Why Women Need the Goddess

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The symbol of Goddess aids the process of naming and reclaiming the female body and its cycles and processes. In the ancient world and among modern women, the Goddess symbol represents the birth, death, and rebirth processes of the natural and human worlds. The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death cycles in the universe. This is sometimes expressed through the symbolic connection between the twenty-eight-day cycles of menstruation and the twenty-eight-day cycles of the moon. Moreover, the Goddess is celebrated in the triple aspect of youth, maturity, and age, or maiden, mother, and crone. The potentiality of the young girl is celebrated in the nymph or maiden aspect of the Goddess. The Goddess as mother is sometimes depicted giving birth, and giving birth is viewed as a symbol for all the creative, life-giving powers of the universe."[17] The life-giving powers of the Goddess in her creative aspect are not limited to physical birth, for the Goddess is also seen as the creator of all the arts of civilization, including healing, writing, and the giving of just law. Women in the middle of life who are not physical mothers may give birth to poems, songs, and books, or nurture other women, men, and children. They too are incarnations of the Goddess in her creative, life-giving aspect. At the end of life, women incarnate the crone aspect of the Goddess. The wise old woman, the woman who knows from experience what life is about, the woman whose closeness to her own death gives her a distance and perspective on the problems of life, is celebrated as the third aspect of the Goddess. Thus, women learn to value youth, creativity, and wisdom in themselves and other women.

The possibilities of reclaiming the female body and its cycles have been expressed in a number of Goddess-centered rituals. Hallie Austen Iglehart and Barbry MyOwn created a summer solstice ritual to celebrate menstruation and birth. The women simulated a birth canal and birthed each other into their circle. They raised power by placing their hands on each other's bellies and chanting together. Finally they marked each other's faces with rich, dark menstrual blood saying, "This is the blood that promises renewal. This is the blood that promises sustenance. This is the blood that promises life."[18] From hidden dirty secret to symbol of the life power of the Goddess, women's blood has come full circle. Other women have created rituals that celebrate the crone aspect of the Goddess, especially at Halloween, an ancient holiday. On this day, the wisdom of the old woman is celebrated, and it is also recognized that the old must die so that the new can be born.

The "mood" created by the symbol of the Goddess in triple aspect is one of positive, joyful affirmation of the female body and its cycles and acceptance of aging and death as well as life. The "motivations" are to overcome menstrual taboos, to return the birth process to the hands of women, and to change cultural attitudes about age and death. Changing cultural attitudes toward the female body would help to overcome the spirit-flesh, mind-body dualisms of Western culture, since, as Ruether has pointed out, the denigration of the female body is at the heart of these dualisms. The Goddess as symbol of the revaluation of the body and nature thus also undergirds the human potential and ecology movements. The "mood" is one of affirmation, awe, and respect for the body and nature, and the "motivation" is respect for the teachings of the body and the value of all living beings.

A third important implication of the Goddess symbol for women is the positive valuation of will in Goddess-centered ritual, especially in Goddess-centered ritual magic and spellcasting in womanspirit and feminist witchcraft circles. The basic notion behind ritual magic and spell casting is energy as power. Here the Goddess is a center or focus of power and energy; she is the personification of the energy that flows between beings in the natural human worlds. In Goddess circles, energy is raised by chant-or dancing. According to Starhawk, "Witches conceive of psychic energyas having form and substance that can be perceived directed by those with a trained awareness. The power generated within the circle is built into a cone form, and at its peak is eased to the Goddess, to reenergize the members of the coven, or to do a specific work such as healing."[19] In ritual magic, the energy raised is directed by willpower. Women who celebrate Goddess circles believe they can achieve their wills in the world. The emphasis on the will is important for women, because women traditionally have been taught to devalue their wills, to believe that they cannot achieve their will through their own power; and even to suspect that the assertion of will is evil. Faith Wildung's poem "Waiting," from which I will quote only a short segment, sums up women's sense that their lives are defined not by their own will, but by waiting for others to take the initiative.

