INSPIRITING THE ACADEMY:
WEAVING STORIES AND PRACTICES OF LIVING WOMEN’S SPIRITUALITY

by

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Abstract

This doctoral dissertation represents a qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences and practices of seven faculty and student alumni, the author included, within an accredited Women’s Spirituality Master of Arts (WSMA) degree program, located in the San Francisco Bay area. The WSMA is a course of graduate study, originating from the grassroots North American women’s movement, that prepares women for leadership in the pluralistic global culture of the 21st Century. The woman-centred curriculum re-claims women’s history, pre-history, spiritual experience, social contributions and creative expressions by integrating scholarly research, feminist perspectives and analysis, goddesses, activism, ritual, spiritual practices, and the arts. Through individual and collective processes of self-inquiry, healing and transformation, faculty and students contribute to new knowledge and social practices that can holistically address local and global challenges of gender, social and ecological justice. This dissertation artfully illuminates intersections of spirituality and feminism in education that remain little known or understood (Alexander, 2005; Birnbaum, 2005; Fernandes, 2003; Grahn, 1993; Spretnak, 1982). In this way, the study responds to calls made by North American scholars for inspiriting (Aoki, 2005) the academy by attending to the spiritual dimensions of human experience (Abalos, 1998; Huebner, 1999; Tarnas, 2006; Tisdell, 2003).

The author posits the WSMA as being an exemplar of innovations of spirituality in higher education. As such, the stories and practices woven into this dissertation document, communicate, and commune-with, WSMA faculty and students’ experiences of self-formation and authorization, search for meaning and understanding, gender, social, and ecological justice work, and the relational embodiment of spirit- and heart-centred learning and renewal. Throughout this text, the author navigates the complexity of her ongoing path as a scholar who claims Women’s Spirituality as a site of learning and research. Stories and practices are woven through the life-based, artistic material metaphor and gesture of “red thread” into themes of “Beginnings,” “Gifts,” and “New Philosophies.” The author engages narrative, auto/biographic, and arts-based research methodologies through life writing and oral history stories, her mixed-media textiles and performance art practice, and the research persona of the philosopher-midwife, drawn from her working background in lay midwifery of being with-woman. She weaves, performs, translates and transmits co-participants’ stories and practices of living Women’s Spirituality, and that of herself, as being the central bodies/body of this research text.
Segments of the literature review in “Chapter Three: Conceiving Birth with the Philosopher-Midwife,” and the life writing of “Chapter Seven: Gifts” under the subheading “Nané – Grandmas’ gifts,” are drawn from the essay, “A Poetics of the Placenta: Placental Cosmology as Gift and Sacred Economy.” This essay appears in an anthology that is in-press, edited by Mary Saracino, Mary Beth Moser & Lucia C. Birnbaum, entitled “She is Everywhere! An Anthology of Writing in Womanist/Feminist Spirituality, Vol. 3,” published by iUniverse.

Ethics approval for this doctoral study was obtained from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board as a minimal risk study, under UBC BREB number: H08-01800.
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I am not alone in this work, I cannot do this work alone. I am not alone in this work, I cannot do this work alone. I am not alone in this work, I cannot do this work alone.
For Grandma,

Diana (Lane) Jordan
January 10, 1921 – July 28, 2010

Om gate,
gate,
paragate,
parasamgate,
bodhi swaha.

Your love prevails.
Prelude: Altar-ed Spaces

Today the Goddess is no longer worshipped. Her shrines are lost in the dust of ages while her statues line the walls of museums….Forced on by the suffering and unhappiness incurred through disregard of the Eros values, men and women are turning once again towards the Moon Mother, not, however, through a religious cult, but through change in psychological attitude. (Harding, 1935, p. 324)

A process, study is also a place.
(Pinar, 2006, p. 111)

As I begin to write, I light the centre candle. She is White Buddha Dakini of the Dakini mandala of candles sitting atop a low filing cabinet next to my computer desk. Set-up about my writing room are a variety of altars that bespeak a spectacle of goddesses and imagery of “sacred female power” (Amazzone, 2010). I daily look upon framed icons and pictures, statuettes and home-made dolls, treasures of local nature as rocks and shells, birch tree bark from a family home in Ontario, bark from the tree growing above the graves of my Irish grandparents in a Toronto cemetery, “Motherpeace” tarot cards (Noble, 1994/1983), spools of red thread in cotton and silk, yarn finger weavings made by my daughters, cedar smudge sticks I make from cedar fronds collected on our family walks in British Columbia, pictures of my daughters at various ages, and a few small bottles of water from different places meaningful to me, including San Francisco.

Today, I decide to anoint myself with the San Francisco water. It is the locale of this dissertation inquiry into a Master of Arts degree program in Women’s Spirituality. While some scholars in the Women’s Spirituality field go far and wide from North America to undertake their research, including India, Italy, and Mexico, I make a practice of returning to San Francisco, California. It is enough for me to get there. I follow the great fault-line south from here to there. My journeys were first epitomized in continual border crossings, short-haul plane flights, and 24-hour long train trips and bus rides to do my Master of Arts degree in Women’s Spirituality at New College of California, in the Mission district of San Francisco. Only recently did it occur to me that this ongoing journey was a pilgrimage practice. I had this epiphany while sitting in a research presentation given by fellow Women’s Spirituality scholar, Mary Beth Moser, on her topic of the
“Black Madonna” in Italy (2009). As I watched Mary Beth weave images of this ancient Mother devotion with her stories of attending ritual processions of the beloved Black Madonna through the streets of an Italian village, I thought of how I would love to research in such places. I felt how romantic and soulful this work is in its ancestral reclamation, woven within study of a living goddess tradition. The gift of this yearning sensation was realizing in a flash that a love of study does draw me to specific places—I go over and over to California itself.

This dissertation marks places and spaces of dialogue and unfolding transformation within my own ongoing journeys. If my research inquiry is a practice of pilgrimage, my offering is this text. I work to understand and extend the visions and voices of such inspired, woman-centred education. I make pilgrimages in order to return home again, revivied by understandings gained through the journeys. I visit and re-visit California, talking, learning and sharing in the ongoing work of colleagues, mentors and friends, nourished by attending Women’s Spirituality rituals and events, hearing of the research, art, activism and artivism of others. I go to California for this specificity of conversations and women’s sacred events and happenings. If pilgrimage means “to partake of a shrine” (Amazzone, 2010, p. 43), the “shrine” I visit is a multifaceted rainbow altar place of various women’s lives, within a beautiful glorious procession of cross-cultural goddesses, Earth-loving wisdom, East-West dialogues, African, Latina, Mestiza and Indigenous spiritual re-claimings and recoveries, enacted within women’s leadership, scholarship, healing and social activism. In dialogue and witness my own life is enriched, blessed, made sense of.

Part of the adventure of my MA studies in San Francisco was not only the Women’s Spirituality curriculum, but the fact that I travelled across the border and 800-odd kilometers to go to school there each time, leaving my husband and three-year-old daughter behind. Leaving my family was always a challenge. Nay saying voices circled in my head, what kind of mother was I? But I knew my daughter was fine with her caring, competent dad for the few days I was gone each time. Yet the fact of these short separations remained; I was caught between homesickness for my young family and euphoria at finding myself on monthly trips to a city and graduate studies I adored. The self-lucidity and space that I gained were repeated each time, a “retreat,” as in a ritual seclusion of taking time for inner/outer work. I was momentarily away from the pressures of day-to-day family life, developing myself as a scholar by continuing journeys I had begun long before.

I fell into the long hours of riding trains and buses, switching month to month between the
two. The bus was cheaper, but the train more comfortable over long hours. I read, wrote in my journal, or daydreamed, watching views of the Cascade Mountains come and go, with snow adorned trees in high passes. I talked with others I met along the way, including the young teacher bringing her students from Seattle to Portland by train, fascinated by my commitment to undertake such travels for an MA, longing to do more studies of her own. I talked with the Amtrak train conductor just before getting off on my final stop in Emeryville, who said we should get the Women’s Spirituality program onto the Oprah show. Throughout all these trips I experienced American life on the road, especially the race and class system at work in a hierarchy of buses to trains to planes, where the poorest folk, often people of colour, take the bus. Many times I sat late at night in some bus station, pondering this American-style system through the veil of my desire to get home again. I knew such inequalities are countered by the work for social change at least some Americans, including the women I was studying with, are living and educating towards.

During overnights in San Francisco, I loved to go out and walk, exploring neighbourhoods. I made my way to City Lights Bookstore to browse the Beat poets and others, buying almost everyone in my family a copy of Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1957) for Christmas of the year 2000. I looked up women poets I hadn’t read, including Diane di Prima (1998) whom poet and Women’s Spirituality faculty member Judy Grahn had suggested I read. And one evening, I went with classmates to my first Drag King show. My friends helped me dress up in feminine style to attend the show, a mini-skirt with tall, black-heeled boots—not my usual outfit. I swooned in awe of the Kings’ abilities to cross genders as they sang-their-hearts-out, embodying male rock and pop stars, performing masculine traits in such a piercingly real way. With an undercurrent of social commentary, the Drag Kings’ performances were funny and serious all at once, busting gender taboos as the sacred and profane collided in true ritual theatre.

I also began my ritual of walking the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. A friend doing her WSMA thesis on the topic of labyrinths alerted me to this site while in conversation about my given middle name, “Ariadne.” My mother gave me this name, seeking to connect me early on in life with the magic of Ariadne’s thread. The mythical Greek Ariadne gives a ball of thread to the hero Theseus, her lover, so that he might emerge alive from the maze after meeting the man-eating Minotaur trapped inside. As a child I explored this name in library books, disheartened that Ariadne was later abandoned by Theseus, and left against her will to marry the
God Dionysus. On further readings as I grew into adulthood, I found a story within the story I could live with. Ariadne had a greater power, a mystery hidden within patriarchal overlays of more ancient goddess myths (Spretnak, 1978). She represented one of the last Cretan priestesses or Queens of matrilineal social traditions, a sacred Mother-keeper of the land and labyrinth (Mountainwater, 1991), where the labyrinth is understood as sacred architecture of the Female-Feminine Divine.


The labyrinth is a sacred geometric footpath of birth-life-death inquiry, rooted in the mystery of our human womb-dance of emergence. Not a maze, it is one continuous path that reaches a centre, from which you spiral outwards again. Walking the length of its sacred geometry is a practice newly revived in North America as a contemplative tool to move with your questions, your pain, your love, or to let go and surrender to insight and intuition (Artress, 1996). Thus
following the footsteps of my namesake, I visited Grace Cathedral at the end of a long climb up to the top of one of San Francisco’s famously steep hills. There I found that the figure of Mary, who keeps this 13-circuit form of the labyrinth, and Ariadne, have curious spiritual ties to each other across time and space. I experienced an embracing swoon of love as my heart unexpectedly opened to the figure of Mary. I burst into tears of surrender and relief, hearing a comforting wise voice in my head, feeling held by Mother love and compassion in her form. I was not raised within the Christian tradition, and I carry a feminist view of Mary as being the subordinated mother within a patriarchal religious tradition. Yet my experience on this labyrinth required that I view her with new mystical vision, setting off my ongoing inquires and paradoxical devotions into the ancient Mother divinity of Mary in her many forms. This is a path of feminist spiritual inquiry with Mary in which I find I am joined by others (Schoemperlen, 2001; Spretnak, 2004).

Palm trees line many San Francisco streets. Their tall forms tower over Delores Park in the Mission district where I often sat myself down on the grass as others do. Looking across hills that reach beyond city limits, the visible ecology of the outlying areas of San Francisco includes soft, sandy coloured slopes. Like soft hair, this dry grass marks the perimeters of the city as you travel over busy freeways coming into the Bay area. In the summer of 2001, I often passed over the Golden Gate Bridge, catching my breath in excitement to arrive at Women’s Spirituality classes. That summer of my studies my family and I were able to live locally in California in Sonoma County, via New College connections. We lived on a dry, grassy, scrubby-oak covered hillside, in a small run-down cabin. The cabin sat above a sweet, clear-water creek, edged with bullfrog tadpoles. With our young daughter, we tracked their leg development, and swam naked in the creek all summer. It was a kind of extended repose and refreshment upon the land and in nature that I don’t think we’ve had before or since. I felt more ‘myself’ than I had in years. How to go back, how to re-turn over and over to such self-sensing?

Sitting now at this altar of my computer, I pick up the bottle of San Francisco water. I realize I haven’t opened the bottle since I collected it. Written on a piece of masking tape it says, in my handwriting, S.F. water. I was collecting water from different places, spurred on by a Women’s Spirituality class in “Ritual Theatre” during my first semester of study there. While creating altars together, our instructor suggested keeping collections of sacred waters on one’s home altar, a way to honour the living energies of water and places we have visited. I had collected this humble bottle of
tap water from the youth hostel I was staying in on that particular San Francisco trip.

Here again in Vancouver, BC, it feels hard to untwist the bottle of San Francisco water. I take a dropper-full and dribble it from the centre of my forehead, across the top of my head, and down the back of my neck, tracing this pathway with my fingers. Through this self-blessing, I feel soft, receptive, remembering my connection to San Francisco. I wonder at the years that have passed since I first labeled this bottle. Chief Luisah Teish taught us this gesture and its fuller intention in a Women’s Spirituality class, based on the teachings of her ancestral African Yoruba spiritual tradition. The water clears and connects forces of knowing within the self in order to welcome spirit. With this San Francisco water blessing, I see the tensions of my room in a new light. This space contains my day-to-day work, while expanding it outwards through research and writing. This room is also the bedroom I share with my husband, contiguously housing the energy of my entire library of books. The altars in this space make use of various surfaces and corners of bookshelves. The two most prominent altars sit atop research files and a bookcase that holds WSMA theses and dissertations, audio and video tapes of my participants’ interviews, cameras and video equipment, my photographic negatives and digital CDs. What a busy creative place—where is the work today?

The altars themselves are now self-arisen, they come from within my working processes. I don’t impose or compose them in the ways I previously did. I was tentative with my early altar makings. I didn’t seem to know how much space I could occupy with them. Not even from an external perception of such, but more from within myself. I would sit in front of my altars in meditation, and hear some inner voice questioning this time and practice, why are you sitting here? Isn’t there something you have to do? I kept playing at re-arranging them, adding meaningful images and bits of life I collected while studying and living. Not raised within a specific religious tradition except for what vestiges and understandings of Christianity my family carried, I found my own way into spirit. I felt the stirrings and callings of spirit come to me through nature and art, and later through birthing work and the discovery of goddesses. I realized about two years ago, after consciously stopping myself from having to make altars at all, that they were spontaneously reproducing themselves.

There is a distinct East–West parable, nurtured within Women’s Spirituality studies, visible on my altars as images of Indian subcontinent goddesses such as Durga, Kali, and the Tibetan
Vajrayogini, mingle with their European counterparts of Mary, and Ariadne in her full Cretan
snake priestess-goddess regalia. My love for Mary was further deepened through observing the many
icons and candles of the Virgin of Guadalupe that grace store altars, windows and murals of the
Mission district neighbourhood in which New College was located. Guadalupe of Mexico-America
lives the colonial layering of female power within a Mestizo/a nation. The pre-Columbian, Aztec
figure of Tonanzin once empowered these local lands. Tonanzin is an Earth Mother, a Mother of
corn, a Mother of the people and the sustenance of life.

The Hindu image of Kali on my altar is blue-bodied and fierce, her ten arms extended, her
bright red tongue protruding, her eyes have the look of focused trance. She wears a necklace of
skulls having vanquished multiple demons. She stands upon the receptive, dreaming body of Lord
Shiva. This image also came to me from the Mission district of San Francisco. I began my studies of
goddesses of India and Tibet during my travels to India, alone, when I was 20-years-old. My studies
and devotion to Kali and Durga have deepened in these last years, held by the work of their cross-
cultural priestesses that I am still learning from (Alexandre, 2007, 2008; Amazzone, 2010).
Curiously, this study is connected to my work in midwifery. Apprenticing as a lay midwife in the
Western world, where midwives live broken but regenerated forms of their more ancient arts
(Cahill, 2001; Gaskin, 1990/1977; Shroff, 1997), I found myself looking for lost names of the
powerful creative energies of birthing women. As a scholar of birthing arts, I follow living linguistic
traces of sacred female power in the Sanskrit term ‘Shakti,’ a generative female life-force-energy held
by goddesses, and potent within women themselves for birth-giving and creative activities beyond
such (Chawla, 2006).

Near to Kali sits a small ceramic votive candle of Mary as the Miraculous Mother. Wearing
a long blue robe and crowned like a Queen, she extends her hands on either side as healing energy
visibly streams from her open palms to the world. Bookmark size images of Black Madonnas from
Chartres Cathedral in France, the Notre-Dame du Pilier and the Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre nestle
within a framed image of the goddess Durga. These were given to me by a friend upon her return
from these Black Madonna pilgrimage sites in France. Durga is smiling gently with these other
Mothers. One of Durga’s right hands (she has many, as does Kali) is raised to the onlooker in
benediction, exposing the OM sign inscribed on her palm in red. She is dressed in a full red sari,
riding her regal roaring tiger. The rest of her eight arms and hands brandish sacred artifacts of
conch, sword, lamp, rose, trident and more.

Sitting beside this image of Durga is a large cloth doll I made in the summer of 2010 during an artist residency on Toronto Island. This doll is similarly dressed in a red sari. I sewed her with red thread, making her long hair from tendrils of handspun wool I spin at home from raw wool. The same homespun forms the umbilical cords of the placental-like shapes I created and installed as performative, sacred objects for earthly communion in various outdoor locations on the Toronto Islands during my residency. This doll-sculpture-Devī (goddess) carries one of these placentas on her back. Her umbilicus is still attached to her placenta, as if she were just born and is still rooted to her Mother, the Earth. It is her cord to Pachamama, intact for full inspiration, inspiriting and breath. Pachamama is the South and Central American Earth Mother, a Mother-world being of life-giving proportions.

On the other side from my large Devī doll sits a small slightly fuzzy picture of Shanti and I, my youngest daughter, when she was a baby. Having just sat up from breastfeeding, she has a happy, dreamy glow on her face, laughing at the camera that is her dad. I look at her from behind, a contented smile on my own face. Behind this photo, a large colourful poster collage I made with healer and Women’s Spirituality scholar Vicki Noble for this dissertation backs the entire altar. It is assembled from pictures reclaimed and cut out of women’s magazines, forming the five quadrants of the Tibetan Dakini mandala, a central adapted spiritual practice of Vicki’s recent teaching. The Dakinis are fast moving, female spiritual beings, *sky-walkers*, who aid and assist the aspirant-yogini on her path of awakening to her true nature. The mandala marks a living expression of my own life path at this time, playfully suggesting the potentiality and possibility of such, held and expressed by Dakini energies. It’s like a trace making for my current life intentions or possibilities. The quadrant of Dakini colours in this poster mirrors the mandala of Dakini candles that sit below, including blue, yellow, red and green and the central white candle I lit upon writing this text.

Sitting to meditate or commune with these presences and deities is no longer an awkward relation but mostly like eating a slow-good-meal that nourishes from its carefully prepared ingredients, cultivated over time. I light another candle in front of the statuette of Ariadne near the framed picture of Kali. This picture is adorned with necklaces of clear quartz, moonstone, and one from my beloved paternal grandma, who died just last year. Kali’s mouth is open with her tongue sticking out; she stands before a small woven box of necklaces that I made for Grandma as a child.
This same woven box sat for more than 20 years unmoving in a central location of Grandma’s dresser in her Toronto home. Next to this box of beaded treasures is an image of me under a giant, moss-covered Douglas Fir tree in the ancient rainforest of the Carmanah Valley on Vancouver Island. My family and I camped there in the summer of 2009, wandering-wondering in awe of these giant grandmother trees, savouring the equally giant berries of this forest. Standing before all these images and objects, I put my hands together in a simple gesture of greeting, closing my eyes. I feel a trickle of love open from within my heart, going out to meet the force of these Mothers as trees, icons, art, red thread, mamas, grandmas and daughters, simultaneously feeling love coming from their multiple directions. There is no image but the image of love, *there is no image but the image of love.*

I wonder at these overflowing spaces, being and singing out from within. The altars are a veritable artistic storyboard of values, curiosities, relationships, beliefs, inquiries, travels, and something more, something emerging I can’t put my finger on but have to trust in its becoming and coming into form, how this unfolds in my life, how I attend to and shape its unfolding. I am not alone in this work, *I cannot do this work alone.*
Chapter One: Introduction

Visions

As I was falling asleep one night in the early days of my PhD, the image of a computer screen appeared before me. I had been fretting earlier that day over an online search engine at the library while beginning to explore literature related to the fields of Women’s Spirituality and Education. Sitting in the University of British Columbia library faced with elongated empty text boxes, I typed the three key words I thought of as being most related to this study—*spirituality, feminism, transformative education*. I worked as if these terms could hold the length and breadth of *my yearning to know*, and *my wanting to make known*. The anxiety mounted as I typed and came up short—*no matches for this request*.

Falling asleep, I saw again the imprint of this screen, its empty text boxes lit up and ready to receive the yearning of my words. It was an imprint of something stared at, too long and too hard. Yet now these empty boxes called me to attention, *look, we are still here waiting for you. We are still here waiting for you*. As I watched, a liquid began to slowly drip and ooze from the edges of the computer template. No longer performing the work of holding my words, the boxes began to spell and spill another message. Colostrum-like wetness slowly poured forth. Milky liquids dripped down, a display of seemingly distinct female body fluids. These liquids began to dissolve the boxes and screen that held them. They dissolved and softened my dismay at not finding a match for my words. As the screen produced this liquid, milking text, I held onto and was grateful for this communication from some other realm.

That mind of fearfulness
Should be put in the cradle of loving kindness
And suckled with the profound and brilliant milk
Of eternal doubtlessness.

*(Trungpa, The Letter of the Black Ashé)*

I needed such an image in those early days of my study, with its gentle, healing reminder. I had learned through Women’s Spirituality education to allow dreams and visions to inform and absorb themselves into my scholarly projects. Moving forward with my doctoral research at the University of British Columbia, I found myself relying on such senses as affirmations for further directions. The melting, milk-screen accompanied me as a living, elemental architecture at work beneath an overlay of computer screens and proscriptive texts. These liquids spoke to me from some primal mother-matrix saying, “It’s okay to continue Nané,
As I entered further academic studies, the term “spirituality” seemed shrouded or untouched in much academic work, especially in regards to “Women’s Spirituality,” beyond the borders of its California field of study. I found myself living silences, self-imposed and otherwise, in being able to fully articulate the depth and need for critical and transformative higher education that is spiritually-based, within my own and other women’s lives. Feeling a sense of encroaching erasure of what I had just lived as inspired education, I wanted to validate and further understand my experiences of such. Rather than work from a divided self that leaves “spirituality” at the door of my research, I chose to create a dissertation inquiry rooted from experiences of the Women’s Spirituality degree program itself. Could I distill further wisdom from within myself, and outwards towards others, in a process of inquiry? The WSMA is a political, social and spiritual justice project, with unique ramifications within various women’s lives. It is feminist praxis in the academy, working towards the holistic, spirited liberation of women for the good of all society.

The Women’s Spirituality Master of Arts degree once identified itself as preparing women for leadership in the pluralistic global culture of the 21st century (New College program guide, 2008). Such a statement answers a scholarly call to attend to cultural diversity and associated religious and spiritual dimensions of human experience within North American higher education (Abalos, 1998; hooks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). The WSMA incorporates women’s spiritual knowledge, traditions, practices, innovations and activism in multi-cultural, multi-sexual and cross-cultural frameworks, including the exploration of goddess traditions and practices. The program engages the grassroots social movement of Women’s Spirituality into an accredited academic, degree-granting program, through an institution of higher learning. As such, it is situated within a social movement dynamics of becoming not necessarily ‘institutionalized,’ but institutionally located.

Each student in the WSMA shapes and expresses her research through a culminating thesis project. This can take on a variety of forms, not limited to but including: scholarly texts, scholarly explorations in conjunction with creative non-fiction, arts-based, visual, and performance works, and poetic expressions. This thesis contribution is invariably found through intimate, close engagement with the materials of one’s own life in intersection with Women’s Spirituality faculty, mentors, and the deep nature of the curriculum itself. From the ‘callings’ of
women’s life paths, coming to know how inner and outer worlds connect, as in the idea of the “personal is political,” women take the opportunity to articulate what is truly important to them. What do you love and cherish? Re-finding, renewing, restoring, re-storying, re-mothering the ‘self’ in-relation-to-world, rooted from a woman-centred, spirituality-based approach to education, women’s contributions to social and cultural transformation can be greatly expanded. Those of us who graduate from this innovative curriculum live the challenges and excitement of working within such socially and culturally transformative possibilities. Thus, my early goals for undertaking this dissertation research into the WSMA were to:

1) Inquire into the lived dynamics and effects of the grassroots, social movement of Women’s Spirituality entering the academy to become a degree-granting program.
2) Elucidate and extend knowledge on questions of spirituality and education by inquiring into the Women’s Spirituality degree program as a unique exemplar of spiritually-based education.

Called by my desire to research through attention to conversation, stories, oral story-sharing, artistic practice and life writing, my project became particularly focused on the lived experiences and practices of a small group of seven women, including myself, who are faculty or student alumni of the WSMA. Working with women’s stories, I felt that the contribution of this dissertation could:

1) Bridge Women’s Spirituality curriculum, scholarship and knowledge for myself and other graduates of the WSMA towards other fields of study.
2) Make more ‘space’ to be able to do inspirdted, body-mind-heart-spirit integrated, multi-modal interdisciplinary research projects across the Arts, Humanities, Education, Women’s Health and Midwifery/Medicine.
3) Inquire into struggles for subjectivities that are alive and calling forth ‘the other,’ as in whom and what has been little known, hidden, or not fully appreciated within the academy—work within scholarly streams of women-honouring, life-centred, life-enhancing, spirited forces of being and worldly action.

