

WOMEN'S VU

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Women's rites and rituals

Margaret L. Meggs, M.A.



Late last winter, two friends and I described to each other how busy we had been, how the weather had kept us inside, how little time we had had for ourselves. As we talked, we realized we had temporarily given up our respective exercise habits. About the same moment, we exclaimed, "Maybe that's it!" and "I do get cranky when I don't run regularly," and "My exercises are the way I work out stress." The interruption of our routines had also interrupted the sense of focus, of balance for each of us.

The regular routines people go through represent many things. For example, exercise may represent a desire to be healthy or to relieve stress; a monthly savings deposit may represent plans for educational opportunities or retirement security; a yearly vacation may represent the need to relax, or to learn, or to maintain personal relationships. Experience has shown that these routines make us feel more secure and more in touch with who we are, with our past, our present and our future. Experience also tells us that when an important routine is interrupted, we feel incomplete and unfocused.

RITUALS - routinized symbolizations of important events or feelings - are especially significant in attention to the religious or spiritual part of our lives. Spiritual formation by any name - spirit, soul, or psychic power - is an integral part of our concept and identification of Self. Ideas are formed and symbolic acts designed to express our experience of the sacred.

For example, a friend is moving to another city to begin a new part of her life. Several other friends gather to send her on her way. A ritual that might be used to support her and give good thoughts she can remember is to sit closely around her in a circle and light a candle. As the candle is passed from one to another, each person names a special trait of the woman who is leaving. The candle is presented to her to remember the group's blessings in her new place. Thus, the group celebrates its friendship in a bonding circle, its hopes for a friend by spoken word and physical deed (passing the candle), and creates a tool for remembrance and connection by giving the candle to the one leaving.

One form in which religious/spiritual concepts take shape is in rituals and liturgies of community gathering and worship. The words and actions that are part of our spiritual rituals give us concrete ways of expressing abstract ideas or emo-

tions otherwise inexpressible. Using rituals to express the inexpressible frees our imaginations. We become involved in a sensory event, a "right brain experience;" we respond from the depths of our being instead of only logically and intellectually. As Witch and feminist theologian Starhawk says in her book, *The Spiral Dance*, ritual allows us to suspend disbelief.

For centuries women have tried to make spiritual connections with the theological/philosophical ideas put forth by men. Some of these theological and philosophical stances have actively negated women's specific experiences of the sacred. For instance, in some ideologies women, identified with body/matter/nature, were/are dirty and therefore unfit and unworthy to touch sacred elements, or, women were/are not "in the image" (male) of God or God's chosen representatives, so could not be congregational leaders or counted among the decision-makers.

In other interpretations, male-centered ideology has simply neglected women's experience in sacred ritual. An example is the traditional child dedication ceremony. The child's life is celebrated, the father is asked the name of the newborn one, but the mother's role of bearing and bringing forth the child is left out; in some traditions, she must be ritually cleansed or "re-churched" in order to participate in services again.

Women have had to fit into masculine ideology and symbol systems to find self-worth and to express the holy in their lives. As a result, many women struggle to reclaim and acknowledge the value of self by restructuring our religious and spiritual traditions.

For many women traditional rituals and liturgies not only do not speak to our experience as women, but no longer have relevance in an age threatened by environmental, economic and nuclear destruction. Therefore, action is taken to reclaim and create commemorative rituals that interpret experience of the sacred specifically from women's experience and perspectives.

Christian women are reclaiming female imagery for God in traditional ritual and liturgy, and uncovering the hidden traditions of the scriptural and historical women of that faith. Jewish women are writing midrashim about women in scripture and history, and reclaiming and revising rituals in the Jewish tradition. Women in

Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other traditions are looking at those patterns of worship to include women's specific experience. A renewal of interest in goddess-centered religions has emerged in recent years and shows signs of increasing.

