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Goddess Spirituality and Academic Knowledge-Making

Cover Page Footnote

Hildy Miller is Associate Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing at the University of Minnesota where she also teaches writing courses and works as a writing consultant.

Goddess Spirituality and Academic Knowledge-Making

Hildy Miller

*I was reading about rationalism
the kind of thing we do up north
in early winter, where the sun
leaves work for the day at 4:15*

*Maybe the world is intelligible
to the rational mind:
and maybe we light the lamps at dusk
for nothing. . . .*

Then I heard wings overhead. . . .

Jane Kenyon

In this poem Jane Kenyon captures a moment in which she suddenly apprehends mysterious creatures in flight—ironically—just after she has assured herself that reality must be both rationally constructed and rationally discernible. The imagery of dusk, when the sun no longer illuminates the world clearly, suggests those moments when one privately questions accepted explanations or considers the information and experiences that contradict most culturally sanctioned kinds of knowledge. Like Kenyon, many of us find ourselves questioning the limitations of rationalist views of knowledge sanctioned by the academy—a perspective most feminists would characterize as masculine. We sense that some sort of counterbalance is needed. Yet, Beth Daniell (1994) points out, “As scholars and teachers in America, we have been carefully trained not only to separate religion from civic life but also to dismiss the spiritual” (p. 239). Indeed, academic knowledge-making typically delimits its domain by assigning nonrational kinds of learning to nonacademic contexts.

Thus, spiritual belief is relegated to the province of churches, temples, and mosques. It is excluded because it is seen not simply as another way of knowing,

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but instead as a way of not-knowing, and so as altogether opposed to the kind of reason that we as academics should espouse. The mysteries of dusk must remain removed from the bright light of reason. To be sure, there are obvious dangers in attempting to admit spirituality to the academy if it serves to restrict or exclude any points of view. But by operating only within a rationalist tradition, we also limit what counts as knowledge, how we can go about making meaning, and who qualify as legitimate meaning-makers. As a result, many of us are left, like Kenyon, feeling intellectually fragmented when kept within such narrow straits.

Certainly, for intellectual growth to occur, we must be free to draw on a full range of knowledge, including that of spiritual belief, no longer completely divorced from the enterprise of academic research and teaching. In particular, I want to propose that spiritual belief can be an alternative way of making meaning that can enhance as well as challenge our traditional notion of academic knowledge making. And I want to illustrate this point by showing how I integrate spiritual ways of knowing into the reading and writing that students do in my literature and composition classes from the perspective of goddess-centered spirituality.

My own connection to this tradition grew out of my longstanding interest in feminism. Early in the 1970s, I participated in consciousness-raising groups in which circles of women gathered privately to try to interpret personal experience through the social lens of gender. As I would discover later, such circles worked well not only for social issues but for spiritual ones. Out of these shared experiences, women generated a coherent and increasingly complex feminist theory that transformed masculine approaches and assumptions in many sociopolitical areas. Always, I read and watched these transformations with interest. By the late 1970s, the women's movement had begun to change spirituality too when it began to reclaim lost feminine spiritual traditions. It was during this time that a group of women gathered in Boston for a first spirituality conference (Christ, 1987). My own exposure to this development began when I read a book by Merlin Stone (1976) called *When God Was a Woman*—a watershed study, the first to document ancient and widespread matrifocal spiritual traditions. It was, in fact, also the first time I had ever felt the negative impact of the way in which our culture typically anthropomorphizes a supreme being as masculine.

