconnectedness of all life, a relationship which includes the animate and inanimate, and a belief in the inherent power found in the natural world of animals, plants, rocks, and lakes, as well as in people, is common to both groups. In this egalitarian value-scheme, humans are not seen as apart from, or superior to, nature (Leacock, 1986: 157).

This relationship with the natural world extends to human responsibility in it; historian Philip Kopper (1986: 294) claims that Indians were often bewildered when exposed to certain Christian principles such as vicarious atonement which appeared to relieve individuals of accountability for their own actions. For traditional native peoples, religion pervaded all aspects of daily life (Dempsey, 1986: 412); the linear separation and categorization of the spiritual is not emphasized as it is in white society.

To Goddess adherents as well, responsibility for self, others, and the planet, is a primary value. Goddess celebrants attempt to eliminate the dichotomy between



spiritual and secular life; many Circle members express their desire to "live" their religion by making everyday life a series of rituals which remind them of what is valuable.

## 2. Symbology

As well as adopting traditional Native values, Goddess adherents appear to have borrowed heavily in terms of symbology.

The Calgary Circle in particular uses native ritual materials: sage and sweetgrass purification smudges; eagle and owl wings for smudging and as "talking feathers"; native drums and rattles; Kachina dolls; and, teepees for summer rituals. Like Blackfoot youths who wore amulets representing spirit helpers (Dempsey, 1986: 422), many Circle women wear amulets, usually small handcrafted leather or crocheted bags containing personal objects, such as crystals, sacred to them. As previously noted, the amulets may be placed on the altar during rituals to be "re-energized".

Steinmetz (1984: 15), describing a peyote meeting of the Native American Church, remarks on the Indian altar, which, like Women's Circle altars, is arranged to evoke rich images. As well, both groups gather around fire; for example, candles, in the case of the Circle. Gazing into a flame is a hypnotic means of centering and concentration.

Four direction symbolism, a prominent feature of

Goddess rituals, is widespread among North American Indians. In sacred pipe ceremonies, smokers puffed smoke, as an offering of incense to the Spirits, to the four directions, then to the Above and the Below (Underhill, 1965: 110); the Cree believed each of the four corners of the Earth were occupied by wind persons, each possessing characteristics representing particular seasons, weather, and animals (Feit, 1986: 176); to Northern Algonquin peoples, the four directions were the domains of spirits of varied attributes - the East, for example, was the bringer of sun and daylight (Brown, 1986 :227). Pueblo, Maya, and Aztecs also gave the four directions colours which varied from group to group, although North was usually black (Underhill, 1965: 110), one of the colours it represents to Goddess participants who also ascribe to the four directions particular animals, seasons, and personal attributes.

In Native religions, the circle is also primary, a symbol of harmony and unity, representing "continual movement within a continuous space" (Bancroft-Hunt, 1981: 16,17). Anthropologists have noted the prevalence of the circle, not only in religious ceremonies, but at every level of Plains culture (Toelken, 1976: 16-17): family groups sit in circles; meetings are held in circles; teepees are circular; the campfire is a circle; and the camp organized in a ring. The universe itself, according to Lakota John Lone Deer (Steinmetz, 1976: 39), is circular: "The moon, the horizon, the rainbow - circles within circles, with no

beginning and no end".

The circle is a primary Goddess symbol signifying the inter-connectedness and the cyclical nature of life. Two Calgary Circle members comment: "It stands for unity, relationship, responsibility - what goes around, comes around - the idea that what you give returns to you"; and, "The Circle represents the feminine principle, the womb, the moon".

Symbolic visions and dreams are important guiding forces in Indian life and for many of the Women's Circle participants. In Plains Indian spirituality, the vision quest was a principle element. Vision quests could result in the manifestation of spirit helpers unique to the individual or beneficial to the whole tribe (Dempsey, 1986: 442). Visions and dreams, rich sources of religious symbols, provided the power needed to perform religious ceremonies (Steinmetz, 1984: 12-13).

