

SageWoman

Celebrating the Goddess in Every Woman

Renewal & Rebirth

Safe in Freya's Arms • The Healing Cloak of Womanhood
At Hestia's Hearth • On the Beach with Yemaya
Walking the Spiral Path • Kali Maa: Dancing with the Dark



the Healing Cloak of Womanhood

One. The three of us — my cousin Elise, aunt Judyth, and I — exited Highway 101 onto a dusty dirt road. We bumped over a stream that tumbled over rocks and moss, a jack rabbit calmly watching us drive by. A forgotten bus stood in the tall native grasses as we entered the ground of Black Oak Ranch, a banner plastered to its side festooned with a bumper sticker from the previous century: “Vote for Nobody ’00.” This was my introduction to the Northern California Women’s Herbal Symposium.

I tried to put on an upbeat appearance, but inside I was crumbling under the weight of a dying marriage, a broken family, and a near-complete loss of self. After registration, we walked up a small incline and passed the Crone’s Corner where silk sarongs painted with images of women waved in the breeze. The combined scent of herbs and essential oils from the bodywork area floated on the wind. Dappled light shone through a stand of California Black Oak trees, and light green moss hung from branches like streamers at a birthday party. We passed a mama sitting at the creek’s edge trickling water on her baby’s bare chest as he giggled with joy. My heart ached as I recalled a time when motherhood had felt so simple and pure.

We arrived at a circle of ten or so thirty-foot-tall teepees. They surrounded a grass and dirt circular area with a fire pit in its center. I threw my sleeping gear and suitcase in the tepee, pulled out my camp chair, and set it outside.

At the opening circle, our leaders Terri and Karen intoned sagely, “We are all teachers. Each one of us has something to offer,” but as I watched the chattering community of women laughing and sharing stories, their feral boldness, self-assurance, and solidarity made me feel alone and disconnected.

That night, baby Delilah, cries kept me awake, making me incredibly grouchy and unnerved. The next morning, I discovered that Elise had taken the babe out for a walk in the wee morning hours so the rest of us, including Mama Laura, could sleep. This act of kindness magically melted my crabbiness and helped me see and connect with the unconditional acceptance and support of the women all around me as they shared community-centric responsibilities from child-rearing to cooking to simply listening. Like a snake that goes blind to molt, I realized that I needed to trust the cocoon these women provided to begin the healing transformation of my spirit from angry, small and trapped to empowered, free, and bold.

Over the next four days, I drummed, howled at the moon, and began to rebuild my sense of independence and self-reliance. Some things were still uncomfortable: I wasn’t used to the style of healthy food on offer, nor accustomed to seeing so many bare-chested women walking about so comfortable in their bodies. But my hardened shell seemed to crack open; I was learning to trust in myself again. I devoted the year that followed to discovering how to be kinder to myself, face my choices, forgive myself, and forge new paths of happiness.

TWO. The following May, we three returned to Black Oak Ranch. Once we reached the parking lot, I felt eager to join the sisterhood and immediately stripped off my bra. Late that night, I snuggled into my flannel pajamas, slid into my Ugg boots, wrapped myself in a heavy velvet coat, and headed down to the meadow for stargazing. The bright moon made my flashlight redundant as I meandered the footpath through the woods, passing tents covered with Goddess scarves and prayer flags, and listened to the sounds of mamas reading to their children, and children and friends laughing and sharing stories.

“The astrological sign of Virgo is represented by the Virgin, as many know,” reported teacher Stargazer Li. “The word *virgin* originally meant a woman who was not owned by another.” I felt relieved and emboldened to hear this positive description of a self-contained woman.

The next morning, I taught a group of teen-aged girls. Using a chalkboard propped against an oak tree, I showed them how the four directions relate to the four elements, colors, animals, magical creatures, and the seasons of nature and described the Enchantress in the south, ruled by fire, orange, red, dragon and horse, salamanders, summer, and the embodiment of will, courage, independence, individuality, and creativity. As the still-healing teacher, watching their developing confidence added momentum to my own.

Then I was asked if I would participate in a ceremony for young women who had recently begun to their menses, welcoming them into the sacred circle of womanhood. Chills raced up my arms: of course, I would!

The ceremony began with a throbbing drumbeat, calling the women to the parade. Women waved flags of vibrant colors; three twenty-foot paper mache puppets followed: Maiden, Mother, then Crone. The musicians shook rattles, banged drums and sang; the crones shook



their bells and brandished the brooms they had made in a special circle earlier in the day.

We circled around the far end of camp, passing the line of maidens who had recently begun their moon. They looked nervous but excited: chins held high, eyes straight ahead. It broke my heart wide open to see them standing proud, waiting for their moment to enter the circle of womanhood.