Waiting for my breasts to develop
Waiting to wear a bra
Waiting to menstruate
.....
Waiting for life to begin, Waiting—
Waiting to be somebody
.....
Waiting to get married
Waiting for my wedding day
Waiting for my wedding night
.....
Waiting for the end of the day
Waiting for sleep. Waiting...[20]

Patriarchal religion has enforced the view that female initiative and will are evil through the juxtaposition of Eve and Mary. Eve caused the fall by asserting her will against the command of God, while Mary began the new age with her response to God's initiative, "Let it be done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). Even for men, patriarchal religion values the passive will subordinate to divine initiative. The classical doctrines of sin and grace view sin as the prideful assertion of will and grace as the obedient subordination of the human will to the divine initiative or order. While this view of will might be questioned from a human perspective, Valerie Saiving has argued that it has particularly deleterious consequences for women in Western culture. According to Saiving, Western culture encourages males in the assertion of will, and thus it may make some sense to view the male form of sin as an excess of will. But since culture discourages females in the assertion of will, the traditional doctrines of sin and grace encourage women to remain in their form of sin, which is self-negation or insufficient assertion of will.[21] One possible reason the will is denigrated in a patriarchal religious framework is that both human and divine will are often pictured as arbitrary, self-initiated, and exercised without regard for other wills.

In a Goddess-centered context, in contrast, the will is valued. A woman is encouraged to know her will, to believe that her will is valid, and to believe that her will can be achieved in the world, three powers traditionally denied to her in patriarchy. In a Goddess-centered framework, a woman's will is not subordinated to the Lord God as king and ruler, nor to men as his representatives. Thus a woman is not reduced to waiting and acquiescing in the wills of others as she is in patriarchy. But neither does she adopt the egocentric form of will that pursues self-interest without regard for the interests of others.

The Goddess-centered context provides a different understanding of the will than that available in the traditional patriarchal religious framework. In the Goddess framework, will can be achieved only when it is exercised in harmony with the energies and wills of other beings. Wise women, for example, raise a cone of healing energy at the full moon or solstice when the lunar or solar energies are at their high points with respect to the earth. This discipline encourages them to recognize that not all times are propitious for the achieving of every will. Similarly, they know that spring is a time for new beginnings in work and love, summer a time for producing external manifestations of inner potentialities, and fall or winter times for stripping down to the inner core and extending roots. Such awareness of waxing and waning processes in the universe discourages arbitrary ego-centered assertion of will, while at the same time encouraging the assertion of individual will in cooperation with natural energies and the energies created by the wills of others. Wise women also have a tradition that whatever is sent out will be returned, and this reminds to assert their wills in cooperative and healing rather than egocentric and destructive ways. This view of will allows women to begin to recognize, claim, and assert their wills without adopting the worst characteristics of the patriarchal understanding and use of will. In the Goddess-centered framework, the "mood" is one of positive affirmation of personal will in the context of the energies of other wills or beings. The "motivation" is for women to know and assert their wills in cooperation with other wills and energies. This of course does not mean that women always assert their wills in positive and life-affirming ways. Women's capacity for evil is, of course, as great as men's. My purpose is simply to contrast the differing attitudes toward the exercise of will per se, the female will in particular, in Goddess-centered religion and in the Christian God-centered religion.

The fourth and final aspect of Goddess symbolism that I will discuss here is the significance of the Goddess for a revaluation of women's bonds and heritage. As Virginia Woolf has said, "Chloe liked Olivia," a statement about a woman's relation to another woman, is a sentence that rarely occurs in fiction. Men have written the stories, and they have written about women almost exclusively in their relations to men. The celebrations of women's bonds to each other, as mothers and daughters, as colleagues and coworkers, as sisters, friends, and lovers, is beginning to occur in the new literature and culture created by women in the women's movement. While I believe that the revaluing of each of these bonds is important, I will focus on the mother-daughter bond, in part because I believe it may be the key to the others.

Adrienne Rich has pointed out that the mother-daughter bond, perhaps the most important of women's bonds, "resonant with charges... the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other,"[23] is rarely celebrated in patriarchal religion and culture. Christianity celebrates the father's relation to the son and the mother's relation to the son, but the story of mother and daughter is missing. So, too, in patriarchal literature and psychology the mothers and daughters rarely exist. Volumes have been written about the oedipal complex, but little has been written about the girl's relation to her mother. Moreover, as de Beauvoir has noted, the mother-daughter relation is distorted in patriarchy because the mother must give her daughter over to men in a male-defined culture in which women are viewed as inferior. The mother must socialize her daughter to be subordinate to men, and if her daughter challenges patriarchal norms, the mother is likely to defend the patriarchal structures against her own daughter.[24]