This last point, centred on ‘struggle,’ is closest to the struggle for being that I experienced and express in this dissertation as I lived and produced it, moving through my own doctoral apprenticeship in the academy. Coming from an alternate educative and scholarly location such as Women’s Spirituality and into what could be identified as the mainstream academy of the University of British Columbia, I often felt I was working across a large abyss of understanding.
and shared meaning within the process of my research. Yet I wanted to conduct my research from a sense of celebration of the accomplishments of Women’s Spirituality in the academy, integrating my mind, body, spirit and heart into my work. I experienced an intensity of struggle (internal and otherwise) to bring this work forward into new and further contexts, and outwards from the kinds of protective space it has functioned within. I did not want to lose its trace or meaning within my own life, challenged as I was by new circumstances. In this sense, I work as if performing a translation from one field of study to another.

The intended audience of this doctoral study is the Women’s Spirituality scholarly community and further fields of study, especially Education. I also aim towards others interested in expanding views of curriculum, learning, teaching and research in the Arts, Humanities and Health Sciences. For instance, women’s, cultural, and religious studies, as well as the Faculties of Medicine, are all fields I work across as an interdisciplinary scholar. For the field of Women’s Spirituality, I have the desire to create a studied, qualitative exploration into the results and effects of its educational program. Towards other fields of study, I wish to extend and translate understandings of the WSMA as a still alternate educational program. Though little known, this kind of program is called for by many scholars seeking new visions and ways of incorporating spirit into learning and research within the academy, simultaneously addressing gender, social, ecological and economic justice challenges we face in a now globalizing world. By ‘academy’ I refer to extended, local and global networks of universities and institutions of higher learning into which students come and professors profess. I would say that the highest aim of the academy is to work, study, and research for the greater good of humanity and our sustaining ‘worlds’ (the Earth and cosmos), to be of benefit, while granting various degrees of knowledge.

In my experience of being a student within the WSMA degree, there was struggle in new learning. But I lived this within a great sense of relief and homecoming with other women through studies that grounded a spirited sense of purpose in our lives. We were homecoming to our-selves in collaboration with mentors and teachers. Upon my graduation from the WSMA, the challenge was that I left my heart in San Francisco, experiencing “susto” or “soul loss” to a beloved place, as described by healer and curandera Elena Avila (1999). I wanted to live more within the conditions and knowledge provided by Women’s Spirituality in an everyday way. I re-knew the world as being animated by a love of women as sacred beings, with ample opportunities for self-authentication. I could openly grasp as real the beloved numinous as an
energy-spirit living within daily life. From grasping-longing for continued nourishment of such integrated forms within my own life and beyond, this dissertation was born. I work to ‘connect the dots’ between here and there. Perhaps the dots cannot be connected, perhaps they can, or perhaps this here/there dialectic, this practice of considering both, is a means through which I now articulate and expand upon my own developing voice, voicing, and vision to further my inquiry potential. As potential, I want to make potent the possibilities for further understanding.

Thus through celebration and struggle, I tell my own stories. At the same time, I co-research the stories and practices of six women who are faculty and student alumni of the accredited Women’s Spirituality Master of Arts degree program that was located at New College of California, and is now held within the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology. Exploring the complexity, challenges and gifts of this degree in my own life, a spark is lit within me, prodding me to work, speak, teach, write, collaborate and co-create with other scholars this work of Women’s Spirituality, as spiritually-informed feminist education and research. I want to engage aspects of epistemological approaches, rationales, pedagogies and research methods learned within a less mainstream educational setting in ongoing ways within my scholarly work. I am coming to understand this as a co-created form of reimagining the academy. I cannot do this work alone, I am not alone in this work.

Research in the context of this doctoral study is a sacred activity as I witness, collaborate with, and experience the stories and practices of others. I dream my research into being through aesthetic consciousness, working the research process through art making. My research draws from and integrates my background as a mixed-media textiles and photographic artist, my work as an apprentice lay midwife, and my family life as a mother of two young daughters. I tell my stories and direct my research from the knowledge, lived experience and skills garnered through these practices and self-locations. I live an ongoing tension in my life through various identities that seek fulfillment within me as an “artist” (visual art, writing), “healer-activist” (midwife—women’s medicine traditions), “spiritual practitioner,” “mother,” and “scientist” (narrative researcher, oral historian). I research as if to resolve such tensions by the act of inquiry itself, drawing from all of these streams of my being. I stitch together the pieces of my-self into the weaving of this research.

For readers, this dissertation is a storied and artful invitation into, and reflection upon, the WSMA from the perspective of my own journey and that of others. In this introductory Chapter One, I reflect upon and discuss literatures that are relevant to WSMA education in order
to open understandings of the background and directions of this topic, including reading into: spirituality, Women’s Spirituality as grassroots and goddesses, spirituality and feminist education, transformative, holistic, restorative learning, and spirituality in education. In Chapter Two I continue my reflections with reviews of methodological literature relevant to my study parameters, including: feminist qualitative research, the narrative turn, sacred story threads, dreaming women’s writing, and notions of art and communion.

Chapter Three bridges my reflections and the literatures to the culminating research chapters. Chapter Three proposes an outline for the conceptual framework of a character or research persona that I introduce as the “philosopher-midwife.” Following my “midwife” identity and my need to develop woman-centred, sacred female-based education and research, I introduce literature that speaks to the ways in which human birth and birth-givers have not been fully accounted for within social, spiritual, philosophical and educational systems. The philosopher-midwife could be considered a spirited, embodied conceptual framework (with this word-play of being both a ‘concept’ in the mind, and meaning ‘to conceive’ within the womb) for this dissertation, a framework that undergirds my ongoing inquiries.

Chapter Four is an outline of my methods and design for this study, a description of where, with whom, what, and how I conducted my research. I therein outline the design of the final three chapters, which are rendered as storied “weavings” of the research process, results and representation. I introduce each of my six co-participants in Chapter Five, describing how I first encountered each woman. I engage storied understandings of the significance of their lives, work and educative pathways as related to the WSMA. I speak to the significance of my art practice in regards to the use of unwinding, winding, spinning and weaving with “red thread.” I introduce red thread as a significant material and spiritual companion of this doctoral dissertation. Red thread becomes the guiding material and metaphor for the structure of the final chapters. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight break from the conversational style and analysis of the earlier chapters. In these final texts, I represent and directly invoke my research process through the voices of my co-participants, my lived experiences of practicing with each, interweaving these as “red threads” with my life writing texts.

May she find herself, may she lose herself.

May she find herself, may she lose herself.

May she find herself, may she lose herself.

(Nané Jordan, mantra for Ariadne’s red thread)
Reflections with the Literature

Spirituality

Spirituality is a love affair—a love affair with existence.

(Chopra, 2006, p.18)

_Spirituality_ is never defined as such within the Women’s Spirituality MA degree program. A definition of _spirituality_ is purposefully left open in regards to discursive defining. Joanna Stuckey (1998), in her book “Feminist Spirituality,” describes _spirituality_ as being not separate from “everyday, secular endeavours” but as a “force that informs all human experience” (p. 5). ‘Spirituality’ vies for distinction from religion; its experience is immersed within religion, encompasses it, or moves beyond such. Spirituality could be defined as a sense of interconnectedness and connectedness with others and all life, as self-awareness, as the ability to surrender to the unknown or practice gratitude, as having inner purpose and value, as the idea that life’s struggles have meanings we can learn from (Hall, 2001). The word “spiritual” can be used to describe experiences of the numinous or the divine, of mystical insight or wisdom.

Stuckey (1998) reports of _spirituality_ that, “writers who deal with the subject usually try not to define it” (p. 6). I do not want to impose some totalizing ‘meaning’ upon this term. But for the case of semantics, _spirituality_ within Women’s Spirituality could be understood as distinct from the practices of institutional religions. It is a curriculum implemented through professors’ and community educators’ visioning and design of a graduate feminist program. The WSMA is not religious education per say, it engages the secular university classroom location within a framework of gender criticality. Within these classrooms there is in-depth scholarly exposure of female divinities and spiritual practices, including those known, those hidden, those omitted, or emergent, in contemporary, historical and ancient perspectives. To quote from past admissions material it is a “feminist learning community” offering “strong mutual support and mentoring, encouraging the development of new theory through integration of scholarly research, spirituality, activism, and the arts” (New College of California program materials, 2006).

_Spirituality_ in the context of Women’s Spirituality is understood as being located within women’s bodies, generative processes, daily life experiences, birth, growth, death and loss, the
Earth and its seasonal cycles, the Moon, the more-then-human world of tree, rock, animal and place, it is held within our relationships with others as the great potential of love. This is an immanent understanding of such from within one’s own body-mind-spirit-heart, and all of one’s relations. Yet transcendent aspects of spirit from outside one-self, as in divine presences and/or actions, are understood in how forces beyond material knowing inter-relate with our lives. Spirituality can be a calling within women’s and men’s lives to serve, care for and relate to the world from an interior place rooted as deep inter-relation and inter-being to exterior world, to act for personal and social justice from a core of oneself and others as whole/holy. Spirituality can be restorative, transformative, healing—it has something to do with love, its calling, expression and lived experience.

Like loving the “Dharma but not the dogma” (Noble, personal communication, 2009), spirituality within and outside of religion may lie in how one lives authentically from the core of oneself, speaking out from a questing-questioning core, not dependent upon indoctrination by others within society. This involves the ability to discern from within oneself and the external world, to make critical assessments and changes, knowing these are contingent as new learning arises.

Though WSMA faculty and educators might teach critiques, frameworks, or lineages from within their own orientation of the subjects, faculty are not spiritual teachers of students. The striving of this work is towards a multi-spiritual, multi-cultural, multi-sexual, open discourse, inclusive of individual and group genealogies within religious and spiritual traditions, cosmologies, and medicine systems (Pare, Grahn, Jenett, Grenn, Carter, Razak, & Birnbaum, 2006). Women’s writing, theory, agency, embodiment and experiences are central to the curriculum and pedagogy as much in text as in the breath and flesh of the classroom itself. Understanding the term “spirituality” within such feminist education is incomplete without addressing social-cultural-religious-political situations of this naming of “Women’s Spirituality.”

**Women’s Spirituality: Grassroots and goddesses**

The 1982 anthology entitled, “The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement,” edited by Charlene Spretnak, catalogues burgeoning authors and leaders of the field, naming the grassroots movement of Women’s Spirituality as conjunct with feminist politics. Within this text, the global feminist movement is cited as “bringing about the end of patriarchy, the eclipse of the politics of separation, and the
As a social movement, Women’s Spirituality branched from within feminist concerns of social change, feminist critiques of patriarchy and male privilege within religion, towards female empowerment that re-centered and re-imagined culture and society within spiritualized, post-patriarchal views. Women’s Spirituality as a grassroots movement in North America is characterized by women gathering in private homes, outdoors, or at community and retreat centres to practice ritual, women’s circles, creating independent practices, invoking the seasons, cycles of life, and female divinity within communities not tied to church, synagogue or temple (Eller, 1993). Women’s Spirituality can also be identified with reformations of liturgy and practice within religious traditions, where male-centred language is rewritten, sexist parts of tradition refused, or original sources are reinterpreted, and female imagery or text is included (Braude, 2004).

Women’s Spirituality claims and re-claims religious and spiritual experiences of women, and even the title of “God” herself. The title of the “divine,” with its double meaning of “God,” and to discover by means of intuition or magic, is understood as having female power, in symbolism, imagery, and the social-spiritual imaginary. Carol Christ (1982), a leading scholar of Goddess and feminist spirituality, a ‘thea-login’ (as in the study of goddess), writes of the Goddess as emerging “spontaneously in the dreams, fantasies and thoughts of many women” (p. 74) within a North American context. There is a “mood of joyous celebration of female freedom and independence that is created in women who define their identities through the symbol of Goddess” (p. 75). Art historian Merlin Stone (1976) uncovered histories of pre-biblical times in “When God was a Woman.” She unearths textual and archeological records that pointed to the worship for thousands of years of primary female deities, “creators of all existence” (p. 2). Stone writes, “there remains a lingering, almost innate memory of sacred shrines and temples tended by priestesses of the supreme deity. In the beginning people prayed to the Creatress of Life, the Mistress of Heaven” (p. 1). The revolution of this research, and archaeological analysis of the Neolithic era by Marija Gimbutas (1989, 1991), points to alternate histories and societies, based on female-honouring, pre-patriarchal values, now long lost from view, and highly contested within contemporary academia. Female or feminine icons and deity supplants what philosopher Luce Irigaray (2007/1990) writes of as “men’s appropriation of the divine” within the Western historical trajectory (p. 62). In the WSMA, study and exposure of goddess traditions are expanded within a cross-cultural, multi-cultural curriculum. Just as Irigaray asks in this very
moment, “how can we dwell on earth without goddesses?” (p.10), there are goddesses located all around the Earth.

Within discourses of feminist theology and *thealogy* (after Naomi Goldenberg’s use of that term, 1979) there is creative tension between Judeo-Christian and goddess-centred positions, though crossover of practices and affiliations lies within each grouping (Braude, 2004; Christ, 2004; Stuckey, 1998, p. 17). Despite this, scholar Joanna Stuckey (1998) uses the term “feminist spirituality” to look at a gamut of theory and practices, from feminism within Christianity and Islam, to women engaged solely in goddess worship. Women working for reformation from within religious traditions such as Judaism or Christianity may not identify with the term “Women’s Spirituality,” or with notions of *goddesses* as such. Yet feminist healer and scholar Vicki Noble, one of my study co-participants, warns of the dangers of losing a goddess-centred position within the WSMA curriculum itself. The larger culture can easily “evaporate such a position at a moment’s notice” (Noble, personal communication, 2009). Holding *goddess* at the centre of an academic program is a subversive and creative stance that generates new knowledge. Goddess implies a new (and ancient) set of working and living conditions where goddesses in their multiplicity, as multifarious concepts and non-concepts, generate new ways of understanding self, cosmos and *all our relations*.

Goddess is not reducible to a mirror image of God within the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. I title “goddess” in lower case, though others may prefer to capitalize her as a singular-named-being. Not to diminish ‘her’ importance, I point to her difference from the God concept itself, in the ways ‘she,’ as a multiple-identified-being, can be understood as activated within everyday embodied life, within multiple forms of interconnected Earth-based life. She is immanent and in co-presence, co-creation, with the world (Christ, 2003). Worship of her form(s) differs in quality, practice and association of characteristics from the traditionally identified patriarchal God figure. In “Beyond God the Father,” Mary Daly (1973), a foremother of radical feminist thinking, defined the worship of an exclusively male God as intimately connected to the patriarchal social order where spiritual laws resonate deeply with social-familial laws that have limited women’s freedom and autonomy.

Carol Christ (1982) notes goddesses as undergirding and legitimating the “concerns of the women’s movement” (p. 74) in North America. These concerns include honouring and valuing women’s bodies as sacred, celebrating the life-giving power of women’s generative cycles and the blood-mysteries of menstruation, sex, birth, breastfeeding, and the cessation of
menses at menopause towards becoming an elder. This celebration of the female form works to counter histories of social and religious vilification of women’s bodies and generative cycles. This honouring of the generative female is paradoxically not meant as an ‘essential’ reduction (once again) of women to their bodily forms (Reid-Bowen, 2007). Rather, a focus on the female points to the development of a more complex idiom-atics of the body as a sacred life source, within all bodies’ multiple, varying expressions, desires and manifestations. Within this “her-ethics,” death and decay are honoured (or known) as part of living cycles, whereas the death-wielding power of human-over-human, and the subordination of women through traumatizing and ownership of their bodies and sexuality, are actively worked against.

As non-traditional formations that radicalize religious practices, the grassroots movement of Women’s Spirituality is also associated with the emergence of pagan and Wiccan religious forms of worship that include goddesses and the modern female spiritual authority of priestesses. Such Earth-based spiritual practices call to notions of pre-modern, pre-Christian European traditions of Earth reverence and cyclical seasonal celebrations based on cycles of sun and moon (Adler, 1990/1987; Budapest, 1986). Those who identify as a “witch” (female or male) in such new religious traditions re-claim this derogatory term from its associations with the European witch-hunts of the 13th Century onwards.

‘Goddess’ is thus a large and complex religious and spiritual topic that I could probably never lovingly exhaust. Actual belief in goddesses is not a prerequisite to study, practice or research within Women’s Spirituality. What constitutes belief in or practice with a deity is an ongoing question, especially within the WSMA curriculum that is not considered religious education. With a shock of awareness on New Years Eve 2007, walking the labyrinth at St. Paul’s Church in Vancouver, BC, I had the thought: Nané you are some new breed of thealogin. I study goddess(es) as education, and as birth (Jordan, 2009b), her complex callings within women’s lives. Her multiple images on my home altar as Mary, Durga, Kali, Black Madonnas, trees, river rocks, shells, Quan Yin, Ariadne as Cretan Priestess, an owl, the labyrinth, my daughters, Vajrayogini, and home made dolls of nature spirits, Gaia-Devi, nourish and testify to the strength of her emergence(s) within my own life before and especially after my formal studies in the WSMA. For me, goddess is lived in my ongoing relationships with others, in the interrelation and beauty of living forms, the Earth and its processes, including the human and sacred female form. She is process-based, relational, an energy more verb-like than noun that can take forms of one kind or another. She is a cyclical, regenerative, sense of relating to the all-
that-is. She is fluid, and a fluid logic of relations and transmission, always be-coming. She is not alone. She is not alone in this work. *She cannot do this work alone.*

Goddess is not necessarily an easy concept or location to live. Goddesses also mark the psychological and spiritual terrain of women’s descent into self (Perera, 1981; Meador, 1994). Individual women moving beyond accepted structures of society may live the mythical dimensions of the searing work of self/soul transformation. This may come about in working against the limitations of gender, or facing the tortures or abuse of oneself by another, facing one’s own capacity for abuse, or family or social histories that have been suppressed. The myth of the ancient Sumerian goddess Inanna and her underworld sister Ereshkigal is taught within the WSMA as emblematic of this descent and a woman’s re-emergence to claim her-self, re-born to the new, integrating the old with full vision (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Inanna leaves her worldly, Queenly garments and jewels at each of the seven gates of her descent to the underworld. Completely naked at the centre of the Earth, she faces Ereshkigal, who fixes the eye of death upon her and hangs her corpse on a hook. Inanna is resurrected by her faithful friend and the work of the flies, who call her back to life. Just as we can be traumatized by others, we are healed by others, by those faithful companions who stay by our side as we traverse our depths. *I am not alone in this work.* I cannot do this work alone.

There is paradox in knowing and not knowing in ongoing spiritual inquiry, a loneliness of such struggle. A lived embrace and trajectory of transformative justice work and spiritual life collide in the writing of queer Mestiza activist and writer Gloria Anzaldua (1999). She writes of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, “*la Coatlicue* is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche” (p. 68). Her claw foot gushes blood; she cannot be reduced to a benign, all loving mother. *Mother* is fierce in tearing up human attachments, fierce in her compassion and love. Struggle is part of her path.

**Women’s Spirituality in the academy**

There is a tension between necessary enclosures women create to build selves in ‘women’s space’ and the enclosures forced upon selves by patriarchal social orders and restrictions. The Women’s Spirituality MA degree is an already public venture in education, having the institutional support of an academic framework to work within. It crosses the divide of so-called private female spiritual lives to a public degree granting process. Women’s Spirituality names its curriculum “woman-centred,” meaning *women are located at the centre of*
Women’s Spirituality as a degree program grew out of the North American grassroots women’s movement marked by women coming together with other women to socialize, share, create ritual and re-define or define spiritual and religious practices, both from within and without traditional religions. Often described as growing out of the politically motivated women’s consciousness raising groups of the late 1960s, Women’s Spirituality carried ‘women’s space’ into the 1970s, 80s and onwards (Eller, 1993; Spretnak, 1982). Women experienced “comfort and safety, the release, and the support these groups provided” (Stuckey, 1998, p. 130). Such groupings met the urge for many women to find, speak and ‘be’ them-selves with them-selves, a necessary feature of the transformative movement of feminism within the larger culture.

I draw the word “enclosure” from Carol Lee Flinders’ (1998) scholarship on Christian female mystics of European lineage. The Christian mystics were women whose visions flowered within enclosures of women-only convents in centuries past. In the paradoxical nature of such enclosing, many women’s lives flourished within a paradoxical freedom, living beyond the measures of patriarchal marriage and childbearing. Interestingly, the term enclosure is an oft-used word in reference to the take over of the global ‘commons’ and local resources by corporations and neo-liberal economic policies (Coté, 2007; Fernandes, 2003). The affinity of terminology is apt. Enclosures within academic culture might actually point to a drive, however localized or particular within education and the academy, to make space for learning and research beyond neo-liberal imperatives of knowledge production that threaten the flourishing of life itself (see Nick Dyer-Withford, 2007 in Utopian Pedagogies). This has been reinforced by identity politics of all kinds, as in the localization of class, race, gender, queer, indigenous spaces of learning within the academy wherein scholars articulate the specifics of power relations that in-form lives.

Identifying the necessity for women’s space within education grows from political, economic and spiritual concerns about the value and meaning of women’s lives within society. Flinders (1998) writes of the 14th Century mystic Julian of Norwich, her gentle writing and “powerful drive for unity,” her sense of “fusion” beyond divisions of body/spirit, joy/sorrow, her “doctrine of hope” (p. 49). Julian was “constitutionally unable to tolerate the divisive, oppositional modes of thought that characterize traditional, male-centred scholarship and theology” (p. 49). I think of this gentle spirit living in the tumultuous conditions of her own
time, and my own temperament as a scholar in this world, my seeming inability to withstand divisive characteristics of competitive careerism. I am constantly drawn in my personal and professional life to more holistic, spiritualized, and relational, social, educative and economic forms, yearning as if within Julian’s “powerful drive for unity.”

The Mothers of what has become Women’s Spirituality in higher education and the academy are many. From the grassroots movement of Women’s Spirituality, Starhawk (1999/1979), Z. Budapest (1986), Vicki Noble (1991), Luisah Teish (1985), and Judy Grahn (1993), are a few of the leaders who contribute to, and write about, the empowerment of women’s lives, their own lives, through and within woman-centred understandings of spirituality. They are linked variously to Earth-based, pagan, lesbian-feminist, Buddhist, African-Yoruba lineages and cosmologies of lived religious and spiritual practices. All of these women have taught or teach within what was the WSMA degree program at New College of California, now re-located at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California.

Elinor Gadon, an art historian, initiated the field of Women’s Spirituality into the academy through developing and directing an accredited, one-time only PhD-degree cohort at the California Institute for Integral Studies (CIIS), located in San Francisco. Gadon’s scholarly work includes, “The Once and Future Goddess” (1989), a survey of contemporary American women’s art. She combines analyses of contemporary artists’ practices with scholarship in goddess studies and mythology to develop contemporary and (pre) historic understandings of sacred female bodied and embodied power. Gadon’s initial WS program led to the later development of the MA degrees in Women’s Spirituality at both CIIS and New College of California. Many of the women who studied with her went on to teach in and further develop these WSMA programs.

The San Francisco Bay area is a significant location for these programs. The Bay area is home to leading activists, community leaders, teachers and independent scholars of Women’s Spirituality since the inception of American feminist, civil and gay rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Women’s Spirituality scholar Lucia Birnbaum (2005) says of this location of Northern California, “we vote left of violent patriarchal centre, and subaltern cultures green everywhere” (p. xxi). Within this locale and context, Women’s Spirituality as a graduate degree meets a specific social and, I would say, liberatory practice of feminist education that serves educational and scholarly needs of women, in education-by-women-for-women. This women’s liberation has a spiritual quality embedded within in accord with ‘enlightenment’ in a spiritual
sense of coming to knowledge, or wisdom of oneself/others/world within whole reality. The women’s stories in this study attest to the ways in which enlightenment is never finished, but is a process of continuing to attend to oneself and one’s relations in the world. One learns to trust the process, developing intuitive discernment of one’s next step, while not always knowing where this will lead.

**Spirituality and feminism: Missing links in an education**

In the realm of the secular, the material is conceived of as tangible while the spiritual is either non-existent or invisible. In the realm of the Sacred, however, the invisible constitutes its presence by provocation, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enables us to know that it must be there. (Alexander, 2005, p. 307)

I first encountered the lived and theoretical work of both M. Jacqui Alexander and Leela Fernandes at the 2006 National Women’s Studies Association annual conference, in Oakland, California. I quickly recognized the significance of their scholarship in understanding the need to integrate ‘spirituality’ within feminist education, wherein it has been ignored or lost. These scholars combine post-colonial, women-of-colour critiques, and transnational feminism into scholarship that speaks to the dynamics of what Women’s Spirituality addresses within women’s lives and feminism itself. I quickly disseminated the work of these scholars to colleagues grappling with feminism and spirituality (Bickel, 2008).

M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) notes that “secular feminism has perhaps assisted, unwittingly in the privatization of the spiritual—in the dichotomization of a “private” spiritual self from the corpus of work called feminism” (p. 326). There is a tendency to view political and social work as necessary and hard, while spiritual work is reduced to the soft extra stuff of life. As feminist educator Bettina Aptheker (2006) relays, her once “sum total” knowledge of spiritual aspirants was that of “nonproductive…parasites living off the labors of the working class who couldn’t afford the luxury of time off to find themselves” (p. 377). Privatization and fear of spirituality as extraneous leaves little room to bring forward reflection upon human depths and possibilities into public and social view.

Feminist pedagogy is historically identified with interventions in sexist and racist schooling in the academy (Weiner, 2006). Women’s Studies originated the woman-centred university classroom as a site of transformation and empowerment. Feminist educator bell hooks
(2003) writes of education as “the practice of freedom” (p. 181), working towards a vision of *wholeness* of mind, body and spirit in intellectual work and its public transmission (p. 179). She notes how Black Studies, Women’s Studies, and Cultural Studies are all disciplines that have promoted holistic approaches to learning, and value the experiential within classroom practices. Feminist pedagogy is associated with attributes of teacher and student relationality, leveling traditional classroom hierarchies. Feminist pedagogy values the lived experiences of teachers and students, challenging notions of difference and power imbalances within race, class and sexual orientation towards increased equality and inclusiveness. Feminist teachers commit to reflection on their practice, and ultimately the transformative power of the classroom itself (Weiner, 2006, p.86).