And I was thunderstruck. As I read about ancient goddesses, I found myself first struggling even to imagine a god-figure with feminine qualities, then after only partly envisioning this phenomenon, feeling overwhelmed with the significance of its implications. A woman knowledgeable, powerful, respected, and honored? For the first time spirituality reflected back a face I recognized. Immediately I sent copies of the book to my mother, sister, and women friends so that they could also share the wonder of this novel concept. Whatever interests in spirituality the book had awakened were set aside, however, until I returned in the 1980s to graduate school, where I studied rhetoric and composition. There in the academy I found feminist theory transforming standard approaches to teaching and research. In my own research on cognition and writing, I gradually rejected narrow rationalist paradigms of thought processes. I came to see these mechanistic models as byproducts of masculinist epistemological assumptions on which the dominant academic notion of cognition is based. Other scholars

too were arriving at similar conclusions and offering similar critiques (Grimshaw, 1986; Lloyd, 1984; Longino, 1989). In contrast to these paradigms, nonrationalist forms of cognition posited as embodied, contextualized, personal, and figurative—were ways of knowing largely absent from the academy.

My interest in investigating this kind of cognition led me again to small groups of women who were working experientially with goddess spirituality, much as they had with sociopolitical issues in the past. This time, however, circles of women were creating rituals to celebrate the seasons, to mark rites of personal passage such as marriage, divorce, and childbirth, or simply to develop an idea, such as sharing the names and memories of those women who most profoundly influenced them. Goddess ritual is grounded experientially by use of incense, candles, singing, drumming, and dancing, thereby enacting a body-based knowing. It is rich with image, metaphor, and symbol. Goddesses represent the creative potential of all women; seasons correspond to internal states such as renewal and rebirth or rest and hibernation; the traditional four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—stand for life itself. For an academic steeped in rationalism, ritual was to me a fascinating way of making meaning that was uniquely collaborative, experiential, and metaphorical. As a kind of spirituality, it held special meaning because it centered on concerns of women using positive images of women. It was empowering to have the creation of ritual in our own hands—ritual appealingly imaginative and spontaneous.

As always with women's studies, experience and theory were intertwined. Groups working to develop goddess-based ritual were complemented by research on women's spirituality across many religions, including prepatriarchal goddess traditions. The political had encompassed the spiritual, much to the dismay of a good many feminists. Dubious American feminists, always practical and results-oriented, were initially aghast at this development. Gloria Steinem's (1984) immediate response: "After all, how can mythological goddesses from a patriarchal past help us to analyze our current realities or reach an egalitarian future?" (p. ix). Yet by the mid 1980s, thanks in part to the popularity of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982), in which her heroine's personal development hinged on reconceiving the gender of god, feminine spirituality was starting to be regarded as yet another field to theorize and another aspect of women's personal experience to validate. Theory, then, had to catch up with women's experience, for as Carol P. Christ (1987) maintains, "The Goddess symbol has emerged spontaneously in the dreams, fantasies, and thoughts of many women in the past several years" (p. 120). My own research developed in this area, as did practical applications that I found in my composition and literature classrooms. It made me question what counts as knowledge, how we make knowledge, and whom we consider legitimate meaning-makers.

Goddess Spirituality as a Complement to Rationalism

What actually counts as knowledge-making in the academy? Peter Elbow (1986) responds: "We are in the habit—in academic culture anyway—of assuming that thinking is not thinking unless it is wholly logical or critically aware of itself at every stop" (p. 57). The way of knowing suggested by goddess spiritual-

ity exemplifies the sort of cognitive alternative that many feminist scholars have proposed in their critiques of Western rationalism, the system of knowledge-making that undergirds academic research. Rationalist cognition might be said to represent our cultural preference for impersonal disembodied reason (Johnson, 1987; Lloyd, 1984). Mark Johnson explains: "The view of the objective nature of meaning and rationality has been held for centuries by philosophers in the Western tradition, and, in the last several decades, it has come to define *the* dominant research program in a number of related disciplines" (p. xi). Introduced by Aristotle as the *modus operandi* for rhetoric and philosophy and later adapted by Descartes for scientific inquiry, this paradigm for knowledge-making has come to be regarded as synonymous with reason itself. Procedurally, it is based on the belief that we can, metaphorically speaking, hold up a mirror to nature and see reality in it from a God's eye or objective view. The results of such inquiry, a piece of objective truth, must then be articulated through literal, orderly, and methodical discourse. However, such an approach to knowledge-making and its verbal expression is not the only way to reason. As Johnson, G. Lloyd, and other feminist scholars have pointed out, there are other valid ways to make meaning. In particular, there are contextual, personal, and embodied approaches often associated with women, though, of course, not found exclusively only within this group. Rather than holding up a mirror to nature from a position of detached observation, researchers in these approaches look into a mirror to see interactively both themselves and the one reality out of many that they are attempting to describe.