These patterns are changing in the new culture created by women in which the bonds of women to women are beginning to be celebrated. Holly Near has written several songs that celebrate women's bonds and women's heritage. In one of her finest songs she writes of an "old-time woman" who is "waiting to die." A young woman feels for the life that has passed the old woman by and begins to cry, but the old woman looks her in the eye and says, "If I had not suffered, you wouldn't be wearing those jeans / Being an old-time woman ain't as bad as it seems."[25] This song, which Near has said was inspired by her grandmother, expresses and celebrates a bond and a heritage passed down from one woman to another. In another of Near's songs, she sings of a "a hiking-boot mother who's seeing the world / For the first time with her own little girl." In this song, the mother tells the drifter who has been traveling with her to pack up and travel alone if he thinks "traveling three is drag" because "I've got a little one who loves me as much as you need me / And darling, that's loving enough."[26] This song is significant because the mother places her relationship to her daughter above her relationship to a man, something women rarely do in patriarchy.[27]

Almost the only story of mother and daughters that has been transmitted in Western culture is the myth of Demeter and Persephone that was the basis of religious rites celebrated by women only, the Thesmophoria, and later formed the basis of the Eleusinian mysteries, which were open to all who spoke Greek. In this story, the daughter, Persephone, is raped away from her mother, Demeter, by the God of the underworld. Unwilling to accept this state of affairs, Demeter rages and withholds fertility from the earth until her daughter is returned to her. What is important for women in this story is that a mother fights for her daughter and for her relation to her daughter. This is completely different from the mother's relation to her daughter in patriarchy. The "mood" created by the story of Demeter and Persephone is one of celebration of the mother-daughter bond, and the "motivation" is for mothers and daughters to affirm the heritage passed from mother to daughter and to reject the patriarchal pattern where the primary loyalties of mother and daughter must be to men.[28]

The symbol of Goddess has much to offer women who are struggling to be rid of the "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" of devaluation of female power, denigration of the female body, distrust of female will, and denial of the women's bonds and heritage that have been engendered by patriarchal religion. As women struggle to create a new culture in which women's power, bodies, will, and bonds are celebrated, it is natural that the Goddess would reemerge as symbol of the newfound beauty, strength, and power of women.

Notes
1. From the original cast album, Buddah Records, 1976. Also see *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: MacMillan, 1976).
2. See Susan Rennie and Kristen Grimstad, "Spiritual Explorations Cross-County," *Quest* 1, no. 4 (1975): 49 51; and *WomanSpirit* magazine.
3. See Starhawk, "Witchcraft and Women's Culture," in *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 260.
4. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.
5. Ibid., 98-108.
6. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Bostoen: Beacon Press, 1974), 13, italics added.
7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshleys (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953).
8. See Grimstad and Rennie, "Spiritual Explorations Cross-Country."
9. Monique Wittig, *Les Guerilleres*, trans. David LeVay (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 89. Also quoted in Morgan MacFarland, "Witchcraft: The Art of Re-membering," *Quest* 1, no. 4 (1975): 41.
10. Mary Beth Edelson, "Speaking for Myself," *Lady Unique* 1 (1976): 56.
11. Personal communication.
12. This theory of the origins of the Western dualism is stated by Rosemary Ruether in *New Woman / New Earth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), and elsewhere.
13. Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, The Malleus Maleficarum, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 1971), 47.
14. See Rita M. Gross, "Menstruation and Childbirth as Ritual and Religious Experience in the Religion of the Australian Aborigines," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 4 (1977): 1147-81.
15. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), plate 4, 106-7.
16. See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), chs. 6 and 7.
17. See James Mellaart, *Earliest Civilizations of the Near East* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 92.
18. Barbry MyOwn, "Ursa Maior: Menstrual Moon Celebration," in *Moon, Moon*, ed. Anne Kent Rush (Berkeley, Calif., and New York: Moon Books and Random House, 1976), 374-87.
19. Starhawk, "Witchcraft and Women's Culture," *Womanspirit Rising*, 266.
20. In Judy Chicago, 213-217.
21. Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100-12.
22. Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1928), 86.
23. Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 226.
24. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 448-49.
25. "Old Time Woman," lyrics by Jeffrey Langley and Holly Near, from *Holly Near: A Live Album*, Redwood Records, 1974.
26. "Started Out Fine," by Holly Near from Holly Near: A Live Album.
27. Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 223.
28. For another version of the story see Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre Hellenic Myths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).