Many women in both mainline and emergent religions are returning to a closeness and respect for the natural world for rituals. This wholistic view of spirituality honors ancient traditions of a transcendent Deity combined with the immanent qualities of the Deity present in the natural world that sustains human life.

Many possibilities exist for women looking for alternative ways to celebrate and commemorate spiritual experience both inside traditional, institutional religions, and in new forms of community. A resource list of reading materials and contacts accompanies this article.

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Selected Resources on Women's Rituals

Christ, Carol P., and Judith Plaskow, editors, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1979.

Mariechild, Diane, *Motherwit: A Feminist Guide to Psychic Development*, The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY 1981.

Ronan, Marian, et al., *Image Breaking, Image Building: A Handbook for Creative Worship with Women of Christian Tradition*, Pilgrim Press, New York, 1981.

Reuther, Rosemary Radford, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1985.

Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1979.

More information on women's rituals can be obtained from *Womanspirit*, c/o Margaret Meggs, P.O. Box 60131, Nashville, TN 37206.

In the news

Race For First Lady? Elizabeth Dole's decision to resign her Cabinet post so she could campaign for her husband, Sen. Robert Dole (R-KS), in his bid for the '88 GOP nomination has re-newed attention to the role of the First Lady. The first concentrated media focus on the '88 field was prompted by a first-ever "First Lady's Forum" in Iowa last July.

Now *U.S. News and World Report*, 9/28/87, has covered "the other hot race for the White House" with a wrap-up on the current candidates' wives and the interests they would advance if their spouses win. The article says the '88 spouses are "unusually distinguished" in their "political accomplishments" (four are attorneys), and provides at least a glimpse of the proposed focus for each. (Dole, Kitty Dukakis, and Tipper Gore captured most of the copy.) The position of First Lady, *USNWR* notes, has more "latent power" than the vice presidency.

—*Women's Times*, October 6, 1987



Gannett News Service reports "**Black women's political power to grow: leaders**". This headline was given to the announcement of the late October meeting in Atlanta of 2,000 women from the nation's four largest predominantly black sororities meeting to map out strategies for more political power among black women. Similar conferences will be held next year in Detroit, Richmond, Va., Columbia, S.C., and Jackson, Miss.

The sororities, which include Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Sigma Gamma Rho and Zeta Phi Beta, collectively represent nearly 400,000 women worldwide. Members say they will use those numbers to get more women elected into public office and to force upcoming presidential candidates to address issues critical to the survival of black women and black families. Among these issues are education, child care, economic development, employment, housing and health care.

"We have the people, the power and the expertise, and we will begin coming forth in great numbers," said Althea Simmons, Washington bureau director and chief lobbyist of the NAACP.

According to the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, there are about 1,564 black female elected officials in the United States. Black leaders predict that number will increase steadily in the next decade.

—*Tennessean*, 10/30/87

Surrogate Motherhood Moves Through State Legislatures. According to a recent UPI wire article, legislation concerning surrogate motherhood has been introduced in twelve states. But, only Louisiana has banned the practice. In New York State, a proposed law would put surrogate motherhood contracts under the supervision of family courts.

The Eastern Regional Conference of State Governments heard extensive arguments on all sides of the issue at its recent meeting in Wilmington, DE, and the level of disagreement promises any legislation a very rocky road. The proposed New York law, for example, is opposed by both the Catholic Church and the New York National Organization for Women.

Those in favor of state regulation argue that the technologies are here to stay, and that the law should not drive them underground. Arguments for banning the practice center around the danger of treating women as a uterus which can be rented for the gratification of the male parent.

Eleanor Smeal Report, September 28, 1987

"The Job Search: A Good Resume Won't Get You a Job, But it Just Might Get Your Foot in the Door" is an excellent article written by two professors from Middle Tennessee State University. They deal with the art of writing an interesting, informative and persuasive resume. To pick up your free copy of the article, come by the Women's Center.

Advantage Magazine, October 1987

"To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels - sex, race, and class, to name a few - and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."