As a vehicle for reconceiving knowledge-making, goddess spirituality goes about making meaning by using symbol rather than theory. It is not just an alternative logos, but instead conveys knowledge through metaphor, as do other ways of knowing associated with the holy and sacred (Dooley, 1995; Wilshire, 1989). Images of goddesses, the seasons, the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, the earth and moon all function as central metaphors of this symbol system. As external symbols, they mirror internal processes and are used both externally in ritual or internally as objects of contemplation. So, for example, a woman might contemplate the image of the goddess Minerva, who stands metaphorically for the feminine expression of scholarly intelligence. Functioning as a kind of role model, the goddess might emanate such qualities as thoughtfulness, dignity, and depth and might possess an authoritative voice that speaks in measured tones. Her image presumably triggers deep understandings of these qualities, which well up from the unconscious. That is, she is understood not in the detached, rationalist fashion of assimilating facts from outside oneself, but in the more personal embodied way in which these latent qualities seem to be called up from within.

By apprehending the unconscious facet of feminine experience that she represents, individuals can then begin to incorporate these qualities into their conscious ways of being in the world. Such images provide powerful feminine precursors for knowing and speaking not only individually but collectively throughout the culture: Minerva, the academic woman of intelligence; Aphrodite with her appreciation of art, beauty, and the senses; Artemis, adventurous and athletic; and the Triple Goddess—maiden, mother, and crone— representing the

life stages of women. Clifford Geertz (cited in Christ, 1982) has said myth influences us both individually and culturally at unconscious levels (p. 72). And we especially need figures suggesting female presence and power. Christ (1987) explains: "The simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power" (p. 121). Goddess figures can legitimize that power by honoring not only familiar expressions of the feminine such as mothering, but more uncommon ones such as scholarly thought. C. Jan Swearingen and D. Mowery (1994) observe, "[The Goddess] legitimates woman-as-subject in a phallocracy where the only legitimate subjects have been male" (p. 221).

People who are attracted to goddess spirituality often seem to be reacting to the lack of sacred feminine figures and the limits imposed by rationalist approaches to knowledge-making. They are searching for a way to reclaim the "feminine voice," that voice that honors contextual, personal, and embodied ways of knowing. For many women, the process through which they identify with goddesses is empowering. One woman remarked: "I find inspiration in the feminine spirituality movement because the Goddess is a deity with whom I can identify. Her body and mine are one; her power and mine are one" (Murdock, 1990, p. 26). Such identification is particularly useful for many women who feel disempowered and alienated by cultural images of god-figures as male. Many have said, no matter what they know or do, somehow they feel *otherized*, with their achievements invalidated because their self-image is so different from the male images of gods that they have previously internalized. They react much as I did first contemplating a feminine god, in feeling astonishment at the resulting sense of empowerment and validation. Goddess figures function, then, not as external entities, but through the identification process, as an inner resource, a symbolic extension of self. As a result, women come to see themselves and their abilities positively. As Ntozake Shange (1975/1991) puts it: "i found God in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely" (p. 252). For men, the discovery of goddess figures often activates a latent view of feminine self and knowledge, one they may yearn for, but for which they have seen few examples and seldom received any cultural reinforcement.

