



Living the Dream: Letter from the Editor

by Anne Newkirk Niven

"Bringing a gun into a house changes it."

— Vicki Feaver, "The Gun"
from The Book of Blood

This time last spring, I was spending most Sunday mornings standing out in an old horse pasture about six miles up the road from our home. The frigid wind screamed off the ocean, and I shivered, rubbing my hands and stamping my feet as I waited impatiently for my turn. I don't normally spend hours standing around outdoors in March, but this year was different. This year, I was learning how to use a shotgun.

Like most women of my generation, I had never handled a gun before. My father had one — my mother claimed that he had been a sharpshooter in the Army — but she always kept it behind a locked door, one to which only she had the key. I never saw that gun until after both of my parents died and I had to clean out the house.

There was good reason for locking up that gun. The violent arguments between my parents kept our family constantly off balance. Often, enraged by the battle of words between them that he always seemed to lose, my father would chase my mother around the house, threatening to "kill her if he caught her." She would flee nimbly away from him, twisting between the piles of hastily discarded toys, thrift-store furniture, and oversized Safeway sale displays that dominated our family's living room.

After several circuits, my mother would often stop running to catch her breath. Peering out from behind a six-foot tall Kool-Aid™ rabbit, she would taunt my father. He, in turn, would pause to listen, and then storm after her, his heavy footfalls rattling the windows.

None of us four kids — careful to stay out of the path we had dubbed "the racetrack" — doubted that my father could make good on his threat. He was a short-legged, barrel-chested man, his biceps built up from stocking grocery shelves with thousands of pounds of milk every working day. My mother, by contrast, was whippet-thin: worn down by a combination of surgical menopause, agoraphobia, and a three-pot-a-day Folgers habit. Most of the time, my father would eventually lose interest in chasing her and stomp upstairs to sulk, but every so often he'd *really* try and catch her.

That was when things got out of control: as my parents spun around each other like a pair of binary stars, my mother would start to tire. Sometimes she stumbled, like a deer bounding across a rain-slick highway, and started to fall, and my dad would move in for the kill.

This was when I would intervene. The eldest of four children, I was my mother's lieutenant, confessor, confidant, and champion. Jumping out from where I'd been huddled with my younger siblings, I'd race into my father's path, stand up as tall as I could, look up into his enraged face, and scream "Stop!"

When he told me to get out of the way, I'd dare him to hit me, belittle his manhood, or scream profanities: anything to give my mother time to make her escape. Befuddled, or perhaps simply made ashamed by my protestations, my father virtually always backed off. In spite of the terror, I was proud of protecting my mother, and in my heart, I was a fully developed warrior maiden by the age of ten. I had found that the safest place to be was right in the heart of danger.

Even today, when I feel threatened, my first instinct is to "grab the bull by the horns." So when my husband became interested in shooting last winter, I decided to join him.

I'd always been taught (and had believed) that gun-owners were atavistic low-lifes: cruel, obnoxious, and utterly lacking in class. But I loved my husband, and I'd be damned if I was going to sit at home fretting while he was out playing with guns. So, there I was, that brisk March morning — ready to pick up a loaded weapon, aim it at a spinning clay target, and pull the trigger. So that's exactly what I did.

What I noticed first that morning was the astounding noise: even with ear protection I felt the blast travel down my forearms and right into my spine. Then the acrid tang of gunpowder stung my nose and I registered the sharp impact of recoil against my shoulder. But the physical impacts were minor compared to the clamor of emotions that overwhelmed me.

I shot a hundred rounds that day, and only hit a single target, most likely out of pure luck. But the elation I felt was the sweetest jolt of adrenaline I'd tasted since my youngest son was born over a decade ago and lay suckling at my sweat-drenched breast. To my complete amazement, that morning I discovered that I loved to shoot.

My reaction completely blindsided me: how could I enjoy handling an instrument of destruction, especially after the violence I had endured as a child? My friends were horrified when I told them about my new hobby. Several had marched with our family in peace rallies before the beginning of the Iraq War and couldn't comprehend the seeming dissonance between being anti-war and (as they saw it) pro-gun. I got no help from my sisters: one of them told me, point-blank, that if her husband ever brought home a gun, she would leave him on the spot.

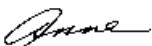
Ruminating on the gun conundrum, I tried to pick out what I liked best about my new activity. It was difficult, since I relished almost everything: the weight of the heavy steel on my forearms, the warm spot of heat haze that rose off the barrel, even the lazy timelessness of waiting for my turn to shoot. But I realized, in the end, that what I loved best was the sense of complete focus. Standing on the firing line, it's just my gun, the target, and me.

This laser-like intensity is something I find almost impossible to achieve in the rest of my life. I'm a compulsive multi-tasker, and always have another song queued up on my mental play list ready to segue when the current one winds down. Most of the time, this ability to split my attention serves me quite well. However, it doesn't leave much space for being "in the moment."

But split-screen consciousness is not possible (and certainly not safe) when I'm holding a loaded weapon. Then, there's a moment right before I shoot that is *just for me*. I clear my thoughts, lift the shotgun, and let my body take over. Right after I fire — when the shot is gone, but before I can tell whether I have hit the target or not — is a moment of perfect emptiness. It is like the Heart Sutra describes, "Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. No cognition — no attainment. Nirvana."¹

Of course, I realize that this experience of intensity could come to another woman through needlework, tai chi, bird watching, or any of a hundred other disciplines. But when the Maiden Warrior came to call on *me*, She just happened to be carrying a 12-gauge.

What I realize now is that, when my parents passed away, I put my "inner maiden" (who was nothing if not a warrior) into a closet marked "too scary" and had pretty much kept her hidden away ever since. I preferred to imagine myself as a mother, an editor, or as anything *except* a warrior. But when I picked up a shotgun, I opened that door, and found a part of myself I had almost forgotten existed. This time, however, I could simply enjoy the sensations and focus that she offered me without the violence that I had experienced when I was a child. Finding her again was an unexpected taste of pure joy.



¹Heart Sutra adapted from *The Compass of Zen*, by Zen Master Seung Sahn, © 1997, Shambhala Publications, Inc.

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Editorial Notes

We encourage all Goddess-loving women to write for *SageWoman*. Most of our articles come from our readers! *SageWoman* accepts non-fiction submissions from women only, while *PanGaia*, *The Blessed Bee*, and *newWitch* accept both fiction and non-fiction from all genders.

Please submit *SageWoman* articles directly to Anne Newkirk Niven; via email (preferred) to: editor2@sagewoman.com. By postal mail, send submissions to our main address: SageWoman, P. O. Box 641, Point Arena, CA 95468.

#73, "Visions of Goddess: Queen" Deadline May 1, '07

There comes a time in each woman's life when she asks, "Is this all I am? The roles I play, the goals I set, the relationships I have?" Although many are now exploring the role of "Queen" as relating to a specific time of life — that age roughly marked by menopause and bounded on either side by the "Mother" and the "Crone" respectively — the Queen is a part of all women's lives. Please explore the Queen you have known, loved, struggled with — and the Queen you may be seeking to become.

#74, "Visions of Goddess: Crone" Deadline Aug. 1, '07

Ann Kreilkamp says, "the essence of Crone is that she eats her own shadow." Or, to put it another way, the Wise Woman (aka the Crone) is the transpersonal side of the Goddess: the one who Knows. Share with us stories of priestess and crones you know, embody yourself, or hope to become. The Crone exists in all women, at all ages — discover Her in yourself!

Coming soon

#76: Surrender & Awakening

#77: The Wheel of the Year

#78: Giving and Receiving