Bell Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*

Congressional Fellowships On Women and Public Policy are offered for the period August 1, 1988 through April 30, 1989. A fellow works 30 hours per week in a Congressional office as a legislative aide on policy issues affecting women. Stipends for the fellowship are \$8,000/\$9,000. For further information contact Alison Dineen, Women's Research and Education Institute (WREI), 1700-18th St., N.W., Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20009. ■

It's your health

When you absolutely, positively have to be there, how do you take your cold to the office?

- **Drink lots of water, herbal teas and fruit juices.** When you're sick and feverish you're at added risk of getting dehydrated; fluids will help keep your nose and throat moist.

- **Pick your medicine carefully.** Antihistamines can make you drowsy while relieving the sneezing and runny nose. It's best to stay away from them if you have to drive or close a deal on a major account. Ask your doctor for a prescription which minimizes the adverse reactions. Don't use nasal sprays for more than two weeks as a reverse reaction may make you more congested after use is stopped.

- **Avoid heavy food and caffeine.** Foods high in fats take longer to break down and make your body work harder. Excess caffeine, a stimulant, may make it difficult to rest. Light foods - toast, lean meats and fruits high in vitamin C - are best.

- **Dress in layers.** Wear what you normally would for the office climate but bring an extra sweater or scarf.

- **Don't exert yourself.** Your body says "slow down" when it is fighting off infection. Let errands wait and take the car or bus instead of walking.

- **Don't wash your hair that morning.** Even though you think you've dried it thoroughly, hair remains damp for hours.

- **Rest when you come home.** And, remember there are days (when you have trouble breathing or have a high fever and chills) when you and your office mates are better off if you stay out of the office altogether.

—*Working Woman*, February 1987

Making Peace With Food by Susan Kano; drawings by Linda Bourke (Amity Publishing Co., PO Box 933, Allston, MA 02134; \$14.95 plus shipping; paperback) is the best book on freeing yourself from society's idea of what your image should be since Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. This is not your usual "how-to" book; instead, it reveals in-depth the many ways we are conditioned to be "thin", to wear uncomfortable clothing and dangerously high heels - in fact, to even kill ourselves trying to be our culture's ideal.

The book is leavened with delightful and sometimes poignant cartoons. This feminist book discloses the many hidden ways society manipulates us.

On The Issues, Vol. VIII, 1987 ■



In the library

One of the periodicals available for reading and research found in the Women's Center Library is *AWIS Newsletter*. This bi-monthly publication of the Association for Women in Science is a "must-read" for women in science. Each issue contains remarks from the president, activities of local chapters, information on available grants, fellowships and awards, and employment information.

Members of AWIS are physicists, anthropologists, medical researchers, teachers of science, science policy analysts, engineers, chemists, students or any individual who supports the full participation of women in science.

The Association for Women in Science, founded in 1971, works to improve the educational and employment opportunities for women in all science fields.

AWIS believes that a woman educated in a field of science has gained the right to pursue a career in that field and be judged on the merit of her work, not by her sex. The higher attrition rates, greater unemployment, and underemployment experienced by women as compared to men in science and engineering, constitute a serious waste of human resources. AWIS seeks to prevent this waste by:

Encouraging enrollment of girls and women at all levels of math and science education.

Encouraging the participation of women in the scientific work force at all levels.

Creating links among women scientists in different disciplines and at different career stages.

Promoting recognition of the past and current achievements of individual women scientists.

Increasing opportunities for women scientists to share their expertise with the scientific community through elections and appointments to peer review committees, national advisory committees, editorial boards, and leadership positions in professional societies.

Supporting laws and programs intended to maximize the number of women studying and working in the sciences.

To join National AWIS you may request a membership form from AWIS, 2401 Virginia Ave., N.W., Suite 303, Washington, DC 20037. ■

The YWCA needs YOU! Are you interested in volunteering 3-4 hours a month? There are a variety of opportunities for volunteers. If you like to meet new people, have fun and contribute to your community - call today at 269-9922.