Yet Women’s Studies classrooms are largely divorced, as Alexander notes, from the spiritual dimensions of the experiences of their learners. For Alexander (2005), spiritual labour is “anchored in reconstituting a terrain that is both exterior and interior” (p. 312). She describes how the “alignment of mind, body and Spirit could be expected to assault the social practices of alienation wherever they may be practiced...within dominant religion, in the enclosure of the academy” (p. 320). The dialectics of interior/exterior, inner/outer, and spiritual/political aspects of living justice are useful in understanding Women’s Spirituality as a shift within feminist pedagogy to include spirituality.

Working from the historical forced “crossings” of African slaves to the Americas, Alexander (2005) conjures to this moment the continued violence of neo-colonial Empire building and its associated oppressions of race, class and heteronormativity. From these histories and the current moment, Alexander claims the necessity for the *Sacred* in feminist praxis (p. 298). She defines spiritual work as a “body praxis” (p. 297); the body is a site of memory and a pathway to knowledge. She cites her own healing through embodied re-memory accomplished under female leadership in African originated Vodou and Lucumi spiritual traditions. This language speaks to larger concerns for me within women’s education and healing, how the body is the site of learning, how without spirit such transformations cannot be effected. You need community to hold all this re-education and work with integrity. *I cannot do this work alone.* I am not alone in this work.

I draw from Alexander’s and Fernandes’ work to support the return of spirituality to feminism, to what Alexander names as “pedagogies of the sacred” (2005, p. 287). Women’s Spirituality coursework such as: “Women, Spirituality and Cultural Transformation,”
“Embodied Spirituality,” “Metaformic Theory and Feminist Theory,” and “Ritual Theatre,” act as transformative, holistic and restorative feminist education. Critical and theoretical work engaged in such classes elicit the experience and knowledge of the leaner, according agency to teacher and student, while attending to feminist textual critiques and formulations. The arts, poetry, aesthetic practices, ritual, movement, performance, voice, and stories work in concert with feminist texts and analysis. Such interdisciplinary feminist pedagogies of social gender justice and cultural transformation become a living, spiritualized politics within education and practices of knowledge production in the academy.

Leela Fernandes (2003), a feminist educator and scholar of political science, argues for “Spiritualized Feminism.” Fernandes proposes the practice of non-violence in the classroom. Non-violence “demands an unrelenting embrace of risk and self-examination” (p. 96). She notes the challenge of feminist teaching and its goal of transformative practice is to realize social justice, while overcoming attacks and counter-attacks in the classroom that are based on lived power differentials of race, class and sex. Fernandes suggests that a spiritualized feminist practice that is willing to “decolonize the divine” (p. 104), can recognize the spiritual error in claiming monopolies on the truth. Educators and students can thus work through such trials of learning with more compassion for self and other, without losing a deep call of justice for all.

Women’s Spirituality is perhaps a form of ‘post-secular’ feminism, meeting the needs of spiritual dimensions of social gender justice within educational processes. Fernandes (2003) is careful to articulate the difference between attacks on the secular Nation State by religious nationalist, fundamentalist movements, and the work of “spiritualized social transformation.” Spiritualized social transformation does not seek to gain State power in and of itself, nor to attack diverse religious tolerance and the freedom not to practice religion (p. 101-102). This is an important distinction, one often confused with what is happening as education within Women’s Spirituality. Women’s Spirituality and goddess feminism might also be viewed as some strange fad, or dismissed as a New Age preoccupation or cult, missing and dismissing the deeper work being accomplished therein.

bell hooks (2003) names “spirituality” as having something to do with the ontological quest for being, as important to integrate within classroom practices. I would argue, as do hooks, Alexander and Fernandes, that agendas of justice and social transformation will go no further until the complex connections between spiritual and material realms are understood, renegotiated and re-inscribed through practice. Arguing for the possibilities of a “disidentified
self” and a “divinized conception of self” (2003, p. 36), Fernandes wants us to move beyond essentialized identities towards a sense of “universalism that does not imply sameness” (p. 37). The disidentified activist engages in “both a radical movement for complete social, economic and political justice and a profound spiritual journey” (p. 38).

**Transformative, holistic, restorative learning: Spirituality in education**

Re-viewing your life—the number one factor is understanding that psychologically things are going to come apart and be put back together again. Women’s Spirituality material is designed to promote that, and to contain it, and to allow it to happen. (Judy Grahn, personal communication, 2009)

I had never heard of the terms “transformative learning” or “transformative education” until after graduating from the New College WSMA program. This term was described to me in conversation with Dianne Jenett, co-director of the WSMA, when I was looking for university programs to undertake my doctoral studies within. Because of the disciplinary novelty of the WSMA, I was having a hard time locating an academic discipline that could contain my further studies. I wanted to continue my birth inquiries, while developing the spirited method of engagement and experiential pedagogy I had learned in Women’s Spirituality education. I began to understand that an interdisciplinary approach in the field of Education could support my continuing scholarship.

The early development of “transformative learning” is credited to educator Jack Mezirow as a “a primarily epistemic, rational process whereby adult learners become aware of their unconscious roles, beliefs, assumptions” (Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, 2003, p. 178). Hidden beliefs and assumptions are surfaced through the “disorienting dilemma” which transforms the individual as she/he gains new values and understandings. Moving beyond this historical view of transformative learning in higher education, there is a growing emphasis on “reflective learning, the intuitive and imaginative process, and the ethical, spiritual, and/or contemplative dimensions of education” (Duerr et al., p. 178). Transformative learning offers correctives to the prevalence of the down-loading-information model of teaching and learning in many fields of study.

Developing further definitions of transformative learning adds complexity to the work of educator Jack Mezirow, including what might be understood as the *spiritual* dimensions of experience. An operational definition for transformative learning is expanded to include:
reflective learning, experiential and participatory pedagogy, intuitive and imaginative processes, and contemplative practices...developing ethical and moral sensibility, cultivating a recognition of interdependence and a re-connection with the natural and social world, and an emergent sense of social responsibility. (Duerr et al., 2003, p. 180)

The notion of “wholeness” is reflected in the development of “Holistic” learning and education (Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Kates, 2005). Holistic learning values attention to the whole person in education by including emotional, mental, physical and spiritual aspects of learning within the classroom. Holistic learning further attends to learning within a holism of life, knowing that as human beings we live within interconnected webs of relations with others, including an Earth-based ecology of non-human others, trees and animals all. Thus, transformative learning expands to include holistic understanding in its desire to address a disengagement of people, as faculty and students, from themselves, from each other, and from larger issues of social-ecological justice and life meaning, within academic institutions and practices. Educator Edmond O’Sullivan (1999) greatly expands the social, economic and ecological justice aspects of transformative learning in his discussions of integral transformative learning. O’Sullivan calls for the creation of new educational visions to meet global challenges of the 21st century.

Women’s Spirituality education is transformative and holistic by design. I think of experiences like sitting in a Women’s Spirituality class on “Female Shamanism” with educator and co-participant of this study, Vicki Noble. We start our day in a group circle after warming up our bodies with simple yoga stretches. Each student shares something about herself in the circle, how she is doing in the moment, and her dreams of the night before. Thus bodies and dream-bodies open our class. Our time together culminates in a hands-on healing ritual of a class member. Our voices coordinate in song and vibration, hands growing warm from the transfer of energy through our bodies and into the person whom we are circled about. We take the risk of having experiences in such classrooms as “experiential” learning.

In terms of Women’s Spirituality education, I add understanding of “restorative learning” to the definitions of “transformative” and “holistic.” Educating for personal and social transformation includes preservation and recovery of the ‘simple things’ in life. Educator Elizabeth Lang (2004) worked with adults undergoing life transitions, finding that students need experiences of “radical relatedness” in order to recover “suppressed values/ethics and forgotten relations” (p. 135). Lang finds that restorative learning is a bridge to the later effects of
transformative learning. Restoration includes re-valuing and restoring the centrality of human relationships, the body’s simple needs for nutritious food and sleep, non-co-modified activities such as going for walks in nature, tending a garden, or playing with children, and returning one’s self to an “inner compass” from modern, fast-paced consumer life-styles that stress distraction, and “having” over “being” (p.130).

I locate the ritual work done in Women’s Spirituality classrooms as a key aspect of transformative and restorative learning. Ritual is a powerful practice that moves beyond critical thinking and reflecting, restoring the body and the community within education. Ritual claims emotional, intuitive and spiritual aspects of knowledge-making for women in this context. “Feminist ritual offers an imagistic revitalization for women and a participation in the concrete, bodily expressive creation of new images of the feminine which helps alleviate the stress of liminality” (Turner, 1982, p. 220). Ritual in Women’s Spirituality is not ascribed through dogmatic or rigid adherence, though it may arise from particular traditions and cosmological streams. Learning through the wisdom of these streams comes through embodied ritual practice with others. There may be free-association and co-creation of elements by participants, “it is our collective heart that beats there” (Turner, 1982, p. 219).

Ritual and healing are not ascribed to ‘pedagogy’ in the transformative education literatures I reviewed. This signals perhaps the association of ritual with traditional religious dogmatic forms. Within the secular and post-secular classroom, it may be hard to consciously entertain ritual as a classroom practice without a larger context for its studied use as in Women’s Spirituality education. Through a WSMA course titled, “Lifecycle Rituals,” rites of passage that mark the importance of events such as menarche, birth, sexuality, marriage/divorce, menopause and death, are an important restorative aspect of learning for women in the WSMA. Ritual pedagogy in the graduate seminar and in women’s WSMA thesis work is one of the most interesting contributions of Women’s Spirituality to education, in a non-theological, multicultural understanding and use of ritual.

“Positivism reigns in the academy. How the institution conceives of itself and what it finds valuable is a huge barrier” (Duerr et al., 2003, p. 203) to restorative and transformative learning. The co-modification of the academy is indicated by the valuation of things such as funding, enrolment, testing, and professors’ publications, over development of indicators such as professors’ and students’ interior development and wellbeing. This kind of personal and social struggle between material and existential values was clearly prevalent within my cohort.
of WSMA students. We often discussed and struggled with the meaning and implications of our alternative studies. Though we experienced this education in profound and life-altering ways, as transformative and restorative without using that terminology, at least one student hid the focus of her degree from some family members and friends. She did not feel open to discuss the contents of her studies with all. People often queried me on what I was going “to do” with such a degree. This question hangs in the air. The implication seems to be that a university degree has immediate economic and mechanical social value, whereas the “values” I have chosen to pursue are not so immediately employable. In fact, they run counter to and in expansion and transformation of social and cultural norms.

As a truly “value-able” practice, spirituality in education addresses anxiety and meaninglessness, away from “conceptual poles of fundamentalism and nihilism” (Glazier, 1999, p. 2). Teaching from the heart plays itself out in such classrooms. Working within spiritual frameworks calls to ‘the heart’ as an organ of pedagogy. One develops a heart-based concern for others through inner and outer work, in educational processes that cultivate inner peace and balance throughout life—with goals of human connectedness, relationality, and cosmic unity.

bell hooks (1999) notes that what-it-means to have a life of the spirit and in the heart must be discussed before talking about “spirituality in education.” The topic of suffering and love rings through hooks’ writing. Her topic is that of suffering through injustice, how spirit addresses and lives through suffering, surfaces and dives its edges, breaking into a practice of love. “Love can bridge the sense of otherness. But it is a practice to beam that love out” (p. 118). hooks evokes “living in community” as a core practice for those desiring spirituality in education. Community must stretch the tendency to sameness, same class, same race, same ethnicity. hooks writes to her friend, philosopher Cornell West, “We bear witness not just with our intellectual work but with ourselves, our lives. Surely the crisis of these times demands that we give our all....It is both political practice and spiritual sacrament, a life of resistance” (p. 120).

What does it mean, this life of resistance? I am reminded of all that brought me to the point of doing my WSMA degree, the intense yearning to write, to study further, to orient, to get away from midwifery politics and ultimately to be brought right back to the centre of these—a centre grounded from within myself and my passion for birth. I yearned to orient myself as a mother, a thinking mother—a woman wanting to know and make known these things. The unconventional so-called choices of my life, not even felt as choices, but as red threads pulling
me along and then into this Master of Arts program with the name “Women’s Spirituality.” This was a name I felt to be a place that might just hold at least some of all of this, hold me in a way I could walk into and not lose pieces of myself in the process, and even reclaim lost parts still unknown. There was and is a freedom in that, though this is liberation wrought in the course of its struggle. “So the spirit calls. But we must not pretend, make it seem like living a life in the spirit is easy. On the contrary: living a life of the spirit is difficult” (hooks, 1999, p. 114).
Chapter Two: Reflections with the Methodological Literature

Feminist qualitative research

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

I like the idea that qualitative research transforms the world, although I’m not sure it always does, sitting in library stacks, filed away. Perhaps a marker of good research is in how and what kind of difference it makes to those who receive it, or to the world it affects. Social transformation and justice is an intended outcome of much feminist research. Marjorie DeVault (1999) describes qualitative feminist methodology as engaging three main points:

1) ‘excavation’ to “reveal the locations and perspectives of women,”
2) seeks a science that minimizes “harm,” leveling hierarchies in research relationships to disarm exploitive research processes towards women,
3) support research of “value” to women, “leading to social change or action beneficial to women” (p. 30-31).

The category of “women” upon which I rely in the term “Women’s Spirituality” is a contested one within feminist theory and methodology. There can be no “global, homogeneous, unified feminism...qualitative feminist research...problematicizes women’s diverse situations as well as the gendered institutions and historical structures that frame those” (Olesen, 2005, p. 236). Qualitative feminist research wants to “realize social justice for women (and men)” (p. 236).

Just as feminism and feminist methodologies have influenced the academy, so too does the academy shape them. Virginia Olesen (2005) wonders how far feminist research can further transform academic disciplines and research. Now within the grip of fiscal restraints in academic settings and the movement of a neo-liberal economy into academia (Cotè, Day, & de Peuter, 2007), this rings true to my own inquiry within Women’s Spirituality as an emergent field of study. Does Women’s Spirituality remain isolated in willing and passionate pockets of expertise? Can it move and morph into extended forms? How does this work translate into job recruitment, tenure and acceptance of publications? My own future lies in the terrain of such feminist research problematics. Especially in regards to the notion of an emergent but little accepted role of spiritualized perspectives and epistemologies within academic and attending
qualitative research practices.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain that multiple theoretical paradigms claim ‘use’ of qualitative research in many academic disciplines (p. 7). They discern a series of eight historical “moments” in its deployment. Qualitative research has its origins in 1900s ethnographic fieldwork steeped in the European colonial task to study the “foreign Other...who stood in the way of white settlers” (p. 2). This has culminated in the eighth moment, concerned with a now post-colonial consciousness that acknowledges the “development of sacred textualities” (p. 3). Between these moments lies the early work of second-wave feminism within “blurred genres” (1970-1986) of qualitative research in post-positivist arguments, undoing the limits of the modernist subject, reframing who and what was defined as a subject worthy of study, including women themselves. This resulted in “crises of representation” of research voices, the need to locate the researcher her-self within reflexive texts, and a push towards the “narrative turn” with a concern for storytelling (p. 3).

As a corrective, post-colonial stance within qualitative research, I recognize the need to “decolonize methodology” as identified by Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2006). Tuhiwai Smith discusses the ways in which “scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism” (p. 1). She conducts research within her own Indigenous Maori community in New Zealand, working to decolonize methodology so that her research is of value to the people/subjects of study themselves, working from Maori ways of knowing in “oracy, debate...structured silences” (p. 14). I draw from this decolonization of research methods in my own approach to researching within the Women’s Spirituality education community. I seek ways to meaningfully interact with my mentors, colleagues and peers, working for the research to be of benefit (to all beings), and to give back to the community itself.

**Autobiography and the narrative turn: Life writing and métissage**

Healing begins when we shine some light, however initially feeble upon that which has been hidden and silenced. With disclosure, cycles of violence may be stopped. When we as individuals are less fractured and fearful, angry and possessive, we can participate in movements for peace and social justice in more wholesome and fruitful ways. (Aptheker, 2006, p.7)

I follow a narrative turn within research methodology, conscious of “knowledge as
ethical practice” (Fernandes, 2003, p. 83). As a scholar, I am more than a witness to the research process, directly experiencing my inquiry as opposed to remaining an objective observer. I work to break through traditional hierarchies and power relations so that my research might work as a liberatory praxis. I acknowledge the healing I seek within my own life path, just as the women in this study share their stories of rupture, fragmentation and the re-storing/re-storying of selves. I disclose self-location by telling stories about my-self and others within my life, engaging autobiography and life writing as research methodology. In “Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods” (Cosslett, Lury, & Summerfield, 2000), autobiography is noted as the “display of self-knowledge through the creation and presentation of stories about the self” (p.1). In a feminist context, Cosslett et al. highlight questions around the inter-subjective nature of these stories, the value of representing experience, and the implications of representing the self for “attribution” of agency and “responsibility” for further action (p. 2).

Curriculum theorist Janet Miller (2005) tackles the question of autobiographic research in education by disrupting the notion that author can find an “authentic” voice. Miller understands autobiography as a practice that calls “attention to interpretations as always incomplete, always caught up in repression, always interminable” (p. 53). According to Miller, the “self” is fragmentary. Autobiography makes visible social and cultural processes that frame the elusive and fragmented nature of the self. I take her elaboration of curriculum scholar William Pinar’s autobiographic method of currere as an “examination of relations among life history, school knowledge, and intellectual development...a queer phenomena...theory that is not...typical within the academy given the positivist or post-positivist social science frameworks that still gird most theory, practice and curriculum norms in education” (Miller, 2005, p. 224).

Currere as conceptualized by curriculum theorists William Pinar and Madeline Grumet (1976), theorizes and practices autobiography as a “self-reflective method.” A four-fold process of “regression, progression, analysis and synthesis” is followed in order to understand “individual existential educational experiences of institutional and societal structures” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 31). Pinar (2009) later writes about processes of “self-formation” within his biographical historical study of the lives of educators living “Passionate Lives in Public Service.” I echo Pinar’s call for attention to self-stories and autobiography in understanding self-formation through education and life processes. Through such methodology the educational researcher re-stories and restores lives within educational experience, following
a relational *currere* of individual life forces that co-illuminate the social, political, spiritual and economic realities of society. *Currere* and biographic work highlight the unfathomable truth of how we as human beings are caught “above all else” in “succession and duration” (Huebner in Pinar, 2009, p. 155). The truth above all else is that we are born, we live, we die—life has its limits. And ‘hopefully’ we love and are loved.

Educational researchers Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers and Carl Leggo (2009) call for an extended autobiographical practice of “Life Writing…as an Ethos for our Times.” “Our times” are lived within modern conditions of immigration, colonial displacement, migration and death by war, and the shifting social-cultural sands of economies within over-wrought or depleted ecologies. The lives of children and educators are played out day-to-day in this foreground and background of our inheritance. Life writing as an autobiographical writing practice addresses the educational literacy and curriculum challenges of knowing ourselves and others as economically, racially, socially, religiously-spiritually, sexually (and all such categories of identity) diverse beings in classrooms. Life writing educators and researchers work to care-fully craft self-stories. As autobiographical research, life writing is a relational and ethical process. Researchers have eyes on community engagement, and the potential social-cultural *transformation* of communities so that all people can contribute and benefit fully within society. This practice draws from women writers of self-stories who write *liberatory* texts from the conditions of their own lives (e.g. Gloria Anzaldua, Hélène Cixous). The aim of life writing, as an extension of autobiography, is to create understanding and interconnection among people by “enlarging empathy and imagination, and expanding knowledge about self and other” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., p. 29) within classrooms and beyond.

My contribution to this methodology draws greatly from an *inspirited* understanding of life writing, where ‘inspirit’ is to *put to life, to encourage*. Artist and educator Barbara Bickel with dancer Tannis Hugill note that “all creative acts are sacred and bring us closer to the Divine” (in press, n.p.). Writing can be a creative force of *seeking after the divine*, of reckoning with the fates, as I enter the unknown with this page each day. Not only working for communication of the conditions and circumstances of lives in research, in life writing I work towards *communion* of/with such. Communion and transmission are instances of transport between self and other when a larger meaning is grasped and the interrelation of lives becomes apparent/transparent. *We see ourselves in the other*, no matter the differences. I am not alone in this work, *I cannot do this work alone*. 
Cosslett et al. (2005) point to the relationality of autobiographic writing as leading to the experience of intersubjectivity in autobiography and life writing, “the ways in which all selves are structured by interactions with others” (p. 7). Self and society are not separable categories. I would add that ‘spirituality’ cannot be reduced to a purely ‘self-centred’ or ‘social-centred’ sphere. In my own work and life I find my-self only in relation to other selves. I note this path in the “community of truth” of Women’s Spirituality curriculum and thesis writing. Several others are present, are in co-presence with each-other, as each woman speaks, listens and writes her-self to being among others.

As in Buddhist prayers that praise the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the Sangha, or community, is integral to the individual path towards ‘enlightenment.’ Sangha represents the community of seekers who work with and support each other towards the ‘truth.’ The Sangha is an overlooked aspect of Buddhism within the West as noted by Western Tibetan Buddhist nun Tenzin Palmo, “the Sangha is rarely seen to be as important as the other aspects of refuge” (Palmo in Hart, 2003, p. 209). Palmo relates the story of Ananda and the Buddha:

The Buddha again and again praised good company….There is one sutra where Ananda says he thinks that on the whole, good companionship is at least half of the spiritual path. The Buddha says, “No, it’s the whole of the spiritual path.” (Palmo in Hart, 2003, p. 206)

I am in “good company” with the co-participants of this study. I am not alone in this work, I cannot do this work alone. The biographic materials of each woman’s story that they shared with me that I listened with, transcribed and crafted into stories, can be understood as relational oral history research, and a “social justice project” (Janesick, 2010, p. 1). I work to meet feminist social justice goals in my study by weaving the storied lives of women as the central contents of this dissertation. As in the feminist research principles identified by DeVault (1999), I “reveal the locations and perspectives of women” (p. 30-31). These stories and philosophies live at the peripheries of dominant educational practices. Struggle, hope and the ability for cultural transformation dwell within such peripheries. These are “limitrophic” (Garnier, personal communication, 2011) edges of culture where knowledge-praxis awakens and disperses. As activist and educator Bettina Aptheker (2006) notes about feminist biographic practices, “the personal is political—or, more precisely, the personal reveals the political” (p. 6).

I document our lives through oral history research, engaging the tools of “interviews, observation, document analysis…digital photography and videotaping” (Janesick, 2010, p. 4), to
produce a mini “collective oral history” (p. 2). This memory project documents in a particular time and place the influence and ideals of the WSMA, through faculty and student alumni’s stories, spoken in plain language as intimate conversation between each woman and myself. I craft the transcripts of each narrative to convey red threads and insights of the stories as told to me.

The weaving in this dissertation of “red threads” from my co-participant’s stories was inspired by the practice of “literary métissage” developed as an arts-based research methodology within the life writing practice of the trio, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers and Carl Leggo (2009). Having worked as a research assistant with these educational researchers during the tenure of my dissertation research, I was able to absorb and extend my own life writing practice. Weaving my co-participants oral narratives into selective themes of “red threads,” I draw from the articulation of métissage as,

- a contact zone where dialogue among multiple and mixed socio-cultural, racial, (trans)national and gendered groups can occur. This exchange of ideas and insights—arising from lived experience—constitutes a new space and practice for curriculum inquiry. (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 35)

Métissage is derived from, “the Latin mixticius, meaning the weaving of a cloth from different fibres (Mish, 1990)” (Hasebe-Ludt & Jordan, 2010, p. 2). Metis is a mythological figure of skill and craft, and of cunning. Trickster-like, she has transformative powers. She is also the ancient Greek Titaness, a mythical figure of primordial wisdom. Descended from Gaia and Uranus, she was later swallowed by Zeus. Add to this that the “Métis” are peoples of Canada descended from Aboriginal and European intermarriages and relationships. “Métissage, derived from these origins, is an artful craft and practice, an active political, literary and pedagogical strategy for negotiating conflicting or dichotomous value systems, a praxis that might also uncover the swallowed wisdom of lost or forgotten origins” (p. 2-3). Thus, I cross borders of all kinds in my story-tellings and sharings. As an artist who engages textiles, I love the metaphor of weaving and undertake its literal, embodied practice to produce the cloth of the research. I wind, unwind and weave red thread, alongside the storied texts of my co-participants in order to recover such multifarious wisdom and celebrate its practices.

**Sacred story threads**

Threads, threads, threads. I really attend to women’s oral histories and biographies as
helpmate to my own life path, in exaltation of theirs, following events and ruminations of women’s unfoldings. Working with stories of others in this doctoral study, I read and take up the notion of “namtar,” or sacred biography as defined by American Tibetan Buddhist practitioner Tsultrim Allione (2002). The namtar are “specifically geared for those on a spiritual quest in the way that someone about to climb a mountain would seek out the chronicles of someone who had made that climb before” (Allione, 2000, p.131). Sacred biography provides “guidance and inspiration to the aspirant...leading toward enlightenment” (p. 132). I further note Women’s Spirituality books such as Vicki Noble’s “Shakti Woman” (1991), and Luisah Teish’s “Jambalaya” (1985), as life writing texts that communicate spiritual teachings, while documenting and telling self-stories. Both texts engage life writing to illustrate and define series of practices that each woman embodies and is simultaneously teaching to other women. Experience and self-text are thus a praxis of education.

I crave embodied story and its exchange in my own learning and teaching. I think of reading collections of women’s stories and sacred biographies, such as Michele Jamal’s “Shape Shifters: Shaman Women in Contemporary Society” (1987), and Hilary Hart’s “The Unknown She: Eight Faces an Emerging Consciousness” (2003), at specific needed points in my life. These anthologies document and tell series of narratives of contemporary spiritual women, from the perspective of the researcher who has collected the stories. Jamal and Hart track the contemporary divine as it is lived through the female and feminine within women’s lives as spiritual leaders in their communities.