In the Women's Circle, Sky and Sandra, for instance, also depend on both visions and dreams for inspiration in planning ritual; they, and several others, have gone alone on deliberate "vision quests" into the mountains during which they hoped to, and according to their accounts did, obtain spirit guides or power animals.

The drums and chants used in Goddess rituals are often direct borrowings from natives. One evocative chant, for example, taught to the participants at the Starhawk workshop, is a Native American Ghost Dance song:

I circle around, I circle around,  
The boundaries of the earth  
Wearing my long wing feathers as I fly.

In the Calgary Women's Circle, the drums and rattles used by several of the members are of varied native provenance: Hopi, Stoney, and Blackfoot.

### 3. Integration through Ritual

While a full analysis of native ceremonials is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that drumming and chanting which form an integral part of ritual, serve similar purposes for both native and Goddess groups.

As noted previously, studies conducted in traditional societies indicate that ritual in its communicative, integrative, and innovative functions, enriches the world view of participants in terms of cultural re-statements and information storage and transmission (Kluckhohn, 1972: 98-100; Partridge, 1977: 62; Leach, 1972: 333). In addition to reflecting the values of participants, ritual plays an important role in shaping social order because of the lasting effects of ceremonials which may recreate the categories through which participants perceive reality (Turner, 1981: 5-6). This re-generative transcendence of self (Lowie, 1985: 369) which draws upon the integration of feminist principles, Wiccan tradition, and native spirituality is engendered by ritual. Through the ritual, this transcendence offers "another world to live in"

(Geertz, 1966: 175). To the members of the Women's Circle, this world represents strength, independence, caring, responsibility, and the inter-related nature of all life forms. In Tanya's words: "What the rituals really do for me is to reinforce two things: the connectedness and that that's the way life on the planet could be".

The measure of transcendence afforded Tanya and other participants in Goddess rituals is characteristic of a mystical experience which, according to theologian Carol Christ (1986: xiv), occurs when "we become aware that we are part of a community, a history, or the natural world which is larger than ourselves". This transcendence is facilitated by drumming and chanting.

Anthropologists and psychologists such as Needham (1973: 392-395), Johnston (1977: 217-225), and Sargant (1959: 92-93), have found, in studies of aboriginal cultures, that rhythmic drumming and chanting serve to disorganize the normal patterning of the brain, often producing an altered state of consciousness in participants. While "altered state" may be too extreme a term to describe Circle members' consciousness during rituals, the combination of ritual objects, drumbeat, and chants does have a profound effect. As medical researchers (Achterberg, 1985: 41-42) have discovered in studies of the psychological effects of percussion, the combination bypasses the logical, left hemisphere to directly affect the intuitive, creative right brain.

The creation of a ritual, like a work of art, "must arise from unconscious depths, to be structured secondarily into conscious action" (Whitmont, 1982: 24). Women's Circle rituals, while often pre-planned, are just as often spontaneous, with women experiencing increased access to creative powers which may not be manifested in other aspects of their lives. In a study which resulted from the writer's experience as a high school English teacher, the same phenomena was noted: some students who were normally incapable of writing creatively, occasionally turned in complex surreal poetry; it was found that such students during their weekend experiences while under the influence of Cannabis appeared able to draw from the right brain to compose the poetry. Interestingly, experiments then conducted in class with the same students writing while they listened to the heavy rhythmic beat of rock music produced similar, albeit not as unusual, results (Gladman, 1984).

The increased access to creative, intuitive, right brain functioning attained through participation in the drumbeating and chanting of ritual appears to lead participants into a deeper consciousness. Jungian analyst E.C. Whitmont recognizes that beneath "our rational modern mind lie dormant the earlier ways: a matriarchal, magical, and mythological perception and concept formation" (1984: 40). Ritual seems to facilitate the retrieval of ancient, repressed ways of dealing with existence.

Starhawk (Lecture, August 1987) says that "invoking the

Goddess is like recalling an ancestral memory", and members of the Women's Circle emphasize the importance of this function of ritual for them. Mircea Eliade (1976: 2-3), discussing Australian Aboriginal initiation rites, describes how the novice discovers through ritual that "he has already been here, in the mythical time; he was here in the form of the mythical ancestor" (ibid: 2). The idea was also a theory of Plato who believed that it was possible for the soul to withdraw into itself and, through a process of "going back", rediscover and repossess the knowledge inherent in its original, extraterrestrial state (ibid: 3).