The drummers began to pound a solitary rhythmic beat and the chant began. As we chanted, the maidens slowly processed toward us. We reached across the circle and formed an arch by holding hands high in the air. When the High Priestess Terri and the maidens reached the beginning of the tunnel, we began to sing. “We are here to tell you that you’re wonderful and beautiful. We are here to tell you that you are always whole. We are here to notice that your loving is a miracle, how deeply you’re connected to my soul.”*

The girls crouched as they went through the tunnel; after they passed, the rest of us dropped hands and walked under the tunnel in our own rite of passage, basking in the glory of all this love. At the end of the tunnel, the crones hugged or held us with their song and the love in their eyes.

The previous year, I had been reduced to shuddering tears by the outpouring of love in this ritual; this time, I managed to take in the love and not withdraw from it. The time had come to know my worth, my value.

The maidens formed a small circle in the middle of our ever-widening circle as the women holding the flags walked through the tunnel. The crones broke into four groups and walked to the four cardinal points, welcoming the energy, the power, and guides of four directions.

I picked up a tray laden with a white transparent silk, a red velvet cloak, small scissors, a dish of rose water, a rose quartz crystal, ten red ceramic crescent moon necklaces and a red crayon, then followed the High Crone Jill to the circle where the High Priestess stood with the maidens.

She addressed the first maiden, “Are you ready?”
“Yes,” the girl replied proudly.

She covered the maiden's head with the white silk, then declared in a booming voice, "You come to us a maiden," as she pulled off the white cloth. She took the red velvet cape and wrapped it around the maiden's shoulders before continuing gravely, "You will leave us, as a woman. But first you must give up your maidenhood, your childhood. Are you ready?"

"Yes," replied the first maiden, smiling radiantly.

The High Priestess then took the scissors from the tray and found a thin braid plaited near the maiden's ear. With a loud snip, she cut the braid and held it over her head for everyone to see.

Our entire crowd of women burst into jubilant, primal cheering, howling, wolf whistles, drumming, rattling and clapping. The air and ground trembled with the joyful noise. The priestess tucked the braid into the maiden's hand and whispered, "Give this to Mother Earth or keep it for yourself." She then dipped her hand into the rose water, intoned the sacred words, "I anoint you in the waters of

womanhood," dipped the crayon

into the water, and used it to draw a red circle on the maiden's forehead. "May you always feel the power, strength, wisdom and creativity that comes from your blood." She took the red moon necklace and held it up to the maiden's. "May you always remember Who is your council," she said, placing the necklace around the young woman's neck as the High Crone walked forward, removed the cloak, and gave the girl a kiss.

I stepped forward to face the girl, now initiated as a woman. I could see a new confidence in her eyes, in the way she held herself, a woman among a circle of sisters. I kissed her on the cheek and whispered "Congratulations. Welcome."

After all the maidens were welcomed, into the circle of womanhood, the High Priestess asked their mothers to join them. Out they rushed from all parts of the circle to hug and kiss their daughters, crying, laughing and just plain beaming with joy and pride. Tears came to my eyes; I pondered what could be accomplished by women who were so supported and loved through the process of claiming their independence.

The young women walked in a circle as we sang for them again. They then joined the outer circle, and then the crones came forward and formed the inner circle. I brought out a black chair; a Crone of Honor was chosen among them to sit in the chair and bestow a bit of wisdom through her tears of gratitude for the love and acknowledgment. At the end of the ceremony, we broke into a joyous dance, leaving the meadows and filtered toward the fire ring where twenty women drummers pounded out songs to which we danced and danced for hours, while the Full Moon crossed the starry sky.



Three. When I returned to the Northern California Women's Herbal Symposium for the third time, I was newly-single for the first time in eighteen years. As I went through that painful process of separation I had gathered feathers as a symbol of my flight to freedom and played a CD I had purchased at the second gathering to fuel my courage, to remind me that I belonged with the witches, dancing on moonbeams and making love to the darkness. Just weeks after I moved out on my own, I once again chose to join this tribe of supportive, accepting women.

This year, I discovered that the food was just as scrumptious and soul-satisfying as everyone had claimed it to be from the beginning. More than my palate had changed, however: I no longer needed a shell to hide behind. I wore an exquisite transparent dress at the maiden ceremony and a crown of my found feathers. Even as I received compliments, I felt no need to look in the mirror to confirm or deny what they saw. I felt beautiful, empowered, and luminescent. During a rowdy round of late night drumming and singing, I placed the feathers on the Venus Goddess altar in gratitude for the rediscovery of myself.

It is such a gift to be enveloped in the healing cloak of women that encourages you and your growth, at whatever pace. I am so appreciative of this circle of women in the woods of bay and oak. They helped me heal and find myself and in turn, to find more love in myself to share with my sisters, the Goddess, and the world. @

*Adapted by Carol Horwitz



JAMIE MARTINEZ WOOD is the humble and grateful author of eight books on earth spirituality and Mexican culture. You can find her writings at www.jamiewood.com or <http://backsideofthewind.wordpress.com> or

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