Storytelling is the central feature of the research methodology called “Organic Inquiry.” I engaged this methodology in my MA research in the WSMA. The originators of this methodology, Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Ettlings, Dianne Jenett & Lisa Shields wanted room for what they called “feminine creativity” (1998, p. 115), following a desire to find a “personal and sacred voice” (p. 114) within research. They co-developed a framework for Organic Inquiry by incorporating techniques from the transpersonal worldview they were being educated within, including: sharing stories and experiences as a context of transformation for both teller and listener, deep listening, minimizing research hierarchies, body-based spiritual practices, creative expression, and the mystical ‘grace’ of setting intentional space with chants or meditation (Jenett, 2004, p. 3). Central to an Organic Inquiry is the experience and story of the researcher herself, from which the inquiry grows and is nurtured.

Grounding narrative in the spiritual, I draw from Organic Inquiry by overtly
incorporating liminal states into the research process by attending to my dreams and visions. Organic Inquiry is especially oriented to topics related to “psycho-spiritual growth” (Clements, 2004, p. 27). Limen denotes the threshold, where the researcher crosses beyond ego to gather experiences of “a seemingly beneficial impact, often accompanied by feelings of awe and a sense of direct intent on part of spiritual source” (p. 27). Within Organic Inquiry, liminal and spiritual experiences are settings for transformative change. The ultimate goal of the research is transformation of the researcher, the participants, and the readers of the study.

Though I draw from characteristics of Organic Inquiry, I do not employ the full method wherein I might analyze my data (stories) through a process of interjecting written reflections, re-writing co-participant stories in my own voice, or taking excerpts from others’ stories in order to illuminate my points. Instead, I engage and weave my co-participants’ directly spoken stories after careful crafting and editing, with my life writing depictions of practices we undertook together, through a literary “métissage” of texts. I maintain the speaking voices of my co-participants from our shared conversations, evoking their unique personalities as a documentary text. I add to this ‘mix’ my own autobiographic life writing texts on WSMA education.

Importantly, storytelling and life writing, which are central to this study as research, evoke a necessary reiteration of feminists such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Adrienne Rich (1977) who combined autobiographical and theoretical writing in accessible ways. Using a personal voice in research is central to my own inquires as I situate within streams of feminist researchers. My conceptual and artistic research process strains towards the metaphoric and poetic, grounded and illustrated by personal story and others’ stories, arising from lived experiences and shared telling(s).

**Dreaming women writing**

Calling from small self to big Self, I understand my own life as metamorphosis of a dream-body in believing in my own perceptions and following them, a tricky business in the small scheme of things, a necessary business in the larger one. The birth process of coming up from water and into air is my research and writing itself, accepting and birthing self and selves as a job of life. As described by process-oriented psychologist Arnold Mindell (1993), it takes a lot of energy to master the tactile, primary processes of “doings of this world” (p. 81). People tend to repress secondary processes of dreams, intuitions, synchronicity, sudden visions, pains,
and unpredictable movements in the body (p. 80). Commonly thought of as beyond the five senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, secondary processes call to the relations of being bodies in the world with others, both human and more-than-human. I attend to dreams and visions because they answer, in so many words, this relational call within a still sensory process of every day life.

And there is the problem (or ecstasy) of writing to be dealt with in methodology—the aching of coming to voice in my work, of getting words and vision on page. This having vision and words on a page has something to do with the larger project of my study in which women’s words, experiences, voices, stories, ways of knowing are made central. An inspiring, as in “to breath” and “to be inspired,” of education and research are underway. My co-participants are surely and peacefully going about the business of transforming themselves, each other and the world. These are transformations not only in epistemology or knowing, but in acts of symbol and language, having a way into knowing through words and art, and what constitutes female embodiments of this speaking. This transformation of education, this spirituality of education, follows through with the project demarcated by feminist thinkers who call for new writing (Cixous, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981).

Describing the sense of working through who can write and what can be written, the shame and fear of crossing the real but invisible in a life of daily necessary tasks and service to others, poetic writer Hélène Cixous (1991) in “Coming to Writing,” speaks of having the “right reasons” to write, the ones that give you the “right” to write. Being female and Jewish in French-occupied Algeria, she felt she had “no roots…Diaspora effect” and “no legitimate tongue” (p. 15). Her writing did not emerge from ‘reason’ but was “a passion, something shameful-and disturbing: one of those violent characteristics with which I was afflicted” (p. 9). Cixous continues,

Writing is reserved for the chosen. It surely took place in a realm inaccessible to the small, the humble, to women…Writing spoke to its prophets from a burning bush. But it must have been decided that bushes wouldn’t dialogue with women (p. 13-14).

Gloria Anzaldua (1981), in “This Bridge Called my Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color,” states, “Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?” (p. 163). Moving from silence, from the body which “distracts, sabotages with a hundred ruses, a cup of coffee, a pencil to sharpen” (p. 170), Anzaldua implores women to write. “Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman
under triple or quadruple oppressions. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power” (p. 171). Cixous (1991) continues, “Sinking into your own night, being in touch with what comes out of my body as with the sea, accepting the anguish of submersion...this is a feminine pleasure” (p. 57).

**Writing my-self**

And here is my own perfect day for writing, so write. The daylight fills my room just so from two large windows facing south and west. It is our bedroom where I write within the relational ache of being and working in this bedroom/office, the bed still warm from sleep and the comfort of two bodies as if I could fall into it again. My children are at school and my husband at work following schedules that delineate my own daily tasks of tending lives. I have to get myself back to writing over and over again. I have to get myself back into this other world while the apartment is empty of the beings I am pre-occupied with and love. *The apartment is empty.* The presences of my family surround me and pull with their threads.

Given these relational factors, a space to write is possible, and from such threads I draw my meaning. I conjure another space, sideways from, or adjacent to, the life I live. My fingers on this keyboard seek letters and words to create the text. *But I never learned to type properly.* My husband and children often tease me about how I look on the computer. My one, two or three fingers peck vigorously and madly across the keyboard at high speed. I keep up with the words in my head in this haphazard way. I did not learn to type during my 1980s high school years. Though I was raised with the feminist ideal of career choice for women in being able to become anything I wanted, I was resisting becoming a secretary, the most visible working-class occupation of the women I grew up with. It seemed like being a secretary was what you had to become, rather than what you might have chosen to become. I feared becoming a secretary in the same way I feared teenage pregnancy or abortion. Could you survive them? It was as if these female initiations marked some end to the achievement of the possible self. *I never learned to type.* Who or what is one typing or birthing for? Now I note the undervalued nurturing qualities of secretarial work, how so many women keep businesses and institutions organized, filed, fed and *running smoothly.* Such tasks, like mothering and birthing, make the world work. The shadow side of this gift is its exploitation, a lack of voice or value given it.
Thus without typing I wrote all my poetry long hand into notebooks and still do, handwriting into notebooks for deep thoughts, insights and complaints. As a teenager with my bedroom door closed, I added quiet candlelight, enacting some ancient sacred rite so that my consciousness could flow onto the page. My pen pressed hard, I wrote as if to work the text into stone. Left-handed, the ink smeared across the page and onto the side of my hand. Now, I take this keyboard and write loudly through my day, while at other times I cook, feed, tend, wash, organize, read to, and especially talk and listen with children—the life of us householders. I am living, mothering, typing, writing andprofessing all at once. I suppose that anyone coming to sit and be with this page faces the dilemma of staying with the work and the unknown of how it will come out. At the edges of writing is the suggestion of freedom. Voices whisper their being in archeo-logic layers of words, past and future. Who or what is one typing or birthing for? The suggestion of freedom is perhaps what I am most terrified of. There is the freedom of what is possible, of what is new (and old) in the act ofcommitting words to the page. I keep typing, sensing the presence of something vast and not yet imagined.

**Art and communion**

Arts-based research extends the use of autobiographic and life writing materials into visual, tactile, expressive forms of research. I follow a culture of inquiries, or arts-based research methodologies from my UBC Education coursework and faculty, those of “living” (Meyers, 2006), “performative” (Fels, 1999), and “narrative” (Leggo, 2008) inquiry. These inquiries approximate directions of research within Women’s Spirituality itself as embodied and relational practices, bringing data alive through arts-based inquiries. Arts-based research works across academic disciplines by employing the arts, through genres such as writing, poetry, visual art and performance, to convey meanings and experiences of the human condition within research (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008). Arts-based research can be considered a “milestone in the evolution of qualitative research methodologies” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. xii) in how it extends the definition of what constitutes qualitative research methodologies through visual, performative, and poetic streams of inquiry.

The complexity of my own research process engages multiple layers of qualitative, experiential and arts-based practices and procedures. I extend my artistic practice into this
dissertation inquiry through an arts-based textile, performance and ritual piece entitled, “Red thread in the forest.” My ideas and research flow from an ongoing living inquiry that is embedded in the conditions of my life in relation to others, and my pursuit of particular callings. These callings draw me to express the multiple subject positions I work from in this study, noted as artist, midwife/healer, mother, researcher/oral historian, writer and spiritual practitioner. Attending to these multiple locations of my life, I work within a “living inquiry” as defined by Karen Meyer (2006) in “attention to what goes on in daily life.” In its most direct form this “awareness” calls us to inquire into the “what is” of lived experience (p. 156).

How and what I write in my thesis forms the body of communication of my research findings. Yet I want to trouble the notion of “communication” in research and art. Canadian artist Charles Gagnon schooled me as a professor of photography and visual art through my undergraduate years at the University of Ottawa. He said of “art” and “communication” that:

Many people...regard art as a form of communication. That provides a justification for art and a social function for the artist: to transmit a message that is accessible to the general public. I’ve always said – and perhaps it’s the only thing worth saying – that art is not a means of communication but a form of communion. I think that people commune with an artwork, not because they have prepared themselves to do so, but because they are particularly receptive. This has nothing to do with intelligence or with culture or with knowledge. It’s something else. *Fishermen feel it when they gaze upon the sea.* (Gagnon, in Godmer, 2002, italics mine)

Charles died in 2003, 68 years old. I read of his death in an issue of “Canadian Art” magazine. I carefully cut out the obituary and taped it above my writing desk. A small image of one of his paintings, white, shades of soft blue, swaths of paint across a canvas, strong hints of green speak from corners—a dull ache, tears, simultaneous sense of loss and recognition of his work within me. We hadn’t spoken since he had given me a reference for a bursary for a summer institute in loom weaving at the Chicago Art Institute, years before. I was then in the midst of my post BFA midwifery work and study in Vancouver, BC, still childless days of my young adulthood.

I got the bursary for the Chicago course. I should have gone, but I didn’t. I felt I couldn’t come up with the rest of the money to get there. Charles was fascinated with my decision to learn to weave as an extension of my art practice. He was always curious and encouraging, always within his own practice, relaying this and that interesting detail about this and that artist, his first question, *what are you making and thinking Nané?* The consummate mixed-media
artist, a painter-photographer, he was my teacher who had mentored me into art making and photography in ways I didn’t understand until the moment of reading of his death.

_I don’t think I knew he was my teacher until I read of his death_, now relegated to posthumous dialogue. In a flood of recognition, I gave up years of chastising myself for studying art in university and following further callings into obscure arenas such as lay midwifery and Women’s Spirituality. On Charles’ death, I understood something about the value of life, the value of knowing and being with certain people. I had been given a gift. This is a tenuous gift under near constant threat of erasure within the juggling of my own creative psyche, life path and pressures of the world.

And so I pick up this word “communion” from Charles for my research _now_, picking up threads too of my artist self, who is really the one who feels and knows, _as she gazes upon the sea_. I am blurring the roles of artist and academic researcher, to write from emergent perspectives on functions of research within arts-based forms. Art can both lead research as a form of inquiry, and/or be a practice through which the researcher responds to it (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004). Can research _commune_ itself to an audience rather then communicate (or both perhaps)?

**Summary of methodological reflections**

To conclude these methodological reflections, I summarize the characteristics of my research methodology:

- This work is story-based: I tell stories of my-self and others through life writing and oral biographic narratives, written in the voices of the co-participants of this study, woven against my own life writing texts.
  - This work shares the details and reflections of the lives of study co-participants, including my own: I aim to increase and open understanding of the WSMA as education through its lived experience. I work to convey the variety and uniqueness of individual experiences and expressions of such.
  - This work is artful and performative: I engage and weave my textile and performance art practice into the final texts, bringing forward a spirited notion of red thread and weaving as a research methodology, holding and telling stories in evocative ways.
  - This work is embodied, relational and experiential: I am the central ‘body’ of this text in relation to other bodies, through and upon which the practices and research occur. I witness
the stories of others in relation to my own journey as a researcher, attending to my inner-life and everyday life in telling my stories and those of others.

• This work is feminist, in relation to the sacred: I focus on women’s stories, as well as my own journey as a woman in the academy living and researching in relation to spirituality and the sacred. I work towards a text that extends or communes with understandings of such processes.

• This work grows out of and towards praxis: if praxis is the process through which theory, skills or knowledge are embodied and practiced, then the proof of this research is in the affect and differing effects of the inquiry itself. Readers are invited to become co-journeyers of this text—are you moved, inspired, humbled, bothered, excited, fearful, angry, glad, sad, or joyous to see these ideas, words, images and stories on the page? Are you provoked to further actions and inquiries of your own?

• This work loves writing, art, inquiry, and birth/life itself: my methodology follows from my practices of writing, visual and textile art, and the arts and science of midwifery in practices of being with-woman and in-communion.
Chapter Three: Conceiving Birth with the Philosopher-Midwife

The femininity of a text can hardly be reined in or corralled. Who will bridle the divagation? Who will put the outside behind the wall? (Cixous, 1991, p. 57)

Sitting in front of cardboard boxes containing Master of Arts theses in Women’s Spirituality at Dianne Jenett’s\(^1\) house, I realize I have it all wrong. I am on a pre-research reconnaissance trip in December 2007. I feel like my lit reviews in education cannot hold the work I am sitting in front of. A figure I decide to call the ‘philosopher-midwife’ beckons me from the edges of my mind, her intuitive apparition claims presence and prescience of my task, pulling on ancient red threads of lost self-birthing arts. I feel only humbleness seated before such work as these women have given of themselves to their research and theses.

Thesis titles include: “Lilith as Everywoman in Ancient Myth and Modern Midrash: Transforming a Demonized Eros,” by Deborah Grenn (1998), “The Moving Mirror: Authentic Movement as an Avenue to Healing from Sexual Abuse,” by Elena Azzoni (2002), and “Singing the World Awake: Inspiring Connection Between Humanity and Nature through the Musical Performance, Songs for Sagroda,” by Ann Carol Mitchell (2004). The list goes on with so many titles invoking healing, the sacred, transformation, female divinities, goddesses, Earth-love, inviolable women’s sexuality, sexuality reclaimed from abuse past and present, womb consciousness, and artistic, poetic and performative practices and inquiries. Women’s Spirituality is a container for these scholarly explorations and expressions. A liberatory sense of women’s storytelling, life writing and testimony is a theme in the combined works. It is as a sharing of lives through a crucible of transformation within education and research known as Women’s Spirituality. These works read as gifts to the reader, something offered of the self towards an-other self. The transformation and validation of this research is in the inquiry and praxis itself, the writing and the reading. It is as if the students, myself included, had these theses within them, waiting to emerge just so, before they even got to the gates of their Women’s Spirituality MA degrees.

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\(^1\) Dianne Jenett was and is a co-director of the Women’s Spirituality MA program when it was at New College of California, and now at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology. Due to the demise of New College of California in 2008, the Women’s Spirituality Master of Arts program moved to the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. For further reading on the situation at New College see: Redden, E. (2007).
The year 2007 was the first time I had been able to look at such theses together. I was in anticipation of inquiring with six women into our experiences of study within Women’s Spirituality. What is the course our lives have taken within and from such study? Reviewing WSMA thesis work seemed the place to begin to feel into the program itself from my new vantage as an educational researcher. I feel my way through this research. I may be situated as a thinker, but for this work, and the work of my heart, I am a thinker/feeler of the inquiry itself.

Here is what I felt, sitting in front of the women’s theses:

Throw out the books Nanë. There are no guidebooks here. Where is the language for this work? Each woman has integrated something in her own unique way. The closest word I have for this is ‘healing’ through-with Women’s Spirituality. It is overwhelming to hold all of these journeys, to see the combined theses together. They are a chorus of voices—a choir even. I can feel the chorus of the women’s songs-gifts-callings from their own beings towards:

the “other” of herself,
the “other” of her teachers/mentors/thesis advisors,
the “other” of her cohort of sister students, scholars, friends,
the “other” of her intimates, lovers, children, family lives, ancestors,
the “other” of divine callings, goddesses, spirits, the Earth and its elementals.

There are so many others each woman writes for, through, with and against.

There are so many others. Being with-woman, as mid-wife, I discern a surfacing of intricate curricular and pedagogical relationships in the women’s work, just as I myself had been held within these relationships. Parker Palmer (1993) writes of such a “community of truth” within “education as a spiritual journey,” where education is a “communal enterprise from the foundations up” (p. xix). A community of truth is defined by Palmer as “a rich and complex network of relationships in which we must both speak and listen, make claims on others and make ourselves accountable” (p. xii).

In curriculum theory, the ‘course’ of Women’s Spirituality classrooms might be understood through the Latin derivative currere. Curriculum theorist and art educator Rita Irwin (2003), commenting on analysis of currere by Pinar and Grumet (1976) notes ‘currere’ as active and contextual. The meaning of curriculum opens “to shift the focus away from text to an individual’s experience and the influence of the social milieu on that experience” (Irwin, 2003, p. 2). Currere understands that everyday experience, the breath and vital force that animates who we are as socially and culturally situated, time-bound beings, birthing, living and dying, in
relationship with others upon this Earth, is tied to the text and flesh of classroom spaces. Text and classrooms are vital relational trans-actions between the beings who encounter each other therein, the inner and outer workings of life as education.

On further examination of the Women’s Spirituality theses before me, I see the title by Polly Wood, “The Menstrual Origins of Money: Radical Economics in the Presence of the Divine Sacred Feminine” (circa 2005). Polly works etymologically with the same root for curriculum but through its meaning as “currency” (p. 62). Building on the metaformic theory of Judy Grahn (1993), Wood contends the Latin currentum, which as currere means “to run” finds its roots in the running of menstrual blood as the origins of human consciousness. Human menstrual bleeding, as it entrains with the moon itself as cyclic time (mense – as in: to measure), was the first currency to enact reciprocity between “the earliest humans and the world they inhabited” (Wood, circa 2005, p. 63). The course I am running in my doctoral inquiry holds this expanded meaning of currere and curriculum towards blood thinking and consciousness.

As such, how am I making my-self as a thinker and a researcher, coming into the larger field of Education? Who am I as re-searcher in this re-search? The notion of birth becomes central, or already was, to my research process. Birth as real, as more then a metaphor, the pull of its earthly constitution brought me to and through Women’s Spirituality as education. Before undertaking my WSMA, I had been working in community-based, lay midwifery, attending home and hospital births. I had also been caring for women in their homes post-birth (post-partum), guiding, feeding, holding and supporting this vulnerable, overwhelming stage of life. I like to think of the larger context of birth, what is it to know birth as a force within a woman’s life, within all lives? To see natality for what it is, as we are each born into this life, born into this moment of time through our mothers. Unmediated consciousness of birth seems asleep within the dominant culture, or buried somewhere deep within us. Yet such simple fact is attended to over and over by the midwife, her prayer and continuance. Birth comes with a knowing of the fragile beauty we each are, set into a web of others by our mother’s task.

Thealogin Carol Christ (2004), in reviewing the work of Melissa Raphael (1999), speaks of the emergence of goddess feminism from “Radical Feminism,” in its celebration of female difference from the male body and imaginary (p. 69). I attend to female difference in my research. Within the woman-centred education of Women’s Spirituality, this difference is accorded value, agency and acknowledgement. Christ goes on to note that radical feminism has often been dismissed in academic and theoretical circles through the label of “essentialism.” She
notes that this charge misses larger implications of the recovery of the female body and female-centred symbolism, which is not a simple re-inscription of patriarchal conceptions of such.

Working through the persona of philosopher-midwife that is emerging within my scholarship, I can and do attend to the female body and text, to the female who is birth-giver, and to the conditions under which such birth is given within education and the academy in a post-patriarchal sense. The midwife is with-woman, and by extension she is with life. I see no slippage between the midwife who attends birth, and the philosopher-midwife researcher who attends to her research within a mode of holistic ‘care.’ The philosopher-midwife reclaims what was lost, or buried in male-centric, phallic (patriarchal) layering. She is open to the birthing of the new, of new realities and imaginations.

There are levels, or layers, to my conception, with its dual meaning of “concept” (the idea) and “to conceive” (within the womb), of this philosopher-midwife. These layers include what might be understood as literal truth in acknowledgement of the birth act in reality. In this reality, as the midwife sees it, birth is not appropriated from its female origins as it has been within both religious and secular notions of ‘birth.’ The birth of a nation, of an idea, and to be born again, loses the original reference point from which all such metaphor and metaforms (Grahn, 1993) are drawn, that of coming into being from inside the bodies of our mothers. I call upon rich layers of embodied analogy of actual birth as an approach to my own research process within Women’s Spirituality and the field of Education.

In her book “Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess,” Melissa Raphael (1999) writes, “for throughout the world, the worship and symbolism of female divinity seems to have preceded the worship and symbolism of male divinity.” She continues in brackets with the statement: “(probably because the awesome mystery of new life comes from female, not male, bodies)” (1999, p. 75, italics mine). Raphael evokes for us what is common and obvious about our embodiment, how the gestation of life is given from within female bodies and origination. Why the need to bracket this statement and contain it as a probability? Raphael’s brackets belie hesitancy towards this fact-of-life. Birth from the female is an unspoken truth, assumed, yet something to be hinted at and not directly confronted. I contend that these brackets meet the limits of language, Western philosophy, and modern cognitive awareness in the ability to theorize the human capacity for gestation and birth from within a dominant patriarchal paradigm.

Women are, in a sense, the source of life. Birth is a primordial, re-generating energetic
event, so often ignored. Birth is an act of profound agency and wisdom that needs to be recuperrated from histories of control and simultaneous appropriation of its sacred power. Conditions of gestation and birth mark ongoing, fluid processes of creativity within which we are literally born, live, regenerate, and die as beings. I suggest that we can only understand what birth is at a symbolic level by listening to, fully incorporating, and honouring its real experience by women as sacred and central to human existence. And there are all the births not taken through miscarriages, abortions and baby deaths that women so equally carry within them. These deaths-in-birth are often stigmatized, silenced, yet held in the cells of body memory and life itself.

Birth-giving is a complex, physical-emotional-mental-spiritual, immanently present, transcendently transporting, bodied, fluid-leaking, blood dripping, raw, intense, trance-inducing, gripping, serious or funny, orgasmic, painful, ecstatic entrance into life. Its free expression requires a condition of surrender and can manifest explicit, overwhelming love. We do not ‘do’ birth—birth does us. Carol Christ (2003) identifies how the Western philosophical and theological focus on mortality and immortality ultimately rejects and ignores birth giving (p. 207). Gestation and birth are the metaphorical blind-spots of textual inquiries that focus on a singular figure of a male-paternal God, much as Mary Daly points to in her radical “metaethics” (1978).

Feminist philosopher and once midwife Mary O’Brien (1981) speaks of how we have no philosophies of birth comparable to the force with which death and mortality have been taken up within what she calls “male-stream thinking” (p. 20),

Birth was at one time important in a symbolic way to theological visions, mostly with a view to depreciating women’s part, and rendering it passive and even virginal, while paternity took on divine trappings. Reproductive process is not a process which male-stream thought finds either ontologically or epistemologically interesting on the biological level. (O’Brien, 1981, p. 20-21)

This denial or ignorance of birth within the Western historical trajectory is rooted, “replayed, reenacted…and taught” (Christ, 1997, p. 67) in complex historical, socio-cultural and spiritual terrains of the human dialectic of male/female embodiments. Birth giving capacities of women have been regulated and simultaneously denigrated within patriarchal family systems and accompanying religious traditions (Rabuzzi, 1994). Asserting the necessary physical materiality of life as having sacred dimensions, eco-feminist writers recognize the denigration of female,
birth-giving bodies. They point towards a dualistic and hierarchical equation of women with *body-nature-Earth*, and men with *mind-culture-Spirit* (Diamond & Orenstein 1990; Mellor, 1997).

Working beyond this notion of bodily shame, womanist midwife and Women’s Spirituality scholar Arisika Razak (1990) proposes that birth act “as the nucleus around which to build a paradigm for positive human interaction” (p. 166). Understanding birth as a “universal and central aspect of human existence” (p. 166), Razak describes the emotional significance of birth for all humans. Significant to this act is that regardless of what sex we are born we all pass through female bodies to arrive earth-side. Razak, a midwife, draws from the act of birth a fuller meaning of what it is to have human consciousness connected to and through others. “Birth is the primary numinous event. It is our major metaphor for life and coming to being” (p. 168). Using “human-scale technology,” Razak talks about midwifery as the oldest profession, as a prototype of a field “of, by, and for the people,” a “person holistically rooted within her community” (p. 170).

As midwife and thinker, this *essential* category of reproduction fascinates me within a trajectory of further global feminist thought. What is our ability as feminists across cultures and subject positions concerned with transforming women’s oppression(s) and freedom(s) to think through what *birth* means? Can we go beyond Simone de Bouvoir’s (1949) signaling of reproduction as *biological slavery* to the human species? If birth is simply servitude, then women’s only freedom lies in joining the productive social, cultural and economic realm that has been dominated by men. The Western liberal project of feminism has been critical to my own and other women’s lives as liberatory social change, being able to enter economic spheres of work and education as I do. Yet the full capacity of birth from within the female has not been integrated into this “culture” from a female-based perspective, nor taken opportunity to transform it.