For Circle members, the symbology and the ritual lead to the atavistic process of "going back", rediscovering and repossessing, both individually and collectively, the ancient Goddess archetype. It is this going back which appears to be one of the most rewarding aspects of participation in rituals.

### Psychosocial Functions

#### 1. Spiritual Sources

Between the Goddess religion and the current renaissance of native religions, parallels may be drawn in terms of individual and collective psychosocial healing functions. North American aboriginal religion is becoming a focus of ethnic identity for many Indian groups who are

awakening to a new pan-Indian consciousness (Hultkrantz, 1976: 89). With their traditional life styles and, in many cases, languages gone, the the hallmark of Indianness is becoming a spiritual life in keeping with the old Indian ways (Jilek, 1982: 111). Native groups who have learned to preserve their sacred traditions underground are now more willing to give them greater visibility (Brown, 1976: 25-27; Morrison, 1986: 532). Sundances, Peyotism, sweatlodge ceremonies, the pipe, fasts, potlatches, healing rituals, and other spiritual rites are all enjoying a revival (Borman et al, 1987: 158; Morrison, 1986: 530). Central to many current native alcohol and drug abuse treatment programs is an affirmation of Indian identity, particularly traditional spirituality (Goodstriker, lecture, April 1987; Jilek, 1982: 89; Morrison et al, 1986: 528-530).

Describing the revival of Salish Spirit dancing, Jilek (1982: 158) emphasizes the value of the renaissance of Indian ceremonialism in terms of healing functions for the individual and the collective. In rituals such as the Spirit Dance and the Sun Dance, the focus, as in Goddess rituals, is on the acquisition of power for one's own wellbeing and that of one's people.

As well, like the rebirth of North American Indian spirituality, the return to celebration of the female Goddess principle can be described as a revitalization movement. According to Wallace's analysis (1956: 264-281), revitalization movements are reactionary, prompted by a



culture, or areas of it, which are unsatisfactory to members of the society. Unsatisfactory conditions create a demand for changes which, unlike the classic processes of culture change, result from a "deliberate, conscious effort by participants in the movement to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations" (1970: 188).

The "unsatisfactory conditions" which cause stress and demand for change in both Indian and Goddess groups are, to some degree, parallel. Both native peoples and women have been subjected to paternalistic control, have suffered inferior social status, and have found themselves faced with belief and value systems which, in many cases, offer little relevance and meagre scope for pride in themselves as Indians or as women.

Wallace (1956: 268) states that the prolonged stress experienced in a culture in which needs are not satisfied may result in responses such as alcoholism, extreme passivity, dependency, depression, and self-reproach. These regressive responses may become established cultural patterns in the oppressed group, and indeed, have become common responses for both natives and women. Two members of the Women's Circle are reformed alcoholics and most of the women have talked of overcoming passivity, dependence, depression, and guilt.

More positive responses take the form of revitalistic movements, often religious, and, in the case of both native

and Goddess groups, revivalistic as well. Wallace (1956: 267) describes revivalistic movements as those which attempt to return to a former era, to restore the values and customs of previous generations. For natives, this means restoring traditional spiritual values; for Goddess participants, it means celebrating what they perceive as originally prevalent, matriarchal values.

Wallace (1956: 275), identifying systems of revitalistic change, describes movements, like the pan-Indian, which profess to revive a traditional culture now fallen into desuetude, and other movements which import a foreign cultural system. While native peoples are restoring their own values in the face of an imposed alien culture, Goddess groups, in a process of reverse acculturation, are, in attempting to revive a past which they believe existed in pre-literate times, embracing many of the attributes common to traditional native spirituality.