First woman Cherokee chief

Suzanne Ewing A & S 5

Wilma Mankiller became the first woman to head a major American Indian tribe when she was elected chief of the 67,000-member Cherokee Nation this past June.

Mankiller, 41, whose unusual surname was passed down by a noted warrior ancestor, was previously the first female deputy chief of the tribe. She was appointed acting chief in 1985 when her predecessor left to head the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs.

To Mankiller's surprise, she found that her gender became an issue in the campaign, with some members of the tribe taking exception to the idea of being represented by a woman. Nevertheless, she won handily by a vote of 5,914 to 4,670 over her male opponent.

Women's current underparticipation in tribal politics is actually contrary to the Cherokee heritage. Traditionally, women determined the qualifications that Cherokee leaders must have, nominated candidates, and consulted with the men over the agenda for council meetings. While women themselves were not able to become chief, the title of "Beloved Woman" was reserved for female Cherokees who showed unusual courage, and their exploits were passed down in tribal lore along with those of male warriors. The Cherokee creation story itself emphasizes the importance of cooperation between the sexes; it tells of men and women who decide to live apart, but meet with unhappiness and natural disaster until they recognize the importance of mutual dependence and rejoin together.

According to Mankiller, women only lost status after contact with European settlers, and particularly after the infamous Trail of Tears in 1838, when U.S. government troops forcibly moved eastern Indians from their home territories to what is now Oklahoma.

Mankiller currently resides in Mankiller Flats, Oklahoma, on land allocated to her family after the Trail of Tears. She attended college in California in the 1960's, where she became active in protests against Indian discrimination. Mankiller worked as a grant writer for the Cherokee Nation before running for public office.

The new chief's first priority for her tribe is to improve living conditions and increase educational opportunities for Cherokee people; she sees such reform as a necessary prerequisite for economic growth. Mankiller would like to concentrate more on facilitating and funding community-initiated projects, rather than setting policy and imposing projects on communities from above. In this way, she believes that each community will find ways to develop that best suit their individual circumstances.

Mankiller believes that the communally-oriented values of Indians, and particularly In-

Women's center programs

Call 322-4843 for further information on the programs listed below.

"Women II Times Zones From Nashville". Bonnie Halprin, President of Peace Links, recently returned from Samarkand located in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbek. She will share with the lunch group on Tuesday, December 8, 12:15, how the Soviet women in their Women's Councils work for women's issues and peace. Her trip this October was the second half of an exchange begun in October 1985 when Soviet women were hosted in Nashville. This exchange was sponsored by the League of Women Voters, Peace Links and the Women's Center. Please bring your lunch to the Women's Center on the 8th; drinks will be provided.

"A Taxing Experience" on Wednesday, December 9 from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. may be just what you need to save dollars on April 15th. Sandra Lewis, C.P.A., who owns her own firm that specializes in helping businesses and individuals with tax and financial planning, will be teaching the course.

Some of the topics to be dealt with are automobile deduction, possible home office deduction, "kiddie tax", allowable interest expense, changes in real estate taxation, IRA's and rental property. Pre-registration including \$5 fee is required. Late registration, after December 1, is \$8. Phone the Women's Center today if you are interested.

Dutch Treat Lunch will meet December 10 with Aviva Gorstein, Director of Volunteer Services for the Vanderbilt Medical Center, as speaker. The group will gather at 12:30 p.m. in room 139 of the Divinity School. People may bring their lunch or purchase it in the Refectory. Coffee will be provided.

Book Group will have a planning session for 1988 on Monday, December 14 at 5:15 p.m. in the Women's center. New members are welcome. Light refreshments will be available.