Drawing the terms *reproduction* and *production* from political philosophy, Mary O’Brien (1981) examines what the procreating human female does as *work* in the world of material relations. Both sexes contribute to production of goods, culture, trade, yet one sex has the larger role to play in reproduction. There is a fear that celebrating ‘biology’ reduces women to reproductive and biological capacities where women’s social roles are constrained yet again in the fundamentalist sense that biology-is-destiny. Yet this charge of essentialism relies on a too tidy categorization or dichotomy of “nature” and “culture” in the sense that women’s
reproductive capacities have no culturally determining power or inherent value. The corrective is that there is agency in birthing that has not been accounted for, or perhaps fleshted out enough. The “fleshy metaphysics” of Christine Battersby (1998, p.1), examines the question of what it might mean, through analysis of various thinkers within Western philosophy, to put the female, birth-giving subject at the centre of self-understanding. Battersby does not infer nor concur that “all women can or ‘should’ give birth,” (p. 7) but points to how “philosophers have notably failed to address the ontological significance of the fact that selves are born” (p. 3). Birth and birth-giving are the most slippery of concepts for any well meaning thinker who seeks to counter dominant discourses of such. Birth is a wet, slippery, living ontology, wet like baby emerging from between mother’s legs, gushing fluid, blood liquid and logic all over the place.

In modern day-to-day North American lives, actual birth giving body-minds are largely regulated by medical and technological interventions. There is a dearth of religious and spiritual discourse to reflect the creative and intense female experience of actual birth-giving. Yet many women experience birth-giving as a specific embodied, spiritual event (Lin, 2008; Maloney, 2007), potent with ecstatic and sensation filled possibilities beyond everyday experience. The mystery is in the experience. Goddess feminism and thealogy draw from women’s lived experiences to flesh out the contours of textual, ritual, and liturgical creations. Thealogy in Paul Reid-Bowen (2007) asks, “what kind of metaphysic…may be derived from a subject position that is, at least potentially, understood to possess the ability to give birth?” (p. 51).

Like Battersby’s fleshy metaphysics, fluid logic is philosopher Luce Irigaray’s challenge to binary logic (1992). Categories can exist, but not rigid ones. Fluids run and melt the rigidity and linearity of pure reason (Irigaray, in Canters & Jantzen, 2005). Fluid logic is an indicator in my own visions and dreams. Fluids ooze from visions of my computer screens, shifting and undulating forms to denote the nature of my quest. The philosopher-midwife calls to me from the domain of the “real,” what feminist philosopher Charlene Spretnak (1999) argues for as the “Resurgence of the Real” from modern ideologies of its denial. Spretnak argues that this denial has given rise to the crises of modernity—war, environmental devastation, over-industrialization, alienation and loss of meaning. The real IS the Earth and all of our relationships within it, an enlarged sense of ecology that is not just environmentalism but Earth of cosmological and spiritual significance. In Spretnak (1999), the real is rooted in “Body, Nature and Place,” a trinity of its ongoing manifestation.

Mary O’Brien (1981) deftly analyses the fault of thinking birth is a ‘pure’ biological
process that is “all body and without mind, irrational or at least pre-rational” (p. 21). In O’Brien, human reproductive consciousness is inseparable from human consciousness, and birth must be philosophized from a female perspective. “We cannot analyze reproduction from the standpoint of any existing theory...what this means is that we must not only develop a theory, but a feminist perspective and a method of inquiry from which such a theory can emerge” (p. 23-24). Her reading of birth elucidates how reproduction as an organic function has not been understood “as an instance of human praxis” (p. 39).

**The facts of birth**

Sara Ruddick (1989) suggests looking at the “facts of birth with a welcoming, hopeful eye” in order to tell a maternal history of human flesh (p. 208). Ruddick notes that philosophers have been of little help in this arena. She critiques ‘reason’ as historically needing to be free of such birthing bodies, reducing birth to a source of irrational disorder. Ruddick comments on Hannah Arendt as taking up the concept of birth through natality. She notes that the focus is on the child, more than the women who has given birth:

> Natality, like mortality, is a condition of every human life. Unlike mortality, natality is expressed in distinctive relation to a particular woman. For every human, to experience full the “capacity rooted in birth” (from Arendt) requires imaginatively comprehending that particular relationship. Central to natality as Arendt and Elshtain conceive it are interwoven notions of beginning, action, difference, singularity, and promise. To these we can add maternal concepts of humility, trust, vulnerability, and protection, which characterize the birthing act. Birth is an act whose beginning and end can be neither predicted nor controlled. (Ruddick, 1989, p. 209, italics mine)

Ruddick goes on to express the reciprocal relationship of birth, which is marked by a dissolution of boundaries as one being lives within another, emerging from within the other. Yet boundaries of mother and child are marked by difference, by “physical union in metaphysical separateness—is a crystallizing symbol not of self-loss but of self-structuring...Giver and recipient are engaged in mutual, active, interdependent creation” (p. 210).

There is openness within Women’s Spirituality to address and theorize the body, women’s reproductive cycles and their spiritual energetics, mothering, and the social justice

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2 Mary O’Brien also notes the work of Hannah Arendt on natality. She calls Arendt a “female male supremacist” (1981, p. 9) for decontextualizing birth once again, and viewing childbirth as “animal.”
aspects of incorporating female worlds towards post-patriarchal social forms. *Spirituality* implies a sense of making meaning through these, or understanding there is meaning *implicit* in such experiential acts from which culture grows, maintains, re-educates, and even transforms itself. Thus, I follow a birth, midwifery and mothering inquiry further within Women’s Spirituality and the field of Education, and am not limited to singular biological, social, or psychological views of women giving birth. Women’s Spirituality ‘catches’ the integral baby of my sense(s), my red thread, blood meaning, the *sacredness* of women’s capacities and inner experience, the energetic boon of the midwife attending the freely birthing woman and baby, the intimate acts of joy, grief, regret, shame and disruption felt as women make, lose, work for, and give life.

This writing is itself interrupted by long hours of care taking of children. Giving birth marked my own life and ability to perform individualized academic tasks such as this thinking and writing. I *come to writing* (Cixous, 1991) from years interspersed with two pregnancies, breastfeeding and caring for small children—immersed in fluids and *fluidity*. I combined being at home with children with graduate education and part-time jobs. In my equality minded marriage I am identified as the parent with the fluid, flexible schedule, at times responsible for a large part of the daily functional childcare. This role is also called *mother*, and involves what Sarah Ruddick (1989) identifies as “Maternal Thinking” in the vigilance of organizing, preparing and shuffling the lives of my children to the necessary points in their day, so that I appear to arrive at the necessary points in mine. Maternal thinking indicates the mind / body activity always at work within “the mother” who is responsible not only for coordinating lives of children, but lives in ultimate realization of their vulnerability, is responsible for their safety and well being, carrying concern for and interest in them.

Upon return to school, I lived the paradox of my need for public life through missing the constant presence of my children, aching for their small constant selves at my side. In our society such *maternal thinking* has become more and more localized within one or two parents. Extended collective communities of care for children, or other-mothers, does not often move beyond a few relatives, daycare, the primary school environment, and what social service practices are available within society when a mother cannot carry the work of *thinking* her children through each day. This work of maternal thinking is, of course, unpaid in the logic of capitalism.

Luce Irigaray (1993/1987) speaks of this unpaid work as a “repression,” a “censorship of
the desire to trade” (p. 81). She links this repression to the unpaid work of activists and intellectuals in society. Thus, “infrastructure functions for free” (p. 86), and there is no recognition of this. Society is played out upon this free labour of women, what Irigaray calls a sacrificial understanding of women’s labour. Publication of Genevieve Vaughan’s (2004, 2007) work on “the gift” and gift economy in anthologies of essays approaches realizations of the value of this free infrastructure. The gift is understood to be a one-way process. As in the flow of life and blood fluids through the placenta from mother to child, and the flow of talking and language communication from mother to child, the gift does not approximate the exchange economy of “I’ll do something for you if you do something for me.” In such maternal thinking, the child is there and requires one’s immediate and constant giving or he/she will perish.

The gift is also present in the Earth’s resources as a continual free stream of goods from which we draw our exchange economy in unmitigated taking. The original gift of the Earth, or the mother, is rendered invisible, though it forms the basis of exchange, production, or capital. Reciprocity of the gift lies in acknowledgement or ritualization of return to the Earth and to the mother herself, a sense of gratitude for what we take and keeping the balance in the cycle of life. This notion of reciprocity is currently lost from dominant economies of unlimited growth and exchange. Yet we are given the gift as the gift passes from us to others.

I think of this gift, its female and earthly origins in the work that birth and mothers do. Irigaray (1993/1984) states that “sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the philosophical issue, of our age” (p. 5). Sexual difference is played out in its most extreme example through the procreative and birth giving function of women. Irigaray does not reduce women to this fecundity, rather she sees the fecundity of “birth and regeneration...in the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new poetics,” (p. 5) an age that will come when women have fully articulated the needs of their difference from men from within their own subjectivity. She cites how political overtures have been made towards women—yet “no new values have been established” (p. 6).

The philosopher-midwife works from the embodied state and lived negotiation of female sexual difference. Yet she is concerned with the whole—the baby, male or female, the father or other-mother(s), the family, the community, and the situation within which she supports the woman’s birthing to unfold. I want to undertake research with women, with life, conjuring this apparition of philosopher-midwife who opens to new, ancient understandings of such life-giving capacity and power. I am following what Irigaray (2007/1990) calls “women’s right to their own
spiritual becoming, a right in harmony with their sexed body instead of one that denies it in the name of an allegedly universal and neutral truth” (p. 88). The philosopher-midwife recognizes and assists the formation of these rights and rites, and the birth of new reality frames in the birth-work of cultural transformation.³

Chapter Four: Study Design and Weavings

San Francisco calling

My doctoral study is based on trips to the ‘field’ of the San Francisco Bay area of California. Between 2007 and 2009, I made repeated visits to San Francisco from my home in Vancouver, BC, to meet with co-participants of this study. I wanted to work with my co-participants in person because this research, as pilgrimage, reflects my own experiences of the travel, effort and commitment required to complete the WSMA in the first place. I re-turn, bridging and extending the knowledge I gained in undertaking this degree. I wanted to heal my susto (soul loss) and address my longing for continued connection with this women’s Sangha (community) by sustained contact with this place and people through trans-national inquiry. I wanted to nurture ongoing relationships by personally connecting with participants themselves in close conversations and practices within the sacred context of women’s collegial and working friendships. These friendships and this community are a necessarily nourishing, co-creative aspect of my ongoing research, life and spiritual path.

Seven women, including myself, participated in this dissertation study into Women’s Spirituality graduate education, with a focus on the specialized Master of Arts degree located at New College of California, in the Mission district of San Francisco. All co-participants including myself are familiar with this program, being either student alumni or faculty. Another degree-granting program in Women’s Spirituality is located at the California Institute of Integral Studies, also based in San Francisco, where the WSMA degree originated. Though I am familiar with this program by proximity, I chose to centre this study on the New College WSMA and its faculty and alumni, basing my inquiry on our shared context.

However, during the years that I undertook my study, New College of California, which opened in the 1970s as an alternative, progressive and socially responsive institution of higher learning from within American social justice movements and ideals, underwent political and financial turmoil, leading to its full closure by 2009. New College had run numerous Humanities-based and interdisciplinary graduate degree programs, a BA-completion program, an alternative law school and a teacher education program, all based on the motto of higher education for a “Just, Sacred and Sustainable World.” New College featured non-traditional education with “small enrolments, individualized instruction and a commitment to producing alumni engaged in socially responsible, if not fiscally rewarding, careers” (Redden, 2007). As I
commenced my doctoral studies, I watched with full emotions and a sense of loss as New College stood at its end. I watched a fully running progressive institution completely close its doors. My study followed the literal visual path of ‘closing doors’ as I found myself photo documenting the locked and inaccessible buildings of New College throughout my research trips. Pilgrimage in this case included a sense of farewell and funerary for an era of study.


The WSMA transcended this crisis through efforts of its co-directors, especially Dianne Jenett who has a scholarly background in the field of Transpersonal Psychology. Transpersonal Psychology incorporates spiritual dimensions of human experience in its field of study. The trans-personal – as in: ‘across,’ ‘between,’ and ‘among,’ validates and recognizes the importance of self-transcending, unifying, or expansive states of consciousness. These might be lived within mystical experiences, spiritual self-development, ritual and healing traditions, or by individuals, communities and world leaders who work from platforms of non-violence and love.
in social transformation. These aspects of the psyche are often ignored by traditional Western psychology. Thus, within a *spirituality* valuing academic context, the WSMA was restored with its adjunct faculty, curriculum and course designs intact, in a transition of re-birth to the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), located in Palo Alto, California. Nuances occur in this study as participants sometimes address experiences of working between locations, or within the new institution. In gratitude, the stream and lineage of the WSMA remains and grows.

I began my study with an initial one-on-one, story-based, open-ended interview with each woman. We then undertook an experiential “practice” together that was based upon each woman’s MA thesis work or some aspect of her ongoing life path and projects. I structured the bulk of my fieldwork into two specific research trips, travelling in February, 2009 to begin the interviews, and again in July/August, 2009 to follow up with our practices. I added a final research trip in May, 2011. This last time, I consulted with my co-participants in-person in order to finalize the contents and scripts of their stories.

**Storied interviews**

Before each interview I asked co-participants to reflect on what was significant to them about the WSMA degree program in their lives. Within our interview conversations I was open to any stories they had on this topic, trusting as in an “Organic Inquiry” that the “right” material will arrive. What is presented to me within our relational dialogues is *gifted*. My method draws strength from spiritual activist and Mestiza feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldua in her articulation of *El Mundo Zurdo*, the “path of a two-way movement, going deep into the self and expanding out into the world,” where difference lives and breaths in not *expecting* sameness (Anzaldua in Keating, 2002, p. 520). Following free flow of our lives and the relational dynamics between the women and I, my guiding questions for these conversations were:

- What experiences do/did you have within the Women’s Spirituality MA program?
- What limitations do/did you overcome, and/or do/did you experience limitations within the WSMA?
- What project(s) did you bring, find or develop in your life through these studies?
- How does this education amplify your life/work/being/thinking in the world?

Each participant’s unique interests and experiences led our conversations on the topic. I spoke very little during these interviews myself. I worked to empathically listen to and witness the depth of stories that each woman offered, interjecting only to support or reflect briefly.
Stories and ideas flowed easily from each participant in our shared context of understanding. I had not anticipated the amount of conceptual material that the women would offer. In fact, this inquiry into the WSMA was, as in my own experience of the WSMA, deeply connected to each woman’s extended life path, historically and at present, her relationships with self and others, her work, practices of justice, spiritual experiences and trajectories. All of these aspects impact her philosophies and ways of being in the world, in a seamless and sometimes hard-to-discern way in separation from the WSMA degree program itself. Thus threads of currere, as in curricular, living, breathing, flowing, bleeding, red threads of ‘life,’ ‘education,’ ‘spirituality,’ and ‘philosophy,’ were most often interchangeable during our interviews.

In my research trip of May, 2011, we considered what elucidations and edits were needed for each text. Truly, the personal vulnerability of this kind of intimate, spoken conversation between friends surfaced as I presented my co-participants with drafts of their narratives. Some reacted to the rawness of their voices on the page. I felt the full vulnerability of releasing these stories into the larger world, mixed with my own sense of cherishing what each participant shared with me. From what I learned during this in-person visit, I crafted the final written texts to retain each person’s voice as an individual and personal expression. I created mini oral histories and testimonies, shaping the narratives for language and story flow.

Practices

My co-participants and I followed our interviews with practices that we chose together. “Practice” is a term I use in this study to denote the embodied, relational, artful or healing activities I undertook with my co-participants. By ‘practice’ I refer to any number of artistic, spiritual, ritual or healing forms, including dance, poetry, painting, drawing, photography, music, hands-on healing work, counseling, or ritual co-creations. My idea to undertake a practice with each participant as method for this study was drawn from my desire to art-fully, care-fully express aspects of the WSMA from characteristics the program itself expresses. Connections between each woman’s ‘story’ and her ‘practice’ are often self-evident. Her practice carries over from her story ways of being and expression in the world.

Women’s Spirituality as a degree program cultivates deeply aesthetic and kinesthetic awareness and relational, embodied ways of doing education and research. Classroom activities within the WSMA include artistic expressions and responsive practices in writing, poetry, visual art, dance, drama and performance art, as well as ritual workings, healing and spiritual practices.
A ‘practice’ may become cultivated, articulated and expressed through study within the WSMA. Practices can arise as hidden gifts, talents or abilities that each woman embodies and proliferates through her studies and/or teaching. Thus, I wanted to document and experience an embodied practice with each participant, expressive of her-self in the moment of this research, yet following from the red threads of her experiences within the WSMA. ‘Embodiment’ refers to the movement of text beyond the written word to the flesh and blood text of everyday life. Embodiment is the living, breathing articulation of experience and inner concepts through present-moment gestures, actions and forms.

‘Practices’ cultivate self-authorization, working to manifest what it is we are working with or towards in following from an inner compass the transmutation of culture and society. Practices stabilize our lived commitments and the new or old worlds coming into being through our inner and outer transformative work. They represent what we want the world to be, in the sense that we act on this information now through focused processes of blessing, healing, making art, dancing, visioning or writing. Practices affect the inner world by shifting one’s focus off of habitual, dissatisfied or repetitive thoughts, towards inner awareness. We might witness our previous grasping and settle into deeper or wider states of consciousness. Thus, practices stabilize the human-being her-self, giving rest, nurturance, effort, wisdom, blessing, guidance, space, play and visions, within which the larger day-to-day work in relationship to others is held and can go on.

Practices give us our best and support through our worst. They implicate and generate the values and beliefs we wish to see and be in the larger world. Practices are often ephemeral, evaporating when finished except for the artistic or poetic objects that remain, the healing or deep insight left as a trace of the practice’s transformative impact, and an ability to listen more empathically with others. Practices are time and place-based. They are relational, involving co-encounter with oneself and others be they deities, people, animals or trees. Practices create shared meanings between and among individuals, containers in which we cultivate relationships, learning and teaching.

In practicing with each woman in this study, my experiences were shaped by my presence within the activity and my relationship with each participant. In this sense, a practice may have certain steps or rituals to follow, but is original in its shared experience each time. Practices are co-creative and co-emergent, such that we learn from practice, where such learning depends upon the relationship itself. As I engaged in each practice directed by my co-
participants, experiencing each as they shared their gifts with me, I personally received blessings, insights, messages and healings directed towards my particular circumstances, and the circumstances of this research inquiry. The totality of practices had the effect of blessing this research as well as ‘me’ the researcher.

In order to represent each practice, I wrote descriptive, life writing passages of practicing with each of my co-participants. I reflect the “double-consciousness” (W. E. B. Du Bois in Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 34) of myself as the researcher/writer, performing “autobiographical acts” in self-reflection of “the self being narrated, the other implicated in the telling, the tale being told, and the ideas embedded in that tale” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 34). Via videotape and recollection, I re-entered the palpable traces of my own experience of each practice. I continually faced, “Who (I) have been and who (I) am becoming in the particularity of (my) situated bios and ecologies” (p. 34, brackets mine) of this research process, narrating these effects within the passages themselves. As a researcher, I work to provide storied frames of understanding the WSMA as a deeply relational form of education in its central ‘practice’ of woman-to-woman dialogue and transformation.

**Storied weavings**

Story forms the connective red threads of this study. Conducting interviews and engaging in practices with faculty and student alumni of the WSMA, I conjointly explored my own autobiographic life writing, and my visual, tactile, performative artistic practice through “red thread.” My autobiographic texts were written as I reviewed the relevant literature and reflected upon my own educational and life experiences before, during and after the WSMA. My life writing texts were responsive to the research, in the sense of what I felt drawn to write towards. These texts were further refined as my inquiry progressed.

I initiated this doctoral study with a performance art inquiry in 2008. This was a ritual opening of my research, based from my artistic and inspired understandings, literally engaging red thread. I entitled this experience, “Red thread in the forest.” As my research progressed, I developed video representation of this place-based, forest ritual from its original documentation (Jordan, 2009c, April). I began to write about my initial and ongoing art practice with ‘red thread’ (see “red thread” as a ‘co-participant’ at the end of the following section). From these, I developed written performative passages entitled “Red thread in the forest.” These appear in this study in order to convey the narrative experience and images of the forest ritual.
Thus I draw heavily on the notion of red thread and weaving in shaping the final chapters of this text. I convey red thread as being both a literal, material experience within my art practice, and a metaphorical descriptor for the six weavings of my co-participants’ oral narratives. Working with my co-participants’ life and education narratives, I transcribe, shape (spin), and weave these into six strands of “red threads” throughout the final chapters of this dissertation text. Three co-participant stories are woven together at one time within each of these six strands of narrative red threads. In combination with these, I weave into repeating patterns through literary métissage further research strands of my:

- autobiographic life writing,
- art practice as lived through “Red thread in the forest,”
- descriptive life writing of experiencing each woman’s “practice.”

Differing fonts mark the differing threads of this patterned weaving in order to guide the reader by aesthetic attention to the differing passages of this study. “Times New Roman” is my general use font. My autobiographic life writing texts are indicated by, “Adobe Garamond Pro.” The voices of my co-participants’ stories are indicated by, “Adobe Carlson Pro.” I weave my lines of inquiry into three major sections as themed, storied time-lines of “Beginnings,” “Gifts,” and “New Philosophies.” I open each theme with a quote from Judy Grahn, co-director of the WSMA, speaking to its educational dynamics. I also include for reference the six identified “Program Learning Outcomes” (PLO’s) of the WSMA. The WSMA co-directors developed these goals for the WSMA program, now located at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology. As an additional text, the PLO’s speak in another ‘voice’ to the unique nature of learning within this degree and the aims of its education.

**Beginnings** signify stories of our life trajectories that led into WSMA studies, faculty and alumni included. These stories reflect earlier educational or life experiences that impacted how and why we each came to study within Women’s Spirituality. What led us towards this path of study?

**Gifts** signify stories of learning, teaching and experiential activities that occur/ed within and around the WSMA for each woman. Gifts highlight insights, restorations or transformations we each experience/d within the WSMA and beyond. I draw from the term “gift” its larger meaning as connected to notions of “gift economies” (Vaughan, 2007) in which value circulates in mother-like acts of nurture, desire, and attention, not accounted for within the global corporate exchange economy. I extend the notion of gift within the life-giving work of
mothering, artistic and intellectual practices, and questions of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity in writing itself. As Hélène Cixous (1994/1975) notes,

That doesn’t mean that she is undifferentiated magma; it means that she doesn’t create a monarchy of her body or her desire….Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconsciousness is worldwide. (p. 44)

The “gift” is on the side of living for life, as we function within day-to-day hierarchical and gendered realities of a culture of mass media, fear (Fisher, 2010), and human-centred death wielding powers. In so much as we want to leave the world ‘a better place,’ we live and work towards this through an intricacy of attention to our inner/outer lives in a daily practice of “wisdom” (Hasebe-Ludt & Jordan, 2010).

I take the term New Philosophies from Judy Grahn (personal communication, 2009) and extend its use within this dissertation. I draw from Judy’s linguistic incantation of what-the-world-needs to address these changing and precarious times we live in. New philosophies acknowledge world-level challenges of gender, social and ecological justice, and the need to shift economies of greed and accumulation towards communicative and communing economies that understand, live from, and celebrate the reciprocity of human inter-relationship with nature (as culture) and the Earth her-self. As many scientists, environmentalists and environmentally-minded economists are indicating, humans economies can no longer sustain unlimited growth and the devastation of lands and peoples. As women responding to such challenges, living lives of ongoing self and world-inquiry, we live within an inspired tension of forging new ways of relating to and working within this world. The term New Philosophies accounts for the complexity and diversity of human interactions within these times, drawing from and reclaiming knowledge from times past towards “new” forms. This includes healing the colonial fragmentation of Indigenous traditions and re-membering women’s spiritual histories/herstories. New philosophies especially account for a rooted living spirituality as it is embodied and embedded in daily life. New Philosophies represent each woman’s storied ways of becoming and living through what values, purposes and meanings drive the ongoing education/curriculum of our lives.

I thus represent and perform this doctoral inquiry by weaving the multiple texts of this research process into the final chapters as a performative métissage. Again, I weave my research from within four key lines of (spinning) inquiry:

• my autobiographic life writing about the WSMA and my own experiences,
• the oral “red threads” of my co-participants’ stories gathered for this study,
• descriptive passages from my artistic practice as “Red thread in the forest,”
• storied, life writing descriptions of ‘practicing’ with each woman.

For the reader, these storied red threads provide a document, a documentary, of Women’s Spirituality in the academy, by view of my own journey within this research. As a researcher, I offer myself as the pivot and body of inquiry. These storied red threads are offerings and invitations for you to enter, with me, not only storied understandings of this Women’s Spirituality Master of Arts degree program, but your own potentially related inquiries (e.g. of self, of education, of spirituality, of family, of life, of art, of gender, social and ecological justice, of cultural transformation) in reflection of these texts herein. As William Pinar (2009) notes, by focusing on the “self-formation” of another, “the reader’s own self-formation becomes self-disclosing: the so-called didactic effect” (p. 15). Further, “minority elements of the self return from the repressed and contribute to a reconstruction of subjectivity more worldly then before” (p. 15). The representation of the worldly concerns of these women’s lives, in conjunction with the journey of my own learning and becoming within Women’s Spirituality, forms the storied heart(s) of this research text. I document and perform my journey through the “animated…eros” of study (Pinar, 2006, p. 114) within the academy and life itself. My own story and thoughts are a constantly felt presence of this dissertation as I write, weave, reflect and generate processes of artful, organic, living inquiry. Thus, I hand you this red thread—thread is the text, text is the thread.
Chapter Five: Introductions of Co-participants

I initially envisioned working with a maximum of three co-participants beyond myself—one faculty member and two student alumni. I wanted to engage deeply with individual stories and practices to write full accounts of each, while developing my conceptual material (as in the philosopher-midwife), and my autobiographic and arts-based inquiries on the topic. Yet as I began to dialogue about this research with Dianne Jenett, who is a co-director of the WSMA and the only faculty member I initially invited to interview, I discovered how strongly she felt that other faculty voices be included, and a larger number of co-participants overall. It is not a story Dianne felt she could tell on her own. Dianne and I shared many fruitful dialogues about the meaning and scope of my doctoral inquiry. In its early steps, and ongoing, I felt this inquiry to be a radical and vulnerable topic, even within the Women’s Spirituality field itself as I turn a public lens of self-study on its own ‘study.’