In looking to the past for spiritual relevance, modern Goddess celebrants, many of whom call themselves "witches", model their religion to some extent on that of "revival witches" (Truzzi, 1974: 641). Revival witches pattern themselves on Margaret Murray's reconstruction of the alleged, pre-Christian, fertility religion later elaborated by Gerald Gardiner. Goddess groups have adopted the witchcraft tradition of honouring a goddess and celebrating the power of the imagination for healing. Many identify with the role of "witch" as wise, nonconforming women and

use Wiccan paraphernalia in their rituals.

This analysis reveals that, to a greater extent, the Goddess religion is modelled on that of native peoples in a process of reverse diffusion; that of culture-spread from dominated to dominant. North American Indians, as have other colonized small scale societies, suffered an imposition of foreign, white, technological, social, and psychological values. Although there was some two-way diffusion in terms of settlers' adopting Indian foods, vocabulary, medicines, clothing, transportation, and hunting and survival techniques (Farb, 1968: 312), Hallowell (Bourguignon, 1974: 241), in reviewing the influence of the Indian on North American culture, finds no evidence of actual borrowing of beliefs or behaviours. Native spirituality, in fact, was perceived as a barbaric affront to Christianity and had to be eliminated as completely and as quickly as possible. As Edward T. Hall (1977: 49) has noted, "If the early settlers in North America couldn't make the Indians conform to the European paradigm, the response was to destroy what could not be controlled and what did not perform in a predictable manner." An 1893 article in Harper's New Monthly Magazine entitled "The Religion of the Sioux" (Mails, 1979: 229-230), was typical of the prevailing attitude toward Indian religion.

This much has the missionary done. From the sorcery and jugglery of the weazened medicine-man he has brought the Sioux to confide in the simple teachings of the Bible. From the barbarous self-immolation

of the sun-dance he has led him to the few rites of Christianity. From the gross sensuality and selfishness of the awful mystery, the Takoo wakan, manifested and worshipped under the form of gods innumerable, he has built up a faith in one Supreme Being.

The churches and religious societies have certainly quenched the fire of barbarism in the Indian children. The Bible, translated into their native language, has been put before them, so that the younger element does not grow up with a belief in that convenient form of prayer - merely pointing the pipe - which expressed so little but implied all manner of requests for ponies and meat and comfortable old age. The Sioux has succumbed to a stronger civilization, and with his old customs have fallen his old gods.

As the Indians were victims of deicide at the hands of Christian colonizers, so Goddess celebrants, in their perception, were robbed of the Mother Goddess by patriarchal Church fathers who suppressed worship of female deities and persecuted those, including witches, who clung to a matriarchal belief system. Unlike native peoples who still have access to their traditional spiritual knowledge, participants in the Goddess movement are attempting to revive religious patterns which they believe were prominent in ancient, pre-literate times. Without the window into the distant past that writing/recorded history provides, events vanish from human memory; Goddess celebrants are forced, therefore, to virtually re-invent their religion. In doing so, they have adopted aspects of a native religious/value system which parallels their own values. Much better than the Judaeic-Christian tradition, it meshes with their

feminist principles of egalitarianism, nurturance of the Earth and life upon it, co-operation, personal responsibility, and the interconnectedness of all life.

## 2. Borrowed Superstructure

Starhawk (Lecture, August 1987), in discussing borrowing from native tradition, advocates respecting the intent of the people to whom the traditions are sacred. Although Goddess participants undoubtedly respect and revere native practices, their bricoleur-like fervour sometimes results in surprising combinations and adaptations of diverse native traditions. Ironically, like Sitting Bull (Bryde, 1971: 1) who was quoted as saying: "I have advised my people this way: when you find anything good in the white man's road, pick it up", white, Goddess celebrants are now eager to pick up "anything good" in the Indian road.

Indian scholar Dr. Ahab Spence (1973: 55-56), describing the difficulties inherent in whites' attempts to understand natives, compares the culture of a people to a steamship moving across the ocean with only the superstructure or material aspects such as clothing, tools, manners, and rituals, visible. The motivating forces of the culture, like most of the ship's hull, are hidden from sight. Goddess celebrants are picking up the superstructure, yet they are creating something meaningful for themselves, something suited to their time and situation.