In embracing goddess spirituality, people embark on what M. Murdock (1990) has called an archetypal "descent to the Goddess" (p. 87). The notion of metaphorical *descent* is important here, since in many spiritual traditions, one transcends involvement in worldly or everyday concerns by *ascending*. However, in goddess spirituality, one is said to *descend* by grounding oneself in the body and emotions—thus learning to value those sites of knowledge-making by seeing divinity as located there. Such awareness begins to redress limited rationalist notions of what counts as knowledge. As Murdock (1990) says: "We are blind to the rigid, driven, dominating masculine that controls our psyche. Each time we deny our feelings, body, dreams, and intuition we serve this inner tyrant" (p. 158). Participating in ritual—that most ancient rhetorical expression of singing, dancing, chanting, and drumming—becomes a means of recovering this "body- knowledge." Recent cross-cultural studies have identified numerous links between women, speech, and knowledge. For instance, the Indian hymn text, *The Rigveda*, one of four books of Hindu philosophy dating from 1300 B.C.E., calls

the “creative, fecundating power of speech, ‘matarah,’ or ‘mothra’” (Debrida, 1982, p. 138). Greek mythology also recognizes the voice of the Muse, herself a goddess, along with a pantheon of vibrant feminine figures (p. 139). Other knowledgeable feminine precursors may be found in ancient seers, poets, and musicians. In Homeric hymns, a goddess was typically invited into the home to offer a blessing (Bolen, 1984, p. 32). Much as goddesses were once invoked into homes, part of the enterprise of the feminist classroom is to bring the voices of women into the class “in order to explore women’s relationship to language and to make students aware of the rich and varied tradition of female articulation” (Daumer & Runzo, 1987, p. 47). By their presence, these images seem to reinforce the point that women too are qualified to make meaning.

Though we are increasingly aware of the negative impact on our students of having so few secular female models for speaking and writing, we may not have recognized the lack of sacred models. If being presented with images of women as knowledge-makers does empower women, such an oversight is surely problematic. After all, as numerous studies have shown, the silent woman is still a pervasive cultural archetype (Lakoff, 1975; Olsen, 1978; Spender, 1980). Woman as statue, doll, or mannequin—from the image of the Angel of the House to that of Pat Nixon—personifies the suppression of feminine knowledge. Other figures of the vocal but evil woman—the Medusa, Medea, Gorgons, and Furies of Greek mythology—suggest our fear of speaking and knowing women (Debrida, 1982, p. 142). More recently, the image of Anita Hill still resonates powerfully in the public consciousness both for remaining silent and for eventually speaking out. Certainly, within our classrooms, the pattern of silent women has been replicated in study after study (Annas, 1987; Kramarae & Treichler, 1990). Women still speak far less than men do there, yet when they do speak, they are often unheard or misunderstood. So, too, a feminine voice in male students is presumably silenced, for in the typical academic classroom of both male and female teachers, it is only the voice that speaks from a rationalist knowledge-base that is likely to be heard.

In studies of feminist theory, cognition, and cognitive development, however, we still are ambivalent about the need for such alternatives to rationalism. On the one hand, in much of the theory on women and cognition, it is assumed that women, unlike men, automatically retain and are free to express feminine ways of knowing (Chodorow, 1978; Cixous & Clement, 1975/1986; Irigaray, 1985; Ruddick, 1980). Theorizing from a Freudian perspective, some scholars suggest that women never separate psychologically from the mother and all the qualities that that feminine figure represents. If women, then, always closely identify with the feminine, they are not repressed and can write and speak from the body without struggling to recover this ability. In contrast, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1987) in their landmark study, show many women virtually silenced by rationalist values. Women struggle to emerge from voicelessness by first grounding themselves in a subjective, body-based way of knowing. Much like a descent to the Goddess, they learn to attend to and value their own intuitions. They play a “believing game” rather than a “doubting game” by listening receptively to their own ideas rather than vigorously questioning them (Elbow, 1986). Only after this immersion in feminine self can they cultivate more

conventionally masculinist—disembodied and objective—ways of knowing. In most studies of rationalist knowledge-making in males, such alternative conceptions of knowledge never arise as an issue (Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970).