In addition to my own relationships with people working in the field of Women’s Spirituality, Dianne was my contact at the WSMA at ITP for choosing student alumni for this project. Dianne had been a research supervisor of my MA thesis work. I respect her greatly and acknowledge her as a mentor. My increased number of co-participants reflects methodological dialogues about this research with Dianne. Though working from a strong inner sense of what I wanted to do, I was tentative in my early articulations about the scope (and hope) of this qualitative research as being an integrated conceptual, autobiographical and arts-based design. The creative tension is that I ended up with an increased amount of storied data, as compared to cultivating more time-space for my conceptual workings. I wanted to include all six of my co-participants in the representation of this study while maintaining the threads of my conceptual, autobiographic and artful journeys. Including all of my co-participant’s stories herein reflects the depth to which the WSMA is truly a shared story. Ultimately, the increased number of co-participants reflects my on-the-ground, lived movements of engaging relational research processes within my own community, self-formation, and desire as a qualitative researcher to ‘do the right thing.’

Perhaps one of my biggest lessons as a new researcher of this deeply relational and qualitative work is the challenge I experienced to articulate my own approach, while remaining in dialogue with the wisdom of others. I felt this as a vulnerable process, where the self looses and re-finds the ‘self’ (may she find herself, may she lose herself) within inter-subjective dances.
of learning and becoming. For various reasons, I could not completely bring to full
consciousness articulation at each step along the way all the influences and impacts I navigated
within the border-crossing zones of this study. This includes the depth of my own desire for
integrity of vision in bringing forward new work.

**WSMA Faculty**

Dianne was my original interviewee, representing one of three WSMA co-directors. A
number of adjunct instructors also teach within the program itself. Since graduating from Elinor
Gadon’s PhD cohort in Women’s Spirituality at CIIS, Dianne Jenett and Judy Grahn have
worked very closely over many years of co-directing the WSMA at both New College and ITP.
Dianne felt very strongly that Judy’s voice be included, a sentiment I concurred with, yet adding
to my sense of responsibility in representing these leaders of the field, my own mentors and
respected elders. In my choosing to interview them without including their third WSMA co-
director D’vorah Grenn to be a study co-participant, there was a sense of a loss of this other
voice in their articulations of WSMA leadership and vision. Though D’vorah’s voice and stories
would provide further insight, ultimately I was challenged by already stretching the limits of my
study beyond my original notion of three participants. Continuing to add individual women
would limit my ability to transcribe and represent each story and practice within one
dissertation.

**Dianne**

During my years of study in the WSMA at New College, I met Dianne Jenett as an
adjunct faculty member teaching our feminist research methodology course. Dianne co-
developed with three of her transpersonal psychology colleagues, a research methodology
known as “Organic Inquiry” (Clements et al., 1999). Within this methodology course, Dianne
steered our graduate cohort through the intricacies of feminist, relational, personal, storied,
narrative and arts-informed research methodologies that we could engage with for our final
thesis projects, all within an understanding of what it would mean “if research were sacred”
(1999). A memory of this time was overcoming our collective shock at being able to write “I”
into our term papers, a process begun within the WSMA coursework of “Spiritual
Autobiography” in the previous semester. We worked to articulate our lives and relations into
text, beyond our shared undergraduate training of ‘objective’ essay writing. Organic Inquiry
forged my understanding of the potent potentiality of sacred, feminist, relational dimensions of research practice. Dianne eventually co-directed the WSMA program at New College of California with Judy Grahn, after Rose Frances, the former director of WSMA, left this position mid-way through my own WSMA degree program.

Dianne came into her scholarly work after a successful career in the high tech business industry. She found herself at a mid-life crossroads with questions of ‘self’ that reached beyond the business world. She chose to pursue a transformative graduate degree in Transpersonal Psychology at ITP. This degree led to her enrolment within a PhD in Women’s Spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), a one-time cohort of students directed by feminist art historian Elinor Gadon. The impetus for this PhD program later established the two MA-level Women’s Spirituality degrees, and a now continuing PhD program in Women’s Spirituality at CIIS. American poet Judy Grahn studied within the same doctoral Women’s Spirituality cohort as Dianne. The two forged their friendship therein, conducting collaborative fieldwork for their differing dissertations in travel to Kerala, India.

Dianne had been studying in the grassroots Women’s Spirituality movement, reading books like Vicki Noble’s “Motherpeace” (1994), using Motherpeace tarot cards to navigate both personal and business ventures. She travelled to Kerala, India during her MA graduate studies and was struck by the deeply rooted, living goddess and matrilineal traditions there. This devotion to Devi/goddess is combined with this Indian State’s progressive gender politics in the status and literacy of women—Dianne considered the potent connections between the two. She centred her dissertation research within Kerala, focusing her studies on the yearly, massive, as in thousands of women attending, women’s cooking ritual. This is an offering to the Goddess Attukal Amma (Mother) in a celebration known as “Pongala” (Jenett, 1999). Pongala remains the focus of Dianne’s cross-cultural fieldwork on goddesses, women’s rituals and spirituality as she continues to return to Kerala (Jenett, 2005a). At times Dianne facilitates groups of WSMA students to travel there. The impact of these experiential learning trips is a thread running through the stories of others in this study. American students are able to experience first-hand the life, arts and living goddess traditions of Kerala, India.

I deeply appreciate the relationship I have with Dianne during and since my years of graduation from the WSMA, her insight, love of women’s cultures, and ability to listen and respond as I navigate my way through further learning and research. Within continuing conversations with her, I felt my way into a doctoral program, not knowing what discipline I
could possibly continue Women’s Spirituality studies within. Our shared inquiries spark Dianne’s desire to articulate and write about the dynamics of WSMA pedagogy and her own role as an educator therein (Jenett, 2008). Study within the field of Women’s Spirituality demands as much pedagogical and methodological integrity as it does an ability to open to the radical subject matter of woman-centred spirituality itself. Even as I was enrolled in a doctoral program at UBC, my continuing conversations with Dianne nourished this inquiry.

**Judy**

Judy Grahn is “one of the towering pioneers in both feminist and gay and lesbian literature” (Moe’s Books *Poetry Flash* announcement, 2011) as an American poet (e.g. Grahn, 1970, 1971, 1977, 1974, 1978, 2008, 2009) and writer of critical and autobiographical essays (e.g. Grahn, 1983, 1985, 1989), and a novel (Grahn, 1988). Her long poems, “Queen of Wands” (1982) and “Queen of Swords” (1987), were also produced as theatre. Titles such as, “The Common Woman Poems” (1972), and “This Woman is Talking to Death” (1978), circulated widely with the United States and beyond. Judy’s poetry was and is instrumental in expressing the life, desires and everyday realities of women within women’s communities, and gay and lesbian social movements that grew throughout the 1970s. Women’s Spirituality as a grassroots movement and graduate degree is heiress of the liberation sought within these movements. Men and women redefined gay life out of the dominating pathological and illegal focus imposed upon homosexuality, towards political-social-cultural-spiritual freedom of all such sexual relations and identities. Judy’s book “Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds” (1983) constituted a new (old) origin story and history of the gay community, re-implicating gay culture as having a central creative, sustaining and *inspiriting* office within human history. This text was particularly held close to the heart of the American gay men’s community during the height of the AIDS epidemic (Grahn, personal communication, 2011), and was foundational to the development of queer cultural history and spirituality (Ostriker, 2009).

Recently, Judy was awarded a Bill Whitehead Lifetime Achievement Award from The Publishing Triangle. Always the poet-thinker-feeler, her newly published work, “Love Belongs to Those Who do the Feeling (1966 – 2006),” includes a section entitled “New and Future Poems” that “calls for fresh rituals and reverence for the planet and for its indigenous people and divinities” (Ostriker, 2009, p. 22). From living within such immersed understandings of women’s cultures and counter-cultures, Judy has taught writing and poetry for many years. She
coined “Poetry of Use” as the title of her writing class within the WSMA, wherein I first studied with her. I overcame my hesitance to publically share my poetry, acknowledging this hidden ‘practice’ I had kept since age 14, scrawling into my notebooks. I discovered how Nané-the-writer went into hiding as Nané-the-artist got all of the attention within my BFA visual arts degree, as if the two—writer and visual artist—couldn’t somehow get along.

Within the WSMA, Judy also teaches her groundbreaking evolutionary, cross-cultural theory of the creative impact of women’s menstrual/estrus cycles on human cultural origination. “Metaformic theory” (Grahn, 1993) is a studied understanding of women’s menstrual blood, ignored or hidden as it is within dominant Western cultural and philosophical discourses. Judy considers this “blood taboo,” its signification and rituals, including the counterpart ritualization of male blood and bleeding, as undergirding culture and ritual writ large as we live and know it. Judy’s Women’s Spirituality dissertation research in Kerala, India was an application of metaformic theory, asking the question, “Are goddesses metaformic constructs?” (1999). Judy often says that metaformia is a “poet’s theory” worked through from within a poet’s way of thinking and being (Grahn, personal communication, date unknown). In coming to know the world through metaformia, which more then a theory is an embodied, experiential shift in how one sees reality, I have a pair of ‘metaformic goggles’ that shifts my perception.

Judy now co-directs the WSMA at ITP with Dianne Jenett and D’vorah Grenn, teaching coursework in poetry, creative writing and metaformic theory. Her classes have far reaching impacts on students, where women develop creative writing abilities to tell their own creative fiction and non-fiction stories, and to restore, re-story, and re-centre their own lives as being central to human socio-cultural origination. I especially enjoy Judy’s sense of humour about it all. She so loves the world and all the people in it. I have often fallen into hilarious laughter with her at some stray remark or insight into the human condition, even (or especially) in the midst of the most serious topic.

Vicki

I invited Vicki Noble to be my third faculty interviewee. She has worked for many years as an adjunct professor within the WSMA, first at New College and now at ITP. I realized over the months of writing my comprehensive exams and making trips to California how meaningful Vicki’s teaching is for me in an ongoing way. Vicki was my initial link to the WSMA program. As a grassroots teacher and mentor beyond the WSMA, Vicki’s work informs central aspects of
my own relational stories and learning within the field of Women’s Spirituality at large. Vicki is well known in Women’s Spirituality and Goddess communities (Braude, 2004; Eller, 1993) as a women’s spiritual teacher, healer, astrologer, yogini, independent scholar, and co-creator of the “Motherpeace Tarot” deck (1994). During the 1970s, while working in the women’s health movement and graduating with a self-designed BA in Women’s Studies, Vicki had “a series of direct, revelatory visionary experiences of the Goddess that changed my life, opened my heart, awakened my psychic faculties, and healed my beleaguered body” (Noble, 2007, p. 2). Through these experiences she gained the power to heal herself and others with her hands. With her partner of the time, Karen Vogel, she researched ancient Goddess civilizations, wondering, “was there really a time in the past when cultures were more “female-centered” and if so, what happened? What would female-centered culture actually look like?” (p. 1). They co-created the Motherpeace tarot deck, hand drawing a cross-cultural, women-centred, round-shaped deck of cards. These cards spontaneously returning the Tarot tradition to a vision that retraces women’s history and prehistory, spiritual leadership, matriarchal social foundations, and priestessing within multi-cultural goddess mythologies.

Vicki travelled extensively in the US, Canada and internationally to teach Motherpeace and lead women’s sharing and healing circles. She wrote texts such as “Shakti Women” (1991) and “The Double Goddess” (2003), drawing from her experiences and her ongoing research into women’s ancient healing traditions and spiritual practices. She focuses on East-West lineages of travelling priestesses, tracking their movements through transcontinental iconography. Her healing work is conducted from the vantage of “Female Shamanism” which she teaches alongside a woman-centred spiritual practice rooted from her study and experience with Dakinis, who are Tantric Tibetan Buddhist spiritual figures, skywalkers and women who fly. Dakinis are female embodiments of enlightenment, as actual living human or spiritual beings, from the tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism. Dakinis assist the arising and eventual stabilization of an uninterrupted vision of the true nature of reality in daily life.

My story with Women’s Spirituality almost begins with Vicki. I heard about Vicki’s teaching from an apprentice midwife friend in Ottawa, while studying in my BFA and simultaneously taking workshops with local lay midwives, discerning my way into a then a-legal midwifery career. I had just discovered the work of Marija Gimbutas, the Lithuanian-American archeologist, reading her pictorially rich texts and interpretations of Neolithic art, artifacts, and architecture in “Language of the Goddess” (1989). The work of Gimbutas is taught
by Vicki in the WSMA in a course called “Archeomythology.” Archeomythology is the term coined by Gimbutas for her interdisciplinary methodology that combines archeological science with mythological and linguistic understandings of history, pre-history, culture and human origins.

At the time I was first reading Marija Gimbutas (and yearning to study with her in person at UCLA), I was beginning to understand that the energy of women’s birthing power was complexly connected to something deeply spiritual and feminine-female, Earth-bound, primordial and immanent in the real, yet sublimely transcendent as the “gift” of life returns over and over from within the female body. This is something remarkably large and yet ignored or un-named within the current socio-cultural milieu. Hearing of Vicki’s shamanic school for women in California that incorporated woman-centred ritual, Motherpeace tarot cards, women’s talking, sharing, singing and healing circles, hands-on-healing, astrology, yoga, dream and trance work, into a program of months-long studies, I felt this was something exotic and special, a far away dream I might savour but not quite get to. A seed was planted that had yet to grow.

Now, I have gratitude for my years of study with Vicki, made on a meandering, unique path of its own, still unfolding. I first met her in person in my late 20s (upon my astrological Saturn return) attending her weekend Motherpeace Tarot teaching workshop in Vancouver, BC. I found that I loved the cards and Vicki as a teacher too. Vicki carefully explained the history of the tarot as a map of human consciousness and awakening. She teaches Motherpeace as way to tap into one’s own life path and experiences held within both the everyday and the greater collective human project. Vicki herself seemed so familiar to me, a strong female mentor-figure I must have always known. I felt her certainty of vision and path, how she held her spiritual location. Permeating off of her being and into my own heart was what the Buddhists’ call a “transmission” from teacher to student. It was a simple, direct beginning to my understanding of finding Vicki as a teacher. I was in ‘awe’ of her, yet her presence was so clearly something I knew and could easily relate to.

After my first daughter Danaan was born when I was 30-years-old, I again met Vicki through a workshop that culminated in a hands-on-healing ritual for the whole community, men included. She continues to lead these “Transformational Healing Rituals” where people facing life-threatening or other illnesses take turns lying down at the centre, receiving hands-on-healing of others—we drum, rattle and sing together as a group. I love the felt power of such rituals, as one opens to communal sources of Earth-based energy that run through and clear the body’s
channels. In this time, Vicki mentioned the opening of an MA program in Women’s Spirituality in San Francisco in which she was teaching coursework. Another light bulb went off in my head as I again faced the impossible idea of going to California. Yet this time I was living just up the seismic West Coast fault line. Three years later, as I began the WSMA, I quickly created an independent study with Vicki, inviting other New College WSMA students to join me. These small intimate circles of four or five women met in her then home outside of Santa Cruz, California.

Vicki always talks very openly about her life and what is up for her. Her lucid and attentive way of being models what it takes for a woman to thrive and survive within a critical, woman-centred spiritual path in still patriarchal times. During my WSMA studies, I felt content and centred to be able to sit within classes that were embodied as small circles of women, absorbing Vicki’s teaching and sharing with all. We worked with Motherpeace, Vicki’s stories and research, yoga stretches, and hands-on-healing with each other. By the second workshop we were practicing the Dakini mandala together, transforming negative or overwhelming emotions into their wisdom aspects towards harmonious and joyful lives. Vicki’s home is itself an altar, a sacred space, with images and female icons lovingly placed on shelves. The walls are lined with books, beautiful statues, objects and carpets, and prayer flag adornments. Soaking in her ‘frequency,’ I leave in an altered/altar-ed state that changes me a bit every time. I can acknowledge and bring forward my own unique gifts and spirit.

Vicki consistently teaches the sacredness of the female body, and nature itself, from within a deep understanding of menstruation, birth giving and sexuality as women’s cyclical capacity for immediate embodied spiritual awareness and ‘sudden awakening.’ Women’s cycles and embodiment are the original blueprint of shamanistic vision and insight, undergirding many spiritual traditions that have lost this source of understanding. Vicki teaches aspects of healing, the Dakini mandala practice, and the core course in Archeomythology within the WSMA, and is currently working as a mentor for WSMA students in their final thesis projects. Vicki’s stories and practices are an example of the many exemplary adjunct faculty members of the WSMA who contribute to, live and teach the breathing, spirited pulse of the program through unique, woman-centred spiritual lineages and practices.

**WSMA Student Alumni**

Dozens of students have now graduated from the WSMA. By interviewing particular alumni, the unique content of their thesis projects and life work magnifies certain elements of the WSMA within this study. In my time spent reviewing WSMA theses, I began to dream the qualities, feelings and soul’s calling of women who had graduated from this program, as a variety of thesis themes and inquiries became apparent. *Healer / healing* inquiries emerge in thesis topics about women’s sexuality and body integrity, healing from sexual abuse, reclaiming the full erotic power of the female from a patriarchal definition of such, exuding love of the female, love of self, love of self in all relations. *Earth love / justice / eco-environmental* themes emerge in theses inquiries that foreground Earth connection, ecofeminism, love of earth, the four elements, Indigenous knowledge of place and land, and art emerging from such theory and
practices. *Spiritual activism / social justice* inquiries emerge in theses that range from overcoming oppressions of race, sex, class through spiritualized living and female-based spirituality, to explorations of radical economic politics, and uses of ritual to counteract and heal issues of justice for women.

*Menstruation / blood mysteries* inquiries occur where menstruation is understood as the origin of culture, through metaformic consciousness and the work of Judy Grahn (1993). Birth giving is reclaimed in a post-patriarchal sense within this stream of work, centralizing women’s bodily experiences and embodiment. *Goddess(es) / divine feminine* practices themes come forward in theses that pursue the meaning and role of female divinity within lives, including the figure of Mary, and cross-cultural work on goddesses in Western, Eastern, African and Indigenous traditions, though ritual arts, dance and many other forms. Women’s bodies are understood as sacred and portal of the divine. Practices across and beyond religious traditions are explored within the specificity of the contexts of women’s lives. *Art / artist* inquiries appear in the emergence of artist identities through study in the WSMA. Women who did not count themselves ‘artists’ come out of the program making art, performing theatre, singing and songwriting, writing poetry, publishing books and stories. Thus, art and developing artful living is a theme across many theses. *Ritual / rites of passage* archetypes emerge in thesis research that deals with stages of women’s lives and forms of acknowledgement, ritualizing and honouring of such. This theme includes girls’ goddess or embodied spirituality education groups, menarche ceremonies, women’s circles, education of life meaning and stages, crone-ing and elders’ honouring ceremonies where women’s wisdom and knowing in all stages of life have variety in needs and wants, yet all are of value and worth.

Women’s Spiritualidad theses may combine more than one theme or inquiry, and surely go beyond what I mention in this list. In traditional qualitative ethnographic methodology, I am a participant-observer (Creswell, 1998, p. 123) with inside access to the community and an ethical responsibility of care for the work I chose to represent. I wanted student alumni I interviewed to reflect a mix of spirituality, activism, art, and original research. I wanted to work with women who continue to reflect upon this depth of commitment in their lives. I ultimately chose my co-participants from my own networks, with whom I could engage close conversation. I sought women who were local to the Bay area, or accessible to my Vancouver home, with whom I had established some rapport, however deeply or briefly before this study. Following my own intuitive threads, each of them had already inspired me in some way, contributing
differing aspects of inquiry within the WSMA.

Aikya

Aikya Param and I shared our years of WSMA classrooms and thesis completions. I wanted to interview a peer colleague with whom I had studied in the program. Post-graduation, we continue to communicate with each other by email. I visit with her when I travel to California through our scholarly involvement with the American Academy of Religion, Western Region. Aikya played a leadership role as chair of the “Women and Religion” section, providing a venue for emerging WS scholars such as myself to present our work in further academic contexts. My invitation for her to join this study was an extension of our already shared inquiry, co-journeying as we have been into what the WSMA means in our lives and how it shapes us now.

Aikya was drawn early in life to a spiritual path in a philosophical quest for answers about the suffering she experienced and witnessed in her family’s lives. She immersed herself in Shivite Hinduism, studying Advaita Vedanta in New York City during the 1970s in the American ashram of Indian guru, Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Led to this study after being riveted by an image of Lord Nataraj who is Shiva, Lord of the dance, Aikya learned Sanskrit, meditation and ritual practices. She participated in the spiritual life and studies of this community for many years. Then and now, Aikya navigates inner experiences and visions. These include losing for a time her sense of ‘ego’ to have an expanded consciousness of the ALL in the unity of existence.

Currently living in Oakland, California, Aikya was drawn to the WSMA after researching local Bay area graduate programs in creative writing. She had the desire to use writing and artwork at once in her creative work, with the goal to shift a sense of alienation from her intuition. The WSMA had unexpected yet related effects to Aikya’s goals. She began to recall early childhood experiences related to her Native ancestry through her father, paternal grandfather and great-aunt. These recovered memories led her to search for the Nation her people came from, and restore her lost Indigenous identity. Alongside this thread of remembering, Aikya completed her WSMA thesis on the effects of devotional singing practices in Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi’s (Amma) San Ramon, California community, within which Aikya was a devotee and community member at the time (Param, 2002). Amma (Mother) is a world-renowned Indian “hugging saint” (Param, 2002), whose devotees established a
California centre. With Aikya, I was able to visit and receive Amma’s blessing hug, her “darshan,” on one of Amma’s yearly North American trips. I waited in a long line of devotees to receive and experience this moment of Mother’s hug until I collapsed into her embrace. As Amma whispered words of love into my ear I burst into spontaneous tears, feeling the magnitude of her energetic nurturing and compassion for all selves.

I love and appreciate sharing in experiences such as this with Aikya over the years. We talk of our lives and spiritual journeys, able to move through many topics together. I am always learning from Aikya’s life long spiritual path and her commitment to service and creativity. Like other women in this study, we are spiritual friends in “good companionship” (Palmo in Hart, 2003, p. 2006) with each other. We share our inner/outer and exceptional experiences. Aikya and I have often talked about the significance of symbols and symbolic interpretation within Women’s Spirituality. So much of the sacred female and feminine is hidden within visual and sculptural symbols when there are few directly written texts. Aikya herself paints and sculpts images of such, making portraits drawn from spiritual recoveries of knowledge.

Aikya earns a modest living from working in medical research—undertaking the WSMA was financially challenging for her in ways I and other students discussed over the years. We spoke of the gifts of this education in light of its cost and debt. As a Canadian in relationship to my American friends, I learned first hand the individual life implications of the lack of US Government funding of higher education. This becomes a life long burden for many students who carry large education debts.

Since graduating from the WSMA, Aikya completed her Professional Science of Mind Practitioner license where she is now clergy within the Oakland Center for Spiritual Living (Religious Science), during the time of this dissertation study. A practitioner is “a state of consciousness, which heals by revealing Truth…joyfully surrendering to Spirit as the presence of Love and Truth” (Practitioner services brochure, Oakland Centre for Spiritual Living, 2009). Aikya gives service through a prison ministry, working with others in community visioning processes and letter writing circles to inmates. She writes letters as a service of communication and support as prisoners make transitions to life on the ‘outside.’ Aikya has recently started a blog (2011, http://whole-and-free.blogspot.com/), writing stories of working through fear, her own awakenings and her work with inmates. She exemplifies for me a woman who fearlessly attends to her inner life. She finds ways and places for self-development and inquiry while responding to the world with compassion, healing herself to become a community healer and
counselor. Gaining her Practitioner license at the age of 65 after years-long studies within various spiritual traditions and the painstaking work of reclaiming her Indigenous identity, Aikya writes that “here I am in my culture at my age, doing what the ancient women spiritual leaders did when they were my age” (Personal communication, 2009).


**Anya**

I met Anya De Marie for the first time in 2008 at an AAR conference, where she was presenting a paper on a combined panel with Dianne Jenett and others on the topic of “Organic Inquiry” research methodology. Previous to this meeting, Anya and I had been communicating online. She was my editor in tandem with Judy Grahn for my now published essay on the metaformic dimensions of the medical birth practice of cesarian section (Jordan, 2007a). Anya, as editor of the journal, “Metaformia: A Journal of Menstruation and Culture,” works closely with Judy during and since her graduation from the WSMA in 2008. As a sister scholar, her
editorial work on my essay began our friendship and ongoing dialogues that nourish my path. She attuned with great insight to the yearnings of my work with birth, having keen insight into women’s blood healing work and metaformic theory.

Anya came into the WSMA from a background in frontline domestic violence work, with further commitments to social justice, women’s and Indigenous rights. She has travelled extensively in Mexico and Central America, doing international observation work for the Zapatistas, and later in El Salvadorian elections. Anya and I share a love of ecofeminism, Earthly connectivity through simple living and wilderness retreats. She cultivates awareness of humanity’s ‘blood roots’ in sacred understandings of women’s blood and bleeding. I wanted to learn more about her MA thesis (2004) entitled, “Building the Dragon’s Nest: A Community’s Metaformic Evolution,” in which she explores the community building by hand of a menstrual hut and retreat lodge. This is a “moon lodge” for women built on communal land in the US Pacific North West.

At the time I met her, Anya was living back-to-the-land within an intentional, Earth-based community outside of Port Townsend, Washington. She was working within a local childcare program while completing her WSMA studies. Anya thus commuted between Washington State and California, as I had from Vancouver, BC, to do her degree. She found restoration of her spirit on the land, living in proximity to the Pacific Ocean wilderness. Anya began to study West African dance in Port Townsend community dance circles, a deeply significant practice that restored and centred the art of dance in her life.