Sealey and Kirkness (1973: 121-135) decry the ignorance of "experts" on Indian affairs who rarely have much real understanding of native culture, partly because of native determination that whites should not have such access:

Persons of native ancestry, to a greater extent than most white people, believe in the right of privacy for both individuals and groups, and valiantly resist efforts to penetrate the barriers which they erect around themselves. A case in point would be the famous and well documented "shaking tent" ceremony of the Cree and Saulteaux people. Anthropologists would give their eye teeth to witness the ceremony but none has recorded it for at least two generations. It is doubtful if an anthropologist of this generation will ever be allowed to witness it. By unwritten agreement it has been removed from the list of things Whites are allowed to see or hear about.

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The "things that Whites are allowed to see or hear about" are cheerfully adopted and combined by Women's Circle participants. These often create cultural anomalies in the process. One woman's native West Coast mentor, for example, claimed to be a pipe carrier, and a major native influence in the life of another woman was that of pipe ceremonies, again conducted on the Coast, yet the pipe has not been a part of Coastal tradition; the origin and purpose of the ostensibly Plains Indian "medicine stone" used in Women's Circle rituals is unclear to participants; and the bear, envisioned and claimed as a power animal on Stoney land by one of the Circle members, is anathema to Plains Indian

women who do not even attend to bear meat (Ryan, personal communication, January 1988).

Some of the Women's Circle members have been influenced by the writings of Lynn Andrews, California author of five best-selling books on her personal spiritual quest in which she allegedly has been guided by native women shamans. Her fans consider Andrews the female equivalent of anthropologist Carlos Castaneda who wrote of his own apprenticeship to a Yaqui Indian sorcerer. Native critics of Andrews, such as Buck Ghost Horse, professor at Holy Names College in Oakland, California, dismiss her as a "Beverly Hills witch" (Calgary Herald, January 17, 1988) whose books are more fiction than fact. Ghost Horse questions Andrews' accelerated, self-pronounced mastery of shamanism, and, like many other Indians, resents the exploitation of native spirituality by Whites.

Despite native fears of white exploitation of their spirituality, interest in Indian religion among native and non-natives is rising as both groups question the prevailing values of our culture. Among Indian peoples themselves, in this religious rebirth, diffusion is occurring; the Sun Dance, for example, has spread to tribes who have not had it before (Capps, 1976: 90). In the case of Goddess celebrants who are, in effect, creating a new religion, it is useful, like these tribes, to discover and make use of someone else's past in their own quest for spiritual identity.

### 3. Empowerment

In the synergy created through the interaction of feminism, Witchcraft, and native spirituality, the Goddess religion offers its participants empowerment on two levels: individual and collective.

#### Self as Goddess

Goddess celebrants report increased self-esteem and confidence and diminished anger and anxiety as a result of membership in the Women's Circle. This appears to result from three factors. The first is the effect of the bonding which occurs between members of the group, an effect resulting from the acceptance and nurturing by the women of each other. Second, empowerment comes primarily, as the women testify, from the rituals themselves in which Circle participants experience not only a heightened awareness of community but a transcendence, a mystical glimpse of the Goddess archetype and a sense of women's traditional strength and history. Third, the strong, independent, Goddess archetype is experienced in the on-going cycle of a self-augmenting feedback-loop, providing a powerful image for women as they take back into themselves that which they perceive as strong; this acts as a purifying antidote for women who have, "in learning to be women, accepted and even internalized, what is all too often a derogatory and constraining image of themselves" (Rosaldo and Lamphere,



1974: 2).

Each woman, changed and empowered by participation in Goddess rituals, affects those around her; as Tanya says, "Every time someone's consciousness changes, she affects everyone else around her". Thus each Circle member becomes a stimulus for change in other members, and each of the others responds by herself becoming a stronger stimulus: stimulus thus feeds response which feeds back to stimulus in an ascending spiral.

Through the group sharing of potent ritual and valued archetype, the women in the Circle invoke for themselves what is in themselves. They each become, as Carol said of herself, "healer, medicine woman, and goddess".