My own sense is that most women and men find themselves, to some extent, assimilating the values of our rationalist and masculinist academic culture. Certainly, in my own case, I needed the experience of goddess spirituality to break out of the rationalist paradigm I had internalized. D. Stein (1991) observes: "Within the safety and protected space of the cast circle, women [and men] create their idea of what the world would be like to live in under matriarchal/Goddess women's values" (p. 2). With its rich symbolism, it functions for me not just as a way to rethink our notion of academic knowledge-making, but rather to "revision" it (Christ, 1987, p. 106). Of course, in drawing parallels between the kinds of knowledge-making and knowledge-makers found in goddess spirituality and secular feminist critiques of rationalism, I do not want to imply that it is the only way to re-envision academic knowledge-making. Certainly, many other spiritual traditions also provide similar correctives. However, from a feminist standpoint, this woman-centered approach has been particularly useful in balancing the masculinist epistemology of the academy with a more feminist one emphasizing connections to self and others (George, 1994). In what follows I detail some of the ways that I apply these spiritual insights in my teaching.

Spiritual Knowledge-Making in the English Classroom

In women's literature courses, I have begun including selections that focus on spirituality as an issue in women's lives. I am persuaded that these stories are an important way of bringing women's voices on this topic into the classroom. As Christ and Charlene Spretnak (1982) say: "The expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known" (p. 327). So I have begun treating spirituality as a valid part of the experience of women, and I have found not only a wealth of selections to choose from, but student interest and receptivity. Typically, I pick several examples to comprise a unit on spirituality. Some, like Marion Zimmer Bradley's novels *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) and *The Firebrand* (1987) are fictionalized accounts of prepatriarchal goddess traditions. The former, a woman's perspective on the Arthurian legend, presents Celtic goddesses and beliefs; the latter, a woman's view of the fall of Troy covers Greek goddess traditions. These books provide examples of sacred role models—goddesses as women who speak and know. However, I do not just confine the readings to goddess spirituality. Instead, I include a variety of pieces focusing on general spiritual issues for women. Among the best known novels are *The Awakening* (1899/1981) by Kate Chopin, *Surfacing* (1972) by Margaret Atwood, *The Four-Gated City* (1969) by Doris Lessing, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/1978) by Zora Neale Hurston, and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker. Though not about goddess spirituality in particular, these novels all show women characters on quests that follow a pattern similar to a descent to the goddess. That is to say, characters recover a feminine voice by immersing themselves in the feminine and forming a new identity.

So, for example, I might focus on a passage in Walker's *The Color Purple* in which the central characters Celie and Shug discuss the nature of a supreme being:

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It. . . .

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh. (pp. 177–178)

The casual unassuming tone of their exchange belies the profundity of the spiritual questions at stake. Can we create our own god or goddess? Does it matter what gender we assign or whether we envision any gender at all? How do we come to “know” this entity—through our minds, our emotions, our bodies? For Celie and Shug, re-envisioning what the culture has taught them is pivotal to their personal development. Only after reconceiving god as less oppositional, that is, less the old white man, and more complementary, as a presence in nature and sexual pleasure, can they incorporate spirituality in their lives. The accessible god they create—immanent in the sky, the rich color of flowers, and the sensations of their own bodies—therefore becomes empowering to them.

In coming to understand the meaning of these issues for the characters in the story, I ask the class to play with these notions in their writing journals and class discussions.¹ Have they ever connected god with gender, and does doing so matter in their own lives? Student reflections on this idea typically express a range of views. Some of them declare that they have always thought of god as genderless, and so question the purpose of anthropomorphizing in this way. Yet, ironically, we inevitably notice that even as we try to entertain the idea of a genderless god, somehow in discussion we all keep referring to *It* as *Him*. A few students find the entire idea quite threatening: “As far as considering God as genderless I can't. This causes my questioning beliefs and spirituality all together [sic].” Others say that, like Shug and Celie, they have always envisioned god as

¹All information from students was gathered from questionnaires, journals, and papers coming out of two courses in women's literature and advanced expository writing. They have given me permission to cite their work anonymously.

a mature white man. Since this is the figure most familiar to them, they are comfortable with a male representation. In contrast, many students find the notion of a female representation empowering. As one woman said: "Women, I think, need to visualize the Higher Power in whatever form they can identify with. . . ." Recently during one of these discussions, an African American woman expressed her own frustration with what she saw as the complete Europeanization of her spiritual tradition, especially the dominant image of the old white man. Celie's experience clearly gave her a voice with which to speak. The variety of responses to these questions is precisely what I am seeking to elicit. Students do not need to agree with me—or Celie and Shug. Rather, I am asking them to engage themselves in spiritually significant issues.