Dissertation Writers Group is scheduled to meet Tuesday, December 15 from 4-6 p.m. at the Women's Center. Women of all schools and disciplines are invited to attend. New persons should contact the Women's Center. ■

dian women, need only to be properly tapped to provide a source of energy and community pride that will lead to greater economic success in the future. ■

Announcements et cetera

Planned Parenthood Association of Nashville offers a mini training, "Effective Decision Making: Help For Teenagers", December 1, 6:30 - 9:00 p.m., \$15 fee per person. Training will be held at the Planned Parenthood Center, 112 - 21st Avenue, South. Reservations need to be phoned to them at 327-1097.

For the past year **Genesis Learning Centers**, a non-profit, community program, has offered a program to help mildly handicapped youth make the transition from school to the adult world of work. A Job Partner works one-on-one with the youth, sharing their knowledge and experience. For an initial period the two work the job together.

This year Genesis is expanding its program to a Community Collaboration and is looking for women and men committed to working with handicapped persons. These Job Partners must be available to work four hours per day, five days a week and attend a twenty hour training session. The Job Partner will be paid for both the training and the time spent with the handicapped youth on the job.

This is an opportunity to help someone grow in discipline and responsibility. For more information you may contact Lauren Allen, Genesis Learning Centers, 832-4222.

Vanderbilt Women's Political Caucus has recently been organized by students with Elizabeth Perry, Associate Professor of History, as their faculty advisor. Their purpose is to increase women's political participation and to pursue issues which will improve the atmosphere on campus for women. Anyone with interest in the group should call Tammy Veazey at 385-3773.

The Women's Basketball Schedule gets in full swing this month. The home games are:

Dec. 1 David Lipscomb 7 pm
Dec. 11 West Virginia 7 pm
Dec. 19 Dayton 2 pm

In addition to seeing some fine basketball by a team pre-season ranked 10th in the nation, there are some other incentives for attendance. The numbered game programs, which sell for only 50 cents, give you a chance of winning a variety of free meals at some of your favorite restaurants, a free oil change for your car or the grand prize of a trip for two to New Orleans including airfare and accommodations. For the grand prize there are five program numbers selected at each game, and the persons holding them are invited on the court for a half court shot. An additional prize will be awarded at the Dayton game, Dec. 19 of a Ramcraft mantle clock valued at \$400. To have a chance for the clock, register in the lobby at that or any previous game this season and be present for the drawing.

Nashville has recently formed a chapter of **9 to 5, National Association of Working Women**, to join the over 20 chapters and 12,000 membership nationwide. 9 to 5 is a professional organization for clerical workers, primarily women, and informs the public and elected officials of women's concerns.

Some of the objectives of Association of Working Women are: (1) end discrimination based on race, sex, or age, (2) close the wage gap between men and women, (3) improve economic security for older women, on the job and in retirement, and (4) provide safe working conditions.

If you would like to become a member or a supporter of working women, you may call or write: Nashville 9 to 5, P.O. Box 23741, Nashville, TN 37202-3741, 889-7510 (evenings).

Group for Openness in Adoption is made up of birth mothers, adult adoptees, and adoptive parents who realize that all three groups need support and communication. Maryann Anderson, President, states that while they strongly discourage any attempt at contact when the adoptee is a minor, they believe that when all parties reach adulthood the decision of how much or how little one knows about birth relatives should be up to the individuals involved. Persons interested in knowing more about the group may write to Group for Openness in Adoption, P.O. Box 1185, Madison TN 37116 or call 227-2947 after 6 p.m.



How to prevent or explain away women's writing

"She didn't write it. (But if it's clear she did the deed . . .) She wrote it, but she shouldn't have. (It's political, sexual, masculine, feminist.) She wrote it, but look at what she wrote about. (The bedroom, the kitchen, her family. Other women!) She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it. (*Jane Eyre*. Poor dear, that's all she ever . . .) She wrote it, but she had help. (Robert Browning, Branwell Bronte. Her own 'masculine side.') She wrote it, but she's an anomaly. (Woolf. With Leonard's help . . .) She wrote it BUT . . ."

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