Anya currently resides in the San Francisco Bay area, after a period of discernment that unfolded during the tenure of this doctoral study as to where to undertake her own PhD studies. Much as I had upon leaving the WSMA, Anya was seeking a scholarly field that could contain the next level of her specialized studies that would include women’s embodiment and sacred dance, spirituality, metaformic theory, and the desire to write accessible books for the public on topics such as menstruation, matriarchy and women’s oral histories. Relocating completely to the Bay area since 2010, Anya entered the first year of a PhD program in Transpersonal Psychology at ITP. As an extension of her WSMA degree, she is able to further her work in this context, while being mentored and nurtured by WS faculty to teach in the WSMA.

Anya is currently dancing in San Francisco Bay area Haitian and Haitian-Cuban dance companies. She extends her artistic practice rooted within dance as a cross-cultural, spiritual, sacred ritual expression of life. Anya continues to steer the “Metaformia” journal, seeking new
directions within her dissertation research. As Anya relays to me her thoughts of developing Metaformia, I feel how she is becoming the next generation of WSMA educators and leaders. How fortuitous to have her participate within this study as we dialogue, travel and practice together.

MamaCoAtl

I came out of the healing room and felt an enormous melancholy. On the sidewalk outside the healer’s house, I wrote: this is for Her who held on to the warmth of my love, for Her whose dismembered body rots in the brutal landscape of corporate paradise. (Parra, 2003, p. 12)

Silvia Parra, who is known as MamaCoAtl, began her WSMA degree in the year following me. I met her in August 2003 as we attended the same graduation ceremony for our degree programs. I had taken a medical leave to give birth to Shanti, my second daughter, before completing my WSMA thesis. I was captivated with the bravery and expression of MamaCoAtl’s graduating performance and thesis (2003), an evocative, passionate social and spiritual justice ritual theatre project expressing the plight of the women of Juarez, Mexico, entitled “Surviving Femicide in the Maquiladora Border.” This thesis is encountered through a process MamaCoAtl names “artivism” that integrates “ritual, art and activism” so that “a more ancient mind comes to the inner stage” (p. 20). MamaCoAtl’s deeply poetic artivism project intervenes on the sexualized murders and abductions of hundreds of young women in Juarez, a border factory town between Mexico and the US. These young, mostly Indigenous migrant workers work in the assembly plants of corporate, American owned maquiladoras. MamaCoAtl’s evocation of the women’s plight through ritual theatre addresses the role of mothers in seeking justice for their daughters. The performance ends in a healing ritual, where the patriarchal, sacrificial blood rites/rights of murder/femicide are replaced with the blood rites of the mother through giving the blood of life, in menstrual rites/rights and women’s free embodiment. “Guardians” of the four directions and elements call forth their blessings and prayers (Parra, 2003, p. 61-64).

Mama’s work is poetic at all stages of creation. Writing poetry informs her artivism, “in times of conflict and struggle I have found myself only on the wind of a poem” (2003, p. 16). Of Mexican mestiza heritage, MamaCoAtl is a poet-songstress, performing across San Francisco
and at events and gatherings in her local Mission district community. This was the location of New College, and the Latino/a, Mestizo/a community of San Francisco. Migrant and landed peoples from Mexico and Central America live in this neighbourhood, carrying burdens of poverty within double lives marked by that American blend of illegal alien-nation. Many live ongoing border-crossings between South and North for wages. Mama describes how she “sings for those humans rendered invisible in dominator culture; for the campesinas, the maquiladoras, and the silenced majorities” where “her art is an invitation to healing our earth, to renewing our human spirit.” (2010, http://sites.google.com/site/theartvistcoallition/be-a-part-of-16-days-of-artivism)

Since graduating from the WSMA, I became familiar with MamaCoAtl’s public ritual clearing/healing work through announcements sent out across the WSMA alumni email lists. MamaCoAtl and healer/activist friends conduct healing rituals in public spaces such as the square outside of the Mission Street Bart train stop. This artivist coalition works with the effects of the disenfranchisement of local populations. They create acknowledgement and blessings to address and release the suffering and human costs of this American way of life.

MamaCoAtl was awarded a fellowship to undertake the WSMA at New College through her education and written work about femicide in addressing the missing women of Juarez. Mama has initiated, with others in an ARTivism coalition, a yearly San Francisco festival to mark the International Day to End Violence Against Women and Girls, called the “16 Days of Artivism.” This day is marked on November 25, an alternate and alternative event to the American thanksgiving weekend. The 16 Days of Artivism remembers and heals gendered forms of violence. Poets, musicians, visual artists, ritualists, dancers and healers come together in public multi-day events to speak, listen, sing, share dialogue, read, build altars and conduct community healing ceremonies.

Since graduating from the WSMA, MamaCoAtl has further developed her healing and inquiry path by recovering her “Indigenosity” (MamaCoAtl, personal communication, 2009) through the Aztec knowledge and cosmological systems of her ancestors. She is critical of the limits of the English language in being able to hold full conceptual and lived experiences of Indigenosity. Acknowledging the decimating colonial and Imperial impact of the English language as many Aboriginal peoples have, Mama notes how loosing root languages and native speakers has meant the loss of conceptual and embodied cultural knowledge. Ways-of-life-on-the-land are held and developed within linguistic contexts over millennia. MamaCoAtl is thus
learning the Uto-Aztecan root language of *Nahuatl* in San Francisco. She studies within modern lineage schools of Indigenous teachers who cross the North-South as she does, trans-versing *worlds and words* (Hasebe-Ludt et. al, 2009) from Mexico to America.

During our interview MamaCoAtl shared the *Tonalamatl* calendar with me from her Aztec teachers, describing how everyday has a purpose and meaning, depending on one’s own birth date and life cycle (Mazatzin, 2003). She explained some of its uses for daily life by learning about the cosmological beings who reveal scientific understandings of the Earth, elements and universe. There is great significance for each individual human life in understanding our unique placements in time and the greater cycles of life on this Earth in intricate relations to all others and *Pachamama* as Mother Earth, Mother World, Mother of reality, Mother Life. I am awed and inspired by MamaCoAtl’s spirit, her powerful singing performances and ongoing work for justice, how she lives this through a crucible of personal inquiry and transformation.

**Red thread**

“Red thread” is like my eighth co-participant in this study. Red thread is a material being, or a material *of being*, that I walk with alongside this research, as philosopher-midwife. My art and performative work within Women’s Spirituality, in the field of education and beyond has centred for some time on “red thread.” I was first drawn to work with red thread as an artist learning to weave in Textile Arts coursework, before the birth of my first daughter, Danaan. I made small, thin-threaded weavings on a table loom, combining red warp and weft threads with traces of metal copper wire. The copper and the red thread were highly charged materials in my mind. Both materials conduct energy, electrical and spiritual energetic life forces of blood meaning and lineage. The red thread signified for me traces of blood as the *fluid* that gives and receives life from human to human across time. As *fluid* beings we are made for this holding of life. We hold and pass on the blood of being alive in bodies—a moving stream of humanity that contains the wisdom of this red-salt-liquid, time after time.

I wanted the strength of the materials to speak from within the small red thread weavings I first made. I was looking for a *language* of fibre and cloth. I was looking for lost *languages* of women at the same time I was studying and beginning to practice midwifery. I was sure these languages of birth and being/be-coming were hidden within the living processes of textiles and weaving. Lost speaking and knowing are buried in threads that for millennia have flowed
through women’s hands (Tedlock, 1994). I wanted to enter the worlds of these processes, a *living inquiry*, to experience commitments of technique, time and energy, and absorb some psychic trace of their emergence. Entering such processes, I drop into another space/time continuum of knowing that links me to something deeper within myself that is not my-self. It is the selves of all who had worked such threads in past and even future.

Working in midwifery, I engage in re-claiming birth towards woman-centred, holistic care of birth-giving as a more then medical event, as a social, cultural and spiritual act—*birth led me to thread*. I was already a sewer who had learned skills from family sewers, my mother, grandmother and my stepmother. And I was an artist by formal schooling, yearning to deepen my inquiry and reclamation of fibre-based tactile and text-ile arts. I made an intuitive link between midwifery and weaving, between threads and birth and women’s embodied work. I felt and feel that thread and story are one.

I did not then know the association of *thread* with “Tantra” as a spiritual path. I do not mean the sexualized *Tantra* of its New Age encounters, but its more ancient association with *thread, fabric* and *connectivity*, “connectivity of the inner self with the vastness of the Universe, to the very subtleties prevalent in the cosmic energies” (Chopra, 2006, p. 103). Within Tantric streams of Buddhism and Hinduism, the living substance of blood and especially menstrual blood is considered sacred and worthy of devotion within the female form wherein goddess herself resides (Amazzzone, 2010; Shaw, 1994). In this blood-fabric of cosmic energies “weaving” is forever a linguistic metaphor. Within the English language it is a way to describe how things come together in the world as we “weave stories” and “spin tales.” In Greek mythology the three Fates, a triad of women, work at spinning, weaving and cutting the duration of our lives through their hands. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, in her text on the feminine shamanic path (2006), discusses how spinning and weaving are processes akin to the gestation and birth of a child. These rhythmic, life-giving pulsations have passed through women’s hands and womb-bodies through millennia as ongoing, relational forces that re-make the world against the “reality of change, destruction and death” (Tedlock, 2006, p. 223). Female generative processes have ancient connections to spinning thread. Depicted on a sixth century Mayan vase is a mythological birth scene, with the midwife’s “badge of office” being a spindle whorl attached to her head (p. 215). Birth itself brought me deeply to a desire for thread and its expressions. Weaving as I had asked of it led me to know the connections between thread and birth, birth and thread. Threads are the stories we tell and un-tell in generative spinning and
weaving acts of making lives and tales.

This is how I came to my red thread works, and the *simple gesture of using red thread* that I keep following as a path of inquiry. Within the arts-based education research of poet and scholar Rishma Dunlop, “the colour red is a central *thread* in the narrative…In my works, red is linked to artistic creativity, South Asian and female identity” (2008, p. 63, *italics mine*). “Red” becomes a full-blown human character within education scholar Pauline Sameshima’s (2007) story telling in “Seeing Red.” Red is the object and person of her desire, to whom Sameshima addresses her narrative. Arts-based researcher Stephanie Sringgay (2008) opens her dissertation study with a chapter entitled, “Red Threads of Entanglement,” engaging the wrapping of red threads around rocks on the beach as a larger metaphor for her research into “Body Knowledge and Curriculum.” Springgay’s research celebrates the “messy, complicated and vulnerable places of curriculum, pedagogy and body knowledge,” considering the “possibilities of inter-embodiment” (2008, p. 7). Barbara Bickel, artist, educator, scholar and friend, inspired by my use of red thread, brought this material more overtly into the art making processes of her MA and dissertation level inquiries. Her dissertation explores women’s community-based spiritual and multi-faith leadership, of which I myself was a participant (Bickel, 2008). *Red thread* carries these rich overtones of lives lived and stories told, picking up upon women’s spiritual lineages, the turns, twists, windings and unw windlings, the messy and ecstatic inter-being of our bodied lives.

For the esoterically- or linguistically- minded, my own studies of “thread” reveal its etymology as “th-read,” to carry the word “read,” as in *to read a book*. “Read” is derivative of the word “red,” connecting *reading* to the colour *red* as being blood itself. The “th-” means *twist*, so that “th-read” is both *reading* (words and meaning) and the *twisting of blood* (playing-plying-twisting words and meaning). We spin the life of the bodied story to being from within and among us, acknowledging the role of both giver and receiver of text (text-ile) as one.

Upon entering the WSMA in the year 2000, I brought red thread into one of my first classes. I used it for the first time as a performative gesture within the course “Spiritual Autobiography.” With red thread, I told the story of my middle name “Ariadne,” given to me by my mother. I unspooled a ball of red thread to form a spiral labyrinth that held a mirror at its centre. I performed the thread of my namesake, where Ariadne is understood as being a lost Cretan priestess of the labyrinth (Mountainwater, 1991). Labyrinths are foot-pathways of sacred geometry inscribed into the earth or stone, leading into a centre and out again in one entrance
and pathway. This symbol of sacred architecture is found upon ancient Cretan coins. In Greek myth of Ariadne her labyrinth becomes a maze in which one could be lost and never get out. In her myth, Ariadne hands Theseus a ball of thread so that he might survive the fierce half-man, half-beast Minotaur instilled in the maze. Unwinding Araidne’s thread, Theseus is able to find his way in and out again, unharmed. In playing on this theme of unwinding red thread, I engage a literal unwinding and winding of red thread within education contexts as a performative, arts-based gesture. I enact becoming both lost and found. I drop into a meditative and focused consciousness while enacting this gesture which sublimes and grounds experience, bringing awareness to the present moment, may she find herself, may she lose herself: Winding and unwinding red threads, finding and being lost, points to the necessary paradox of living both aspects in processes of life and its study.

The red thread is life force in all its cosmological birthings and weavings. Its spinning is an act of bringing lost or new worlds into being. I spin thread as a devotional practice. I re-claim women’s stories and my own stories caught and spun as they are in this living moment of time I inhabit. As an artist I dwell within such thresholds of understanding as described by art educator Rita Irwin (2007) as “social, temporal or spiritual thresholds” (p. 1402). Irwin defines the way artists work as liminal beings through occupying “in-between spaces,” “dynamic spaces of possibility where individuals and cultures come in contact with one another creating interstitial conditions for new communities of learning” (p. 1402).

I hand spun, dyed and wove a richly toned red mantle from raw wool while competing my WSMA and awaiting the birth of my second child. Spinning yarn is meditative as the mind slows to a pointed focus of activity that the body carries. Hands catch tufts of wool and allow the twist of it into long strands of thread through the spinning wheel. After spinning, I worked very carefully with a combination of colours for the wool, heating yarn and dyes in large pots of water. I played specifically with the colours of women’s blood reds, from bright hues to darker subdued, almost black tinged red—mixing hues of red, magenta and navy blue. I finished weaving the red mantle in the months following my Shanti’s birth, after writing my MA thesis. I was in pursuit of the signifier “red” as a colour, and the rich meanings of weaving itself. I want to both literally weave and work with ‘weaving’ in its deeply conceptual and cosmological sense. I imagined the finished cloak as a lost mantle for some ancient priestess, Ariadne herself or another wise woman, lost and now re-found through my weaving of her to being. My final weaving presented as a richly red and textured form, very raw and wild in its appearance.
During the weaving process on my small loom, I left all the tendrils of spun wool hanging out, long and visible, though these are usually woven back into a piece so as not to be seen. I liked the wild look of them. I had not yet guessed their further purpose. The finished red mantle provided the link between my WSMA work and what I now undertake.

**Red thread in the forest**

A process, study is also a place.

(Pinar, 2006, p. 111)

I engaged a performance ritual to mark the beginning of this dissertation study by bringing the woven red mantle into the forest with me to wear and perform—bringing it to life upon my body. I began my inquiry on the UBC endowment lands on which I undertook my doctoral studies. I made conscious this fact of location and place as I travelled between places, from here to San Francisco and back again. I enacted and honoured my felt sense of bodily and spiritual connection to the Earth and my love of West Coast forests and ecologies. Tall trees meet salty-tang of Pacific Ocean sands and shores. I wanted to perform my-self through the red thread in the forest landscape, to act within the body of the verdant green forest, relating with living presence of trees, rocks, plants, birds and beings who inhabit it. My intention with this ritual was to open myself in an earthy-rooted way to larger understandings of my-self, and the women who would be sharing their stories and practices with me in this study. By virtue of wearing the red thread mantle completed during and after my WSMA studies, I enacted connection between that place, program and people, and the place, program and people of my PhD studies at UBC. I modeled my own vulnerability and understanding of sacred female power within a fluid origination of interconnection with other living beings. I implicated my body as a force of knowing and awareness, where as Cuban artist Tania Bruguere writes,

My body is my instrument. It is the place where I can give voice to my opinion. It is the space where I have certain power, even if it's only the power of locating my thoughts and emotions. (Bruguera, 2010, [http://www.universes-in-universe.de/woven-maze/bruguera/](http://www.universes-in-universe.de/woven-maze/bruguera/))

I hear people acknowledge the UBC endowment lands in reference to the Musqueam First Nation, upon whose unceded territory the campus sits. This site is alternatively noted as being a place of recreational value. Thus defined by colonial and territorial relations, I yearn for the felt creature nature of the place. I wonder how to learn from and de-colonize this cultural
and literal body of my-self and land in relation to others and the Earth. Within Women’s Spirituality such reclamation work is a project of female-centred integration. We name and speak lost parts of selves, and note what it means to have a self at all, one situated from experiences of female embodiment and its difference from patriarchal processes of self-making. Art making and self-created ritual are practices that I pursue which were nourished within the container of the Women’s Spirituality MA. Ritual, ceremony and rites-of-passage are engaged and taught within classroom contexts.

My friend, artist, educator and spiritual feminist Barbara Bickel came into the forest with me to video document my actions, gestures and movements with the red thread. We have held these kinds of art and ritual making spaces for each other over time in our individual and shared research practices (Bickel & Jordan, 2009; Bickel, 2006, 2005). Bickel herself contends ritual as pedagogy, as a creative, arts-based container in which we can learn, teach and research. I concur that within women’s rituals practiced from outside traditional religious structures and institutions we are able to re-write a “hermeneutics of the social body” (Jordan, 2007). Hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of text, taken from the scholarly tradition of Biblical exegesis. I would that that the body be the text (Jordan, 2009), full of life and blood meaning. “By re-working ritual within embodied scholarship, by attending to a hermeneutics of the ritual body, I would transform and re-write the social body, my body, as text” (Jordan, in Bickel & Jordan, 2007c). We share a co-creation of ethical and vulnerable art practices as Barbara’s ability to follow my vulnerable self into the forest with care attends.

I used a mirror at the beginning of this red thread in the forest ritual to mark a contemplative and transitional space in/to my-self and in/to the place. The mirror, as a primary sacred healing tool of ancient Silk Road (East-West) priestess-shamans (Noble, personal communication, 2009), was brought with me from my earlier WSMA ritual of Ariadne. Knowing nothing then of ancient priestesses with their oracular mirrors (which sought diagnosis or communication), I intuitively found myself retracing Ariadne’s labyrinth, coming to the centre wherein I laid a mirror. I circled this mirror around my body and outwards to others. I finally settled its reflection towards my own face, in order that my self-gaze should see my ‘true’ self, a human self/soul that drops social, cultural, or biological identities—a stare upon which existence is and is not.

In the extended gesture of offering the mirror within the forest ritual, I made acts of reflection and reflexivity explicit from myself as a seeker-researcher, as one who generates and
reflects upon the inquiry of this study. I offered the gaze outwards, and back towards myself. A mirror reflects and transforms those who look within it, who are now paradoxically both outside and inside of themselves, becoming more than them-selves. The mind itself is like a mirror, “the wise recognize that in their own mind all things are reflected, and they seek to make clear, like a mountain stream, their own nature” (Ywahoo, 1987, p. 172). Philosopher Luce Irigaray writes of how in the mirror women have “to let my gaze travel over myself so as to limit my exposure to the other and repossess my own gestures and garments, thus nestling back into my vision and contemplation of myself...the mirror should support, not undermine my incarnation” (1993, p. 65). In this gesture, I played upon the notion of research and the researcher as a being a ‘mirror.’

When first envisioning the forest ritual, wearing my woven red mantle, I saw myself hanging from the weaving as it was tied to branches, as if I were weeping and releasing into the forest floor. The long unfinished tendrils of wool became multiple roots into the forest, blood-roots, placenta-like, reaching into the Earth to tell some story. This image and gesture was a blissful weeping of surrender, as if the red mantle were a beating heart or womb. Yet once I arrived in real time relation to a cedar tree, what came was a careful wrapping of her, dressing her with this colour red as if we were sisters. I steadied myself within the wrapping to be held naked by the tree. I only wanted moments of silence, my eyes closed to listen to her stories. The place itself instructs. The red mantle became the placental interface between the Earth as the tree and myself.

Nagnostic philosopher Mary Daly, who often spoke of the biophilic, a love of life and Earth, notes the term “elemental” as meaning “a first principle, RUDIMENT” (1984, p. 7), where the “Wild woman who yearns to return to beginnings, to questions of her childhood, to her ancestral…Memory…recognizes that these have a special aura, are imbedded with a deep sense of Wonder, which as Aristotle noted is the beginning of the philosophical quest” (p. 8). My yearning to be vulnerable within the forest and trees is something beyond an appreciation of natural beauty. It is perhaps witch-like in the European sense of old magical women banished to live on the wild edges of society. I pretend the role of the wandering female ascetic, or the wild woman who goes off alone into the forest to live her magic and express her deepest spirit that only the trees can hear. In this potent banishment, which I would say expresses a lost or repressed connectivity to the forest, Mother Earth and Pachamama, I sense and see images of lying still among the green ferns like the dear do, being refreshed by such living presence.

During the course of this forest ritual, I had left the original ball of red thread behind me
at the place of my gestures with the mirror, before approaching the cedar tree. Barbara and I discovered that we were actually lost. We were not lost in that we couldn’t get back to a pathway, but lost from the things we had set down with the mirror, my street clothes, our packs and the pathway we had come into this particular place. This was both alarming and humorous, me wandering, naked and covered only with the red mantle. Barbara followed me, looking along alternate pathways for Ariadne’s red thread to lead us back to our lost things inside the labyrinth of the forest.

I felt at this point that the true ritual had begun and here was the real teaching—this place was playing with us. The teasing playful trickster of Indigenous lore along with some mischievous disgruntled forest gnomes had arrived. We had absorbed ourselves into the art practice and ritual so completely that I was sent within, experientially inside of, my initial red thread mantra of finding and losing herself. Performance art, ritual and reality blended into this experience of being lost. I thus emerged from my tree and fern meditations to come face to face with the walkers and joggers on the trails from whom we had hidden ourselves. No one seemed to give us much notice as sacred and mundane worlds collapsed within the absurdity of it all. After a focused search, remembering the way we had come in, we found the red thread again from the tree I first wound it around. Walking along the path, we followed the red thread back into the forest to complete the ritual work and collect our things. I thanked the forest, spirits and place for teasing and absorbing us, thanking all for this potent and playful experience of remembering.

I thus follow this red thread, literally and metaphorically. I need multiple gestures for this research that grow from my own stories and practices. Just as my co-participants in this study share their stories and practices with me, red thread is the practice I further develop, articulate and share. Gestures are an expression of my research results—metaphors, mantras, and mudras. I have often thought that red thread says things more simply, elegantly, and to the point then anything else I can offer as text. If I can just hand you this red thread—thread is the text, text is the thread.

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4 Just as metaphor is a conceptual link, mantras are repetitive strings of words and verses meant to invoke deity or induce non-discursive mind states. Mudras are hand gestures of the same, repeated or performed consecutively as in a dance. One mode employs text and voice, the other gesture. Embodied forms of communion, voice and gesture are linked with ritual inquiry, which heightens the experience of each, distilling the use of both beyond ‘everyday’ language and body movement.
Red thread in the forest

Unwinding the red thread I wrap red thread around a tree by the pathway, marking this beginning place. I continue unwinding the ball of red thread down the path in the forest. A thin red line of thread trails behind me as I go, marking my steps. I unwind and trail red thread, walking the path.

Chapter Five: Beginnings

You could say that’s self-authorization, but it is having to undo un-self-authorization that is inappropriately planted through education in lots of women. It’s not the same as self-esteem. We are not trying to build up self-esteem. We are trying to build up self-location. Who are you? Never mind that you esteem yourself—what’s that? That’s just steam, and what’s that made of? Nothing. But what can you do? What do you do? What have you done? What do you like to do? We can help with that. (Judy Grahn, personal communication, 2009)

Red Thread 1: Beginnings

Nané - Beginnings

What is the question I follow? I am thinking about what Judy Grahn, co-director of the WSMA, said to me in this study, “People have deeper inquires and questions in their lives that bring us places where we find answers, or a deepening of the questions.” I think of my own wanderings of place and spirit, this path of longing, sometimes clearly directed, other times fuzzy as I feel my way along the threads of it. Being an avid student within the primary and secondary educational system that I grew up within in Toronto, Ontario during the 1970s and 80s, science was my first academic calling. ‘Pure’ science, I wanted to study theoretical physics and not be an artist, a title already claimed by my mother/father’s lives. In a seeming 180° turn, I foreclosed my idea of a science career after high school by entering a BFA in photography. I was following creative urges and long years of unconscious immersion and apprenticeship from within this artist family.

Yet concurrent to this BFA I wanted to be a midwife. I had attended the home birth of my younger brother to my step-mom when I was a teenager. I struggled in thinking I should leave the BFA and enter nursing school in Ottawa, midwifery being a lay, grassroots profession at the time with no formal program of study. But the internal pull between disciplines never allowed me to drop one thing for the other. I found a local lay midwife to take workshops with at the same time as my artistic studies. Really, I loved doing the visual arts degree and did not want to leave this education. I loved all of it, even in struggles with myself. Sitting in the basement space of the old stone Laurier building at the University of Ottawa, where art students gathered and sat together,
some people smoking, all of us shooting-the-breeze between long stints working in darkrooms or studio spaces, to have such immersion at a young age was my very own alchemical heaven—practice, practice, practice, being and becoming, being and becoming. I needed to discover myself as artist beyond my mother-father’s identities in this field. I learned to conjure my own spirit into the work, in ongoing process of self-authorization. I trolled the university library for their collection of photography and art books, pouring over this life of images. I used to walk home from the art studios through the dark, cold snow-bound streets of Ottawa to a tiny, warm basement suite just blocks south of Parliament Hill with a feeling of knowing that, despite my unknowing of what was next, this was a happy time of my life. Something was brewing, implementing and being nurtured here that I couldn’t quite name, but would carry forward.

Yet it felt so bizarre at the time, this pull between disparate disciplines and practices that I had no language for and thought I was supposed to chose between. I suppose the gift is in taking up all these various threads, to take the chance of following through with my urgings in ways that allow me to develop my questions, to offer them back to the world in multiple forms. I follow this internal pull or directive voice, the same one that led me to travel to India by myself when I was barely 20 years old. Carrying only a small rucksack, wearing modest clothing that Indian friends in Canada had advised of, I travelled and lived there for three months. I was culturally immersed in a new reality whose goddesses would later rise up in my consciousness and learning.