In Alice Ostriker's poem "Everywoman Her Own Theology" (1986/1991), a woman is also shown creating her own multiple vision of a supreme being:

My proposals, or should I say requirements,
 Include at least one image of a god,
 Virile, beard optional, one of a goddess,
 Nubile, breast size approximating mine,
 One divine baby, one lion, lamb,
 All nude as figs, all dancing wildly,
 All shining. . . . (pp. 281–282)

She enacts her own ritual to invoke this pagan vision. Like Martin Luther nailing his theses to the cathedral door, she tacks her descriptions of a deity both kind and peaceful to a bulletin board in her kitchen. By such means, she hopes, somewhat audaciously, to invoke this being and any of its associates who care to join her. Beneath the humorous tone and irreverence of the ritual, some serious spiritual issues are raised. What images of divinity might women create? In a culture in which men still officiate at most spiritual rituals, should women develop their own rites? What would these alternatives look like?

In writing and class discussion we consider these issues by reading the poem through our own spiritual experiences. Both male and female students—but especially women—find the narrator's actions, humor, and sheer temerity inspiring. The outrageousness of this role model empowers them. Typical of student comments: "That's me! I liked this poem because there aren't many other choices for women. I worship in my own way." Often students, having become disillusioned with traditional sites of spiritual observance, are moved that her home was such a special holy place. Invariably, we always talk about a sense of deep contentment many of us feel in our homes or other places of private retreat. So many poems were located domestically, that we labeled these experiences *kitchen spirituality*. In a journal entry, one student described her special sanctuary:

I was able to relate to this poem a great deal. As a child, I designated a certain area of our yard as a place to worship God. The area overlooked a field and in the distance were mountains. I found this particular spot so beautiful that I was sure that I could better get in touch with God (who created beautiful things).and that God could

better hear my prayers. So, in that respect, I was sort of doing the same thing as Ostriker does in her kitchen.

Still other students are alienated by the way the character does not align herself with a more traditional religion. Without this mooring, one woman saw the character as lost and confused: "She doesn't know what is right and how to distinguish her beliefs." As with the Walker piece, my objective is not for the class to agree with Ostriker. Instead, I hope that by hearing this feminine voice and contemplating this spiritual issue in their own lives, students become more aware of their own voices on this subject.

In composition courses, as with literature courses, I encourage writing from both rationalist and spiritual bases of knowledge. Many of my assignments call for traditional academic writing grounded in rationalist assumptions. After all, students expect to hone their abilities here, and my intent is not to reject this knowledge base but simply to admit other kinds of knowledge. Through such writing, students appear to hold a mirror up to nature by analyzing ideas from a stance of apparent detachment with their personal voices masked. Assignments that demand a kind of pseudo-objectivity are common in college writing. From a standpoint of goddess spirituality, though, this traditional approach asks writers to work from a position of estrangement

because its essence is that we do not see ourselves as part of the world. We are strangers to nature, to other human beings, to parts of ourselves. We see the world as made up of separate, isolated, nonliving parts that have no inherent value . . . (Starhawk, 1988, p. 15)

So in contrast to this kind of writing, I also try to include some assignments which, like a descent to the goddess, ask students instead to ground their knowledge in self—in their bodies, emotions, and experiences. Both male and female students seem to enjoy these assignments, though they are sometimes unsure if what strikes them as such a creative approach is really *bona fide* academic writing—writing from a stance of immanence rather than one of detachment, "the awareness of the world and everything in it [is] alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance" (Starhawk, 1988, p. 9). Students must see "in the mirror" both themselves and the part of reality they are trying to describe.