Finding strength in the support and shared experience of other women, even women of the past, promotes group solidarity which, according to Simone de Beauvoir (Francis and Gontier, 1987: 310), leads to "action, struggle, resistance, and victory" by women who ordinarily "live a shared condition in dispersal". Through the bonding, developing of collective strength, and celebrating of the female image of the Divine provided in Goddess groups, women can overcome the impotence and despair of isolation.

#### Collective Empowerment

The strength and sense of history which, as Circle women assert, is re-energized at every ritual, has ramifications

for women on a collective level as well. Not only is the immediate world likely to be affected by newly empowered Goddess celebrants, but political and social changes come about through changes in personal consciousness.

The Goddess religion's redefinition of the divine image as a female embodiment of feminist values, rather than a male representative of patriarchal mores, is bound to hold implications for mainstream theology and culture. It is not surprising, if the pantheon reflects social values, currently male ones, that females, emboldened by advances in other areas of their lives, should attempt to redefine divine archetypes so that such images are meaningful to them. Kluckhohn (1972: 95-96) writes that personal rituals, dreams, or fantasies, when conditions make them particularly appealing, may be taken over and socialized by the group; the dream of the individual becomes the reality of his or her society.

In fact, Wallace argues (1956: 268) that

....all organized religions are relics of old revitalization movements, surviving in routinized form in stabilized cultures, and that religious phenomena per se originated in the revitalization process - i.e., in visions of a new way of life by individuals under extreme stress.

Many women do feel themselves to be under extreme stress. As a result, the dream of feminist Goddess celebrants such as Starhawk is becoming a religion of reality. It is finding ready ground among women who are not satisfied with traditional religions. According to David

Aberle (1965: 538), the common theme in all revitalization movements is that of "relative deprivation" - a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and actuality. The reference points for feelings of relative deprivation among members of an oppressed group are "the realizations that their current lot is not as good as it used to be, or might be, or is not as good as that of members of some other group" (Barnouw, 1973: 477).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### HARBINGERS AND HEALERS: THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

Though the Goddess religion draws strength from powerful ancient female archetypes, its life and form depend today on an amalgam of Witchcraft and native spirituality. Reflecting many of the qualities of revitalization movements, it is nonetheless creating something new in its widespread borrowing from diverse cultures and eras.

As a counter-cultural feminist spiritual movement nurtured by people such as Starhawk and Sky, it is unlikely to replace traditional Churches in our society, yet its influence is being felt in mainstream religion: women are finding the strength and the unity to question the theological justification for female subordination. The Unitarian Church, for example, has had to begin holding weekly, Goddess-study programs. The United Church is realizing the need for recognition of female traditions and symbols within Christianity, as well as the necessity for full representation of women in Churches which have repressed them.

Such change is the work of reformists, many of whom, while choosing to remain within the Church, have been touched by the feminist concept of the Goddess (Flewelling, personal communication, November, 1987).

Regardless of the long-term theological impact, the Goddess movement as a religio-ecological phenomenon may have an effect on the world view and ethics of North American culture as a growing number of people, both women and men, concerned about ecological threats to the planet, advocate a recognition of female values and an end to the domination of man over nature. Helen Caldicott (1987:105) claims, "The planet is dying, even without nuclear war. The positive feminine principle - loving, nurturing, life giving - has to take over. The age of women has arrived".

Psychiatrist Jean Shinoda Bolen foresees a coming shift from a "patriarchal, hierarchical, domination-of-others ethic" into more of an "affiliative, related-to-one another ethic" (1987:13) as environmental, anti-nuclear, women's rights, and global consciousness movements gather momentum. The Goddess religion shares similar values with these movements.

Certainly, Women's Circle participants believe that the Goddess movement has social implications which reach beyond their personal empowerment. Sarah draws the analogy between Goddess ritual and the prayer of traditional Churches, both of which, in a concerted effort of group will, "can transmit energy and change things". At one ritual, Sky suggested that the group direct healing energy toward the Neo-Nazi Aryan Nation movement, in the hope that its leaders might be imbued with love for all humans.

Kelly thinks that "the world is starting to be ready to

accept feminine values: connection, co-operation, not having dominion over".

