



Living the Dream: Letter from the Editor

by Anne Newkirk Niven

“Only do what your heart tells you.”
— Princess Diana of Wales

We humans, like all social animals, respond to hierarchy instinctively. The battle for status (and correspondingly, survival) is hard-wired so deeply into our genes that no two previously unknown people can encounter one another socially without unconsciously attempting to rank themselves.

As a little girl, I longed to be a Princess. In my mind’s eye this fairy-tale heroine was always perfectly attired, held her head high, and walked like a lady. When the Princess grew up she would surely blossom into that paragon of virtue and status — a Queen. That’s what I really wanted to be.

But I wasn’t a very regal child. My parents gave me the nickname “Hippi the Hippo” because I was always banging into things. My mother’s attempts to teach me to sip (not slurp!), cross my legs demurely, and walk while balancing a book on my head were dismal failures, and my soda-bottle thick glasses and mousy brown hair completed the picture. I was not a little girl anyone would mistake for royalty.

But although I was ashamed of my body, my mother (a First Wave feminist, though she didn’t know it) told me that I was very smart, and that clever girls were important, too. I soon learned that intelligence would be my ticket to glory.

By the age of ten I had become a star pupil: I recited the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments by heart, sang solos in the church choir, and got straight A’s. These achievements pleased my parents, but my teachers weren’t as impressed. “Ann doesn’t work and play well with others,” tsk-tsked one report card, while others wondered why I “held myself aloof” and my sixth-grade teacher scolded me for my unrealistic dreams of becoming a lawyer.

My intense religiosity also made me a target of derision, and my parent’s insistence on keeping me away from my classmates didn’t help. I used to wonder exactly how pious I was as a child (I have forgotten many details of my early childhood) and was shocked to recently discover a letter from my mother to my first-grade teacher, complaining that I was being subjected to immoral behavior because there were girls who were “chasing” boys during recess. It’s really no wonder my peers thought I was stuck-up.

I grew to dread every recess and lunch hour. When I wandered home, scratched and bruised — I was taught to take Jesus’s proverb “turn the other cheek” literally — my mother consoled me as best she could. She told me that I was being discriminated against because I was so smart, and, more importantly, because I was a Christian. “You aren’t like those other girls, Ann. You can’t expect them to like you. You’re better than they are,” she crooned as she rocked me in her arms.

But then, she would continue with an admonition. “But remember, Ann, don’t be *proud* — God gave you those brains, and He is the one you should praise, not yourself. Remember, the way to joy is ‘Jesus first, Others second, and Yourself last.’” This formulation twisted my longing for approval into a four-dimensional emotional pretzel: “take pride in your achievements, but never in your self.” So that’s exactly what I did: I learned to value myself only for my accomplishments. As I grew up, outwardly I exuded confidence and self-directedness, but inside I was still that lonely little girl who wanted so badly to be liked, and who didn’t believe that she had what it took.

Time passed and life went on, but less changed about this aspect of my interior life than I like to admit. I still relish the *achieving* part of the equation, mind you. I can get up in front of a crowd, champion a cause, cast a circle, or make a speech. But I am awkward in small groups or social settings, and nothing will make me squirm faster than being praised *for myself*. In my heart of hearts, I still believe that I can only take pride in what I do, not in who I am.

I now realize that this is why I’m stuck on integrating the Queen. The Queen is confident in her own center; her position flows from *who she is*, not from what she does. But if the Queen deserves respect without doing anything to earn it, then what’s the point of striving so hard? After all, I’ll never live up to the ideal she projects, no matter what I do.

But I've recently discovered a connection that promises to shine a new light on my old nemesis. That connection is the one between a baby and a queen. Both share one defining characteristic: they naturally capture the center of attention. Like a queen, a baby doesn't need to *do* anything to be loved, she just *is* lovable. That soft skin, rosy cheeks and bright eyes cue us to take care of our offspring for the duration of nature's most lengthy childhood. Babies (at least in the best of circumstances) are allowed to simply *be*; to express their desires, feelings, and impulses with utter, delicious abandon. Babies aren't as helpless as they look, either; as anyone who has ever tried to console a screaming infant knows, an infant in full cry is a *force majeure*.

But as we mature, the sweet nimbus of babyhood wears off, and we find ourselves under increasing scrutiny. The closer we get to sexual maturity, the higher the standards — of appearance, compliance, and performance — become; by adolescence we have learned to see everyone (most especially ourselves) through a hyper-critical lens.

The urge to achieve has been ratcheted ever upwards by natural selection for a thousand generations. But perhaps this is where the Queen — not as the standard-bearer of hereditary hierarchy, but as the archetype of a woman “of a certain age” — can lend a hand. Whatever our personal quests may be — whether for status, power, money, or even love — the relentless pursuit can wear our souls down until *joie de vivre* becomes a distant memory. Then one day, perhaps after a major illness, relationship upheaval or at the beginning of the volcanic transformation we call “menopause” — we wake up and say, “What has all this been for?” At that crucial moment, the Queen steps forward.

“Stop right there,” She says imperiously. “Is *this* who you really are?” Her voice is full of gentle irony, and we may feel ourselves being judged yet again.

But She isn't staring at the spots on our hands, or that streak of grey at our temple; nor is She analyzing our bank balance or evaluating our love life. Instead, She is asking us to look deep into the well of our soul and see Who looks back at us.

The Queen reminds us of a time when we didn't censor our thoughts, crush our impulses, or swallow our feelings. She asks us to remember a time when we loved ourselves simply because we were alive.

She doesn't ask us to give up everything (or everyone) we have worked so hard for, or to become infantile narcissists; She is simply asking us to take a deep breath and say, “Why?”

I have started catching glimpses of the Queen in our new home. I can feel Her hand on my shoulder, encouraging me as I imagine creating personal altars all over the house, painting my bathroom shocking pink, or planting a herb garden by the kitchen window. When I find myself standing my ground — firmly and without anger, but rooted like an oak — when I would have previously yielded for expediency's sake, She is by my side, nodding approvingly. When I say, “maybe I'll try out this new recipe — because I think I'll like it,” she smiles. Recently, I bought a pair of silky black gloves with leopard-spot trim, just because they tickled my fancy. The Queen positively beamed.

May the Queen bless you as well,



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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 and newWitch accept both fiction and non-fiction from all genders. Our new magazine *Crone: Women Coming of Age* will debut in Autumn 2008 and will accept material from women 49+ years of age.

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 687, Forest Grove, OR 97116.

#75, “The Wheel of the Year” Extended Deadline May 1, '08

The cycle of the seasons is one of the most intimate connections we have with the cycle of the natural world. In this issue, please share your experience with the changing patterns of weather, light, climate, vegetation, human and animal life that make up the kaleidoscope that is the Wheel of the Year. We'd especially like to see submissions that cover the entire year, not just a single season.

#76, “Giving and Receiving” Deadline August 1, '08

We all receive gifts from the universe: talents, opportunities, love, and life itself. When we live in full awareness of that abundance, we are moved to share our gifts with others. Thus, the energies of giving and receiving are like the intake and outflow of our breath: both necessary to the life cycle. In this issue, please share how you are moved to give and, equally importantly, how you have learned to receive.

Coming soon

#79: Beginnings

#80: Longing and Desire