Although not the kind of overt discussion of goddess spirituality included in literature classes, the kind of knowledge-making I integrate into composition classes is actually patterned after that of ancient feminine oracles who spoke ritually through their bodies at the times of "wise blood" in which visions fluctuated and intensified with their menstrual cycles (Grahm, 1993; Wilshire, 1989). Yet, it also has its rhetorical counterpart in the Greek magical tradition. Rhetors made meaning by speaking magically, from the body, when the gods and goddesses they invoked induced a state of "divinely inspired enchantment" (de Romilly, 1975; Miller, 1994). Elbow (1981) explains:

Words were once connected in a more primary way with experience or things. . . . Logic had to be gradually developed and honed out of language. It took a ceaseless overusing of words—words rubbing and rubbing against each other till they gradually get rounded and smoothed and unhooked from things and experience. (pp. 359–360)

In this tradition, immanence rather than detachment was the preferred rhetorical stance.

Over the years I have developed writing assignments that encourage this kind of meaning-making. For example, one that I have often used asks students to recall a meaningful story from their childhood:

Stories that we read or see help us shape our identities and make sense of our world. Think back to a favorite childhood story and consider it from your view as a child, your view as an adult, and from the standpoint of issues raised by some of the theorists we have read. What did the story mean to you as a child? How does it affect you today? Combine all the perspectives to explain your story. Consider the images and symbols, and what it enabled you to imagine as a child that you might not have otherwise.²

Through this process of recalling a story that has resonated in their lives, I am hoping that students can “re-hook” words and experience, as Elbow suggests. In order to recover the memory of its initial impact, I suggest they figure out a ritual that will enable them not just to recall the story but to relive it. They must re-experience not words so much as the images evoked. If the story has truly reverberated for them, they should discover some long forgotten origins of current attitudes and beliefs.

This assignment is one that students, both male and female, generally appreciate. As one said, “I think knowing yourself well helps you to get to the feelings you use in writing.” Another commented, “It enabled me to rethink the issues more thoroughly.” The experience of a student whom I will call Michael typifies the response. He chose to reflect on what the film *Easy Rider* meant to him in high school. The film, often considered the quintessential ’60s story, follows the odyssey of two rebellious characters on a road trip. In an effort to recapture the story’s impact, he actually scoured his parents’ attic for mementos from high school. As part of his ritual, he recreated the initial viewing by pinning up his old posters, wearing his old clothes, and watching the film again alone. It was during this viewing that one character’s line, “You do your own thing in your own time,” struck him, as he said, “like a thunderbolt.” For the teenager he had been, it had awakened wild hopes for a life free of duty and

²I further develop this basic assignment by using a composition text by Marjorie Ford and Jon Ford entitled *Dreams and Inward Journeys* (1994). This anthology is unique in that it encourages ways of knowing using image, metaphor, and symbol.

achievement—a life in which he no longer had “to carry around the weight of an All-American boy persona.” From his adult perspective, however, the film seemed emblematic of his family’s values at that time: “My parents grew up and participated in the struggle for freedom and I grew up in the fallout. Nobody was sure of anything anymore, especially what freedom was.” Though the film evoked a deep sense of longing for the sort of free life his parents encouraged, he reaffirmed his own inclinations by concluding, “Utopia is nice to believe in but reality is more important.” Much as ancient feminine oracles spoke from the multiple viewpoint of ever changing blood knowledge, he had to consider how his meaning-making had changed over time, how his identity had changed, and how meaning and identity, intertwined with the past, still formed powerful undercurrents in the present. The ritual he devised for himself appeared to help him access this fluid kind of inner knowledge.

For the most part, my efforts have been successful at integrating the ways of knowing that I associate with goddess spirituality. I have made headway in re-envisioning academic knowledge-making by including issues, models, and methods that can help both my students and me to recover the feminine voice. In these ways, spiritual belief can surely enhance rather than threaten our traditional ways of making meaning. As I continue teaching as much in the tradition of the Egyptian goddess Hathor’s temple as that of Plato’s academy, I expect to keep discovering ways to bring balance to academic learning. ☺

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