Tanya adds,

It's going to be interesting to see what happens in the coming years...it's happening so fast, the resurgence of the feminine. It's like the hundredth monkey theory, if enough people change their minds about something, the whole mass consciousness changes. So things are shifting and maybe they're going to shift to a point where we don't even recognize what used to be.

I think probably one of the biggest moving forces in the world right now is the resurgence of the feminine, and timely, 'cause I don't think we'd make it to the next century without it.

Leigh agrees,

We are all connected, all people, all life, the Earth. What affects one affects the others - that connection has a sacred quality. I believe that the aspects of womanness are important at this time: important to understand and to claim. There is a feeling that the world is really changing, going through major changes. Things are shifting at a rapid pace: relationships, health issues, ecological and life-threatening issues. We are faced with knowing we can't continue in the same way; something will happen.

Social philosopher Sissela Bok (1986: 16-17) echoes Goddess beliefs in the interconnectedness of all living things. She insists that "vicious circles", in which everything gets worse and worse, have a positive counterpart, "virtuous circles", in which altruistic actions may spark profound social effects.

It's so important to say that what any individual does will make some small difference. If it is working for the

homeless or working with the aged, working within your own family with a sick child, working to improve your relationship with a brother or a sister, or in the community, or in the nation - those activities, small as they may be, can have an effect, if only a marginal effect, on the largest questions.

Goddess celebrants' concern for the largest questions is stated simply and beautifully by Circle member Sarah who says, "The Goddess religion is about healing: yourself, the community, the planet".

### The Venture

Unlike many spiritual movements which depend upon messianic leaders to maintain momentum, the Goddess phenomenon thrives independently. Starhawk is like an itinerant preacher for she nurtures the growth of widely dispersed congregants, yet they, through their own needs, have seeded themselves and go on to create their own relevance from her insights.

This independence can lead to problems: feminists' distrust of hierarchy sometimes prompts an abandonment of structure which can mean the eventual dissolution of groups (Adler, 1979:220). The Women's Circle is beginning to suffer from a lack of focus as its members strive to maintain an egalitarian, non-hierarchical group with no one "in charge". Sky, who is respected by the other Circle women as a healer, mystic, and ritual facilitator, would seem an obvious choice as leader. She, like the others, feels the

need for more structure, but is reluctant to consider changes which would lead to any sort of control.

I've had a hard time with that....I need a more focused group that wants to do specific ritual, but it has to be co-operative, shared. As soon as you put a leader to it, that's control, there's a control element there. That's exactly what the patriarchal energy is, that's what a co-op isn't. You and I are priestesses, we all are.

Despite the difficulty of finding focus without creating control, women in the Goddess religion are developing viable collective and personal healing systems. They are doing so by taking on the identities, to some extent, of witches and native peoples. Anthropologists describing processes of diffusion and acculturation, recognize that "borrowed identities" are often useful in a world in which new categories are being created (Dawson et al, 1974: 48-49). And new categories through which to perceive the world are being created by women who are challenging the norms and institutions of their culture, creating new realities and destroying old beliefs. Feminist professor Jill Vickers states (1982:28),

As we try to understand more deeply women's experience under patriarchy, it becomes apparent that our venture is more profoundly radical than most of us had imagined. Eventually, it becomes clear that the venture is more than filling in the blanks with missing nuggets of information about women. No longer can we be satisfied just with critiques of the biases and blindness of our disciplinary theories, our religions and our ideologies. Finally, the frightening and exhilarating fact can



no longer be denied - we are together  
embarked on a journey which has as its goal  
the complete reconstruction of human  
knowledge and human existence.

Collectively, the Goddess religion is providing its  
adherents with a revitalizing archetypal symbol of women's  
strength, and a sense of history and intergenerational  
solidarity which has been greatly lacking among women.

Individually, once touched by an awareness of their  
female strength, once in touch with the Goddess within them-  
selves, women's perceptions of themselves and their  
personal, cultural, and political roles appear to be  
transformed. As poet Ntozake Shange wrote (1977),

i found god in myself  
& i loved her/i loved her fiercely

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