There are times of despair in the incongruous nature of this kind of life to what the larger culture sanctifies economically and dogmatically. In many ways I do not feel I have had a choice but to follow these threads, they are given and I have the work of living and understanding them. There is joyousness in having such intimate access to one’s self-callings, whispered from a larger sense of Self-world-cosmos that speaks to and through the ‘small’ self. One ear is always to the ground, sky and trees, to the feeling moving pulse of humanity in the beauteousness of life itself. It’s what Judy means when she speaks of the satisfaction that poets and artists can have from living this kind of life in simply being heard and received within community. One’s work is held by others, even if it’s only the butterflies who are listening. Judy notes this life as spiritual by nature.

At the time of first hearing about the WS degree program in 1998 I was a young mom of a six-month old baby in Vancouver, BC. I was newly and deeply initiated into the more-then-full-time work of being a mother. I had also been immersed for many years previously within the lay
midwifery and home-birth community in Vancouver. I worked full time as an apprentice midwife, attending home and hospital births, while providing woman-centred care for mothers and babies in the weeks after birth as a post-partum doula. My learning and training for these roles had taken place within women’s homes, and through a study group in the home of a local home-birth midwife. Congruent to this birth work, I studied spiritual and energetic healing, learning about the body as an energy system in inter-connection with the Earth, ancestors and spirit. I learned how to use my hands to clear blockages and channels of the body for increased wellbeing. I learned about medicinal plants, wild-crafting and preparing herbal medicines, knowledge that put me in good stead during the years of raising a young family with remedies at hand to soothe sore bellies, ear aches and fevers. As midwives, we used herbal remedies for gestating and birthing women, plants that would build strong blood, aide the flow of birth, stop the flow of too much blood, or assist the arrival of the placenta; and always nourishing food and teas for pregnancy and breastfeeding. I was very far from the standard university and campus classrooms of my undergraduate years, entering the radical, as in going to the roots, classrooms of women’s homes, lives and the forest itself, becoming schooled in birth and healing as I was by women-giving-birth within the social movement of midwifery. Home, home, home, there’s no place like home, the double “eco-s” of ecology and eco-nomy.

Arriving in Vancouver from my undergraduate visual art and photography studies in Ottawa, and my natal home of Toronto, my new friendships circled around a group of young women who were, like myself, avid students of lay midwifery, home-birth and natural healing. We forged close bonds in our circle of radical study, meeting and learning in our midwife teacher’s home through her focused midwifery skills curriculum and the powerful sharing of birth stories and the stories of our own lives. We substantiated ourselves against the oppositional forces of the dominant culture of medicalized birth practices. We created our own women’s circles, marking seasonal changes or the phases of the moon, or the needs of a particular woman. We held together the strength of birthing women and our ability to holistically assist, without drugs or interventions, the bodied, embodied experiences and meanings of birth-giving within women’s lives. We become accustomed to the diverse but recognizable forces of naked, vulnerable yet fierce, birthing female body/minds, attuning ourselves to the sounds, senses, smells, liquids of amniotic and blood, the long, slow or fast rhythms and choreographies of birth-giving that women dance with themselves,
their babies and intimate others. Attending birth, being with-woman and the new baby in this way opens the truth of the present moment, of timelessness (Jordan, 2009). As I stepped across thresholds of the homes of birthing women and into this living orb of birth energy, I would leave behind day-to-day cares I had invariably come in with. Greeting the new human’s arrival is not only hard physical work, but deeply spiritual.

My friends and I worked together within powerful co-optive forces of the larger culture that relegates birth giving to often fearful (tokophobia—fear of childbirth), painful and highly managed medicalized conditions (Davis-Floyd, 1992; van Teijlingen, Lowis, McCaffery & Porter, 2004). Many of the women we served were seeking alternatives to this dominant way of birth. We were on the front line of restoring, one birth at a time, a woman-centred culture of such. I love this work, and the unfolding of a deeply embodied and spiritual consciousness of the value of life, of the wonder of the depth of love within birth itself. Feeling the love and spirit of this work was the price for the cost of doing it, with little pay, taking on other jobs to live, and the realities of disapproval or outright persecution from authorities (Jordan, 2004).

The lives of my friends and I have travelled many paths since. Some of these women are registered midwives or traditional birth attendants, others are mothers, artists and healers, cooks, post partum doulas and more. Many never pursued university educations. We went into various routes of questioning our lives and what would be next when midwifery regulation came into affect in British Columbia in 1998. I re-joined the university, undertaking my graduate studies in Women’s Spirituality in San Francisco. I had always thought I would be a midwife. Yet I followed another strong calling towards inquiry, writing, academia, a re-turn to my art practice and immersion into the study of spirituality in a way I was deeply longing for. Learning holistic healing practices had been part of my midwifery studies, as had my personal extensive readings into stories of curanderas, medicine women, herbalists and Indigenous healers. A ‘regular’ MFA in visual arts could not have supported the threads of my longing to continue to develop the woman-centred birth work and further the explorations that I had started. I was simultaneously recouping my art practice with its link to community service and collective expressions. Little did I imagine the desire for writing within a poetic, birth-centred philosophy that this inquiry would push out of me.

During these years of my new apprenticeship into research, art and inspirted inquiry in Women’s Spirituality, I realize what midwifery and birth knowledge has given me. Midwifery can
be a way of knowing and being that honours holistic human capacities and love from within the body itself as sacred, a relational, mother-centred method of knowing and inquiry, a deep perpetual metaphor of attending to the reality of the gift of life as birth on the edge of death, a woman-centred way of healing, and an ongoing practice of overcoming oppositional circumstances. Midwifery gave me ‘the way.’ I honour this way as a potent energetic portal originating in the birthing/birth consciousness of humanity. Though I no longer attend births full time, I am a devotee of female birthing capacity just the same, drawing from such essences the fragrant, verdant red threads of my current research and art inquiries. My art comes back to re-source itself from this sacred female path and power, growing recognition of my deeper questions.
Program learning outcome # 1
ITP Program Review, MA Women’s Spirituality, 2009

Students know that they are part of a historical past and present which includes the female as sacred and as having a central role in creating and sustaining culture.

Aikya – *Innocent of the whole feminist thing*

 Until I was eight-years-old I lived in New Jersey. Then we moved to New York State on the other side of New York City. When I was out of college, I was in the Christian Science Church where they are very egalitarian as far as the gender roles in the services are conducted; it was founded by a woman. A man and woman conduct the service together, which was beautiful. It was my mother who decided we would go there together, mother, little brother and I. Then my brother got a little more rebellious in adolescence and people in the Church withdrew from him. My mother was disgusted with that. She became lost in a way in terms of what to do with her spirituality. Then it was few more years and pretty serious things started to happen in our family. My brother became an alcoholic at a very young age, he was barely 13, and Mother and I couldn’t wrap our minds around it. He is one of those people that had an instant reaction to alcohol. Then my mother was diagnosed with cancer and had a very disfiguring surgery. I cared for her for a long time but I made periodic attempts to leave. She was good at manipulating with guilt and I would feel awful and stay. Finally, I moved into New York City, but was during that time that my brother committed suicide. He was only 17.

I was very busy with all that. It gave me the questions. I couldn’t stop the suffering of the people closest to me, the only thing I could do was step out of it. It drove me to some kind of philosophical inquiry. What is real? What is the purpose of life? Who am I? What’s going on here?

Images and dreams led me. The first image I followed was of Nataraj, Lord Shiva, lord of the dance. When I first was taken by that picture, I didn’t know anything about the god Shiva or much about Hinduism, I just needed to just be with that picture. For my so-called mediation I used to just sit and stare at a picture of Nataraj. By 1977 came all the many people
into my life associated with Hinduism. I first studied with the Theosophists in New York after I left home because I thought they could help me to understand all these psychic experiences I was having. I wondered what they were for and what I was supposed to do with them. They didn’t know much more then I did. But it brought me to the Bhagavad-Gita. We took a whole year with the Gita and its commentary. Then there was a crisis in the Theosophy community, one of the young people got in a sticky mess and ended up in the hospital. All the elders who I had looked up to were trying to figure out how not to get involved in this. I felt there’s something here that’s not clear to everyone? I made a vow that I wanted to find someone who knew whatever it was that was worth being known from this Eastern tradition. I wanted to study with that person. It was a very clear moment, a very clear declaration, and it began unfolding from there. I had another day when there were thoughts in my mind I knew I had to generate. I wrote them down and it was, “Keep silence, become a vegetarian, and study Sanskrit.” I thought none of them sounded damaging. I had no idea how I was going to study Sanskrit so I went to a bookstore in Greenwich Village to buy the Bhagavad-Gita in Sanskrit with the translation. I went to Samuel Wiser bookstore and the fellow who sold me the books had studied with the person I wound up studying with. Shortly after, I heard Swami-ji Jomi Dyanada Saraswati for the first time in New York City. I thought to myself, he makes more sense then anything I've ever heard and I think I better study with this person. I had a dream about how I would recognize this individual and he fit all the criteria.

Until I began to study in the Women’s Spirituality program, I was totally innocent about the whole feminist thing. I had been busy with my dysfunctional family, and feminism was not a possibility for the Hindu folks I was studying with. I first came to New College of California to go to an open house about the Creative Writing program. I wanted to do a graduate degree in which I could develop artwork and writing at the same time, which is my glimpse at a kind of dissociation that I was walking around with, wanting to heal that back together. To some extent a lot of European Americans have a body/mind split. Some of us have personal experiences that make that worse or more distinct, so I needed to finish that.

Other programs were giving presentations that night at New College. There was a welcome thing about all the programs and Judy Grahn stood up and said something about, “Women’s Spirituality.” Judy said, “For part of the program we are going to South India.” And I was like, “Ohhhh.” Then all the programs broke up into separate rooms where people
were going to tell about their program. I went into the room with the director of the Creative Writing program and I couldn’t get out of the room fast enough, he drove me crazy. I flew out of that room and ran to the Women’s Spirituality room to find out about going to South India! My guru was from South India. I talked to them and they gave me all the paperwork. I thought it was all very interesting, and I liked Dianne and Judy. I went home to figure out how I could do this financially and it seemed totally impossible. But Rose Frances, then the director of Women’s Spirituality, sent an email a week before the last sign up date about going to South India. I pulled it all out and had an interview with Judy and Dianne and to my complete amazement they accepted me. My undergrad degree was in English lit and minor in art history. I could have gone to San Francisco State University to take their Creative Writing program, which is outstanding and was a lot cheaper, but I didn’t have a car. With New College I could take the Bart and get to classes, so I felt I could take my next step.

There I was looking for creative writing, but you know you can’t write unless you have something inside to say. I warmed to the idea of Women’s Spirituality because I had been brought up entirely in male dominated everything, the Catholic Church, the pope and the priests, everybody that is a public blesser of the folks is a male. The women are in a rosary society or they are doing something supportive but not as-good-as. Now I think that is a mistake to see it that way, but when I grew up there were a lot of priests.

**MamaCoAtl - *Aiming to find the truth***

There was a wonderful energy about New College of California. New College students were rugged people with personality, with some history, alive. Everybody was unique and very dedicated to finding themselves which is exactly what gets obliterated when you go to an institution, you are no longer yourself. I feel very fortunate to have gotten a piece of that in my development. Because of doing this work with the women of Juarez, I met Dianne Jenett and they had gifted me with a scholarship to do the WSMA. I don’t think there is another school like it and there probably won’t be. Remember, New College was the outcome of a counter revolutionary movement; the administrators were all hippies from back in the day.

This Women’s Spirituality program allowed me to have a container, to give place for me to articulate my rage in a way that wasn’t destructive for me. I was always aiming to find the truth. That was my thing. I’m aching and I’m burning and I can’t find peace till I find
out, until I’m able to understand how to live my life. If I don’t understand, you’ll find me going around, looking and looking until I understand. So I make a song or I write poem.

Before coming into this degree, my journey started when I became pregnant with my daughter. I had been in a situation in which I had no hope. I had no desire. I thought I was going to get a disease or have a drunk driving accident. What life had for me was a ‘belly,’ una pancita, a little belly and this child. From that moment on I started recovering my body and my promiscuous ways from the idea that I’m more macho than the men. I just left that lifestyle completely. I couldn’t stand people’s smell; my life chemically, harmonically changed. Being pregnant, I decided I wasn’t going to be anybody’s patient. I was not going to a hospital to birth my child because I was not sick. It was an incredible journey because I was almost put in jail for not following the government prenatal care.

About a week before my daughter was born I went to my mother’s house. She wasn’t very interested in my lifestyle. For my Mexican family I’m a ‘hippie-techa.’ They don’t understand, why do I have a black daughter? Why I don’t believe in Jesus or Jehovah? But my mother was kind and allowed me to stay in her home and give birth there. We had gone to a birthing centre and as soon as the director of the centre saw my baby’s dad who is so black he is blue, they kicked us out. I was able to find a midwife from Santa Cruz. She was an Irish woman who came with two other women. It made all the difference for me to be able to command my own birthing. I didn’t have any drugs and I ate my placenta. I did things that women in my family would never do. After that we did a blessingway ceremony for our baby. A whole new way of life came to me from this pregnancy onwards.

I went back to Mexico to raise my child. I couldn’t nurse her in the United States because people were harassing me constantly. They sent me to the bathroom all the time. Even my relatives, my Black side of the family said, “You are teaching her the titty is all there is.” My mother would buy me bottles. My first breast infection tore my nipple and the midwife told me to put heat onto it. But my mother said, “No, you need antibiotics.” All the time I was dealing with the world that wouldn’t let me be. I’m metabolizing that much more at this point as the initial aspect of my healing work.

I spent three years in Mexico, first in Chiapas. I was a journalist and I thought I could report from there. But living in a war zone proved to be a remarkable feat. It taught me a lot about stepping out of my first world habits and getting on with the day. There are no cell
phones in that part of the country, so you had to walk outside to feel the breeze and know if you will see the person you want to see. You had to know if there were going to be soldiers in the plaza. I spent one year there and that was my warrior training. I carried my daughter in the traditional cloth sling, the reboso.

The second time I went back to Mexico I lived in a town of healers. I finished nursing my daughter there. It was a beautiful place where everybody is a healer. You find people who read tarot, people who do gems, and the most traditional people who do massage and figure out belly-aches, and the midwives, the parteras. I was given a new name and I started singing again. I hadn’t sung since the 1980s because I thought I needed to do something more serious by becoming a journalist. I dropped the arts so that I could say the truth—what a fallacy. People in that town started calling me, “MamaCoAtl, MamaCoAtl.” CoAtl means ‘serpent’ and it means ‘knowledge,’ ‘precious knowledge.’ It also means ‘precious twin.’ CoAtl is your cosmic twin, your double. I put this new name on my Yahoo ID. When I recorded my first CD the producers put “MamaCoAtl” on the label and I said, “I didn’t give you permission for this.” They said, “That’s the way it came out.” When I came back to the United States I realized I couldn’t work with my given name, so I started using MamaCoAtl. That’s my public name and people identify with that. I identify with that. I’m learning to live up to that name.

Vicki - A big black widow spider

This is what happened when I went to the woods. It was one of those wonderful intuitive times when you know you don’t exactly know what you’re doing or why. But it all goes in a direction so that when you look back on it, it has a trajectory. I had moved down to Santa Cruz to do an agricultural project as a business, a garden mandala. It was very exciting. I had a place for it; but then I lost the place and everything fell through, including the money for the project. It led into a terrible year. All my energy had been in that project, and that summer I didn’t have any work. I actually had a Black Dakini dream right when that project was about to go bust, so I knew it was not going to happen. I wasn’t in resistance but I wondered, “Now what?”

Right at that moment an old student of mine called and said, “Won’t you please consider doing a Tantra class?” She’d asked me before and I’d said, “No, it’s too sleazy in Western culture. I don’t want to be all mixed up in that.” But she phoned again and I finally said,
“Okay, it sounds like an opening.” I put the word out in my network and got eight women to do a four-month intensive class in Tantra. We met once a month for the weekend four times, and that provided me with a basic income to cover my rent. I taught the class from what I experience and know Tantra to be. In the third session of that class when everything else was literally just dissolving about my agricultural idea, we had a black widow spider infestation in my garage at Halloween. There were so many it was shocking. One day I came into my workshop room from the outside, and on the screen door facing me with her big red mark on her belly was a black widow spider. I thought, “This isn’t good.” Then I found one in the garage and it became a big issue. A friend came to visit and we did a Black Dakini ritual to clear them out. When we got into the garage and started to smudge, there were networks of webs, the whole place was webbing. There were smaller ones that didn’t look like black widows dropping everywhere we went. We took the nests down, chanting, smudging and praying at the same time, but it became overwhelming. We realized later that the little ones were juveniles and could have really packed a wallop. But we got that all cleared out.

That point in November was my third of four sessions with the Tantra students and we were doing basic collages, choosing and layering images from magazines to extend and anchor the students’ visions. Right in the middle of getting all the supplies out and explaining the collage process I said, “Why don’t we make this a Dakini collage, let’s do the five Dakinis?” I had taken retreats with Tsultrim Allione in the mid- to late- 1990s. I had empowerments and transmissions but I hadn’t taken them to heart; I hadn’t owned them. I thought they were wonderful and that it was wonderful to be in retreat. I would use the mantras, which are spoken repetitive phrases you use in mediation that anchor and transmit the teachings. Mostly I practiced the Black Dakini and the Chöd visualization practices. So I thought, we’ll structure the collage in the shape of the five Dakinis. I got Tsultrim’s book (Allione, 2000) out, so that we knew which Dakini went where. Designing the collages this way just seemed really appropriate to what we were doing. You could put yourself in the middle of the Dakinis and see how beautiful that is.

By the next month I had to leave that place. One of my long time supporters gave me some money to do a mailing. That’s how we did the whole year in the past. I did a big mailing in January advertising all my classes and workshops and the whole year took care of itself. I did that and moved up to the cabin in Santa Cruz in late 2000. But there was almost no
response to the mailing. It was one of the most shocking things I’ve ever experienced because it had always worked. It just didn’t resonate anymore because something was changing. So I started to do Dakini practices, I thought if the practices don’t work now they never will.

Sometimes when you are bringing visions in, you can really make the wrong application. That’s what they say in the esoteric work, it can be a big problem. The application won’t work because it’s not really your Dharma. I thought it was, and then it wasn’t anymore. So I moved up to this cabin with a four-wheel drive and all I did for weeks and weeks is feed the fire and do Dakini practices.

The cabin was one mile up the hill from the most important Tibetan Buddhist Centre in the area, a Vajrayana Centre called “Pema Osa Ling.” I rented space there to have retreats for women but I lost my deposit because there weren’t any retreats. One woman who signed up from Washington still wanted to visit me and asked, “Could I pay you the same amount of money and be with you for three days?” I said, “Sure.” It was like a new piece of work. By the time this student came twice for tutorials, other women started coming too. I put it out to my clients that it was a possibility. Then everyone started to come for classes one at a time and I never ran big group workshops again in the US. I do groups now in Italy, but not here. By then I was crafting the collage process, because it was what was in front of me. I did it with every woman who came. One day a student couldn’t come and I had all the materials ready to go; I couldn’t not do a collage. I had to work through my puritan work ethic, because do you sit all day and do a collage when you should be “working?” You do if it’s your practice. From then on I gave myself permission and I went wild up there in the woods. I crafted the collage process to the point where it’s very refined. Now it’s the centre-piece of the work I do whenever a woman comes for a three-day tutorial.
Red thread in the forest

Into the forest I walk straight into the forest. Unwinding red thread as I go, it trails behind me. Into the forest with no path, I move slowly through dense thickets of salal bushes, bracken, fallen logs and branches. I work my way through the forest until I find the right place to begin. Red thread trails behind me, marking my path into this density of green, green, green.

Practice with Anya: Music for metaformia

I know Anya as an accomplished dancer. In her sharing with me, I learned how she had fully claimed her practice and gifts as a dance artist through her graduate studies in the WSMA. I initially imagined we would engage dancing as her practice for this dissertation, in particular the West African community-based dance form that Anya had been committed to for several years. She attended weekly dance circles and classes in her then home of Port Townsend, Washington. I also knew Anya as a committed social activist in solidarity with Indigenous Latin American struggles for justice, a worker in the field of non-violence towards women, and a menstruation educator.

Little did I imagine the circumstances that would bring us to publically perform and dance together with our artful Women’s Spirituality colleague and songstress Polly Wood. We co-created a menstrual musical, a performative menarche rite of passage. Our multi-modal, multi-media performance began during the early months of 2009. Spurred on by Anya’s role as editor of “Metaformia: A Journal of Menstruation and Culture,” we co-submitted a proposal to the “Society for Menstrual Cycle Research” to be held in Spokane, Washington in June of that year. With our friend Polly Wood, a Women’s Spirituality MA alumni, we were accepted into this conference with a 3-person panel entitled “Metaformia: An Alternative View of Menstruation” (Lapham, Wood & Jordan, 2009). We each presented an aspect of our scholarly work in relation to Judy Grahn’s metaformic theory. It was an opportunity to extend this theory within a scholarly venue beyond its Women’s Spirituality roots, making an academic link to the field of menstrual health research and cultural studies. Our panel explored an overview of metaformia (Anya), a view of radical and relational economics through metaformia (Polly), and an understanding of cesarean section as a male cutting practice through “crossover” ritual acts (Nané).

Within metaformic theory all cultural acts can be considered for their ritual implications and origination within an evolutionary understanding of the r’tu (rituals) and taboos surrounding women’s blood and bleeding from our earliest ancestral human times. Taboos surrounding women’s blood originate from consciousness of the sacred powers that surround this potent substance, where “sacred” implies both ‘danger’ and ‘worthy of awe.’ All aspects of modern society, from law, to medicine, to economics, to cooking, can be understood through what I lovingly called during one of our conference car rides through Spokane, Washington, “putting on the metaformic goggles.” Metaformic theory recoups women as equally culturally creative.
beings in relation to dominant histories and theories of men’s cultural activities. This view restores balance, power and understanding of female origination and its embodied lineage to women, men and people of all genders. Metaformia collapses culture/nature dualities within which conceptual knowledge is most often grasped, bringing the body, and in particular the rites of female bleeding bodies, fully into theory and consciousness. In relation to parallel ritual acts of male bleeding, metaformia underscores all bodies’ co-creative relationships in the production of culture (Grahn, 1993).

Within the room of our metaformia presentation at this conference, we created a an altar of red, richly dressed with my red thread woven mantle, red sari cloth, a bowl overflowing with red beads, an offering of chocolate, a silver heart, and a female icon necklace, all lovingly placed next to our projector. We placed such objects in the presentation room in order to aesthetically call forth the sacred context of our presentation, understanding that scholarly work is itself an offering, an opening to new knowledge. Anya included a large image of the moon to mark the beginning of our Powerpoint. Women’s cyclical menstrual entrainment with lunar cycles in monthly bleeding is integral to an evolutionary understanding of metaformic theory.

Polly, a singer-songwriter of women, divine feminine and metaformically themed music, offered to perform a set of her songs as an evening event for the conference in exchange for the conference fee. Thanks to Polly and the conference organizer, professor Elizabeth Kissling, Anya and I were included in this offer. Anya would dance, and I would bring a performance ritual element. I wondered nervously at first how to weave my performance ritual skills into this mix of Anya and Polly’s skills. I viewed them as being the more professional performers. Our ‘menstrual musical’ was born under the official title of “Music for Metaformia: A Performance Ritual,” as we co-created a weaving of our three ‘practices.’ My initial hesitance dissolved into a growing vision of our group purpose. I realized I was there not only to support these two women, but to develop my own experience of collaboration with them. Through an intensive two days onsite at the conference venue, we three imagined, laughed, cried and practiced inter-weaving our creative abilities to create an artful song, poetry and dance-filled storyline cabaret. It was an energetically charged time as we alternately practiced for hours, presented our scholarly panel, attended other panels, and drove around the downtown streets of Spokane, Washington, getting food and supplies to keep us going.

My fondest memory of this whole time is of the three of us touring around in Anya’s car, an old Volvo station wagon loaded up with our performance gear including musical and ritual
instruments, rattles, drums, shakers, bowls and baskets, costumes and reams of red cloth in every variety of that significant colour. At times hysterical and giddy, or just plain tired and short-fused, we were always talking and talking everywhere we went. We were happy to be together in this bubble of time as women bonding and re-bonding. In being together we acknowledged the challenging life paths we each walk in pursuit of our spirited vocations. This acknowledgement is combined with absolute reverie of recognition of each other, of being seen, coming together into women’s time like some long lost tribe.

We covered many topics in endless conversations, from experiences with single motherhood in the United States, to metaformically deconstructing the other conference panels we were attending. We discussed other scholars’ missed points about the immense impact of menstruation on cultural formation through our metaformic understandings of taboo, and the ritualizing effects of women’s powerful blood. So much of the conference focused on the negative impacts, or taboo of menstruation for women. The research often focused on the cultural abjection of women’s blood as something to be contained, kept hidden and unspoken. Women and girls then experience the physical-emotional pain within the medical pathology of such, as well as the socially mediating effects of the pharmaceutical industry who respond from within this belief system.

Though we each had experiences with these important issues in relation to menstruation, we realized we were an alternative view within such research and dialogues. We hold out for a bigger picture of the originary cultural power of menarche and women’s bleeding through complex understandings of such as sacred and world-forming. We understand the potency of women’s bleeding cycles as something to be confronted and lived in-relation to, and not against. Women’s blood is most often considered ‘refuse’ (garbage)—as in what is re-fused. Menstruation brings shifts in states of consciousness that demand a focus of its own in daily life, not always suited to the workaday world. Through metaformic theory, we discern concepts of taboo in notions of women’s blood as an alternately ‘polluting’ or ‘powerful’ substance. Within a hierarchical context of what Judy Grahn calls “male-only origin stories,” women’s blood has been reduced to pollution, requiring the strictest of containments and silences. In our modern era the stigma of menstruation is dealt with by seeming to pretend that this female cycle is not happening at all, though our very lives depend upon it.

There is the notion of “shakti” in steams of Hinduism. Shakti is a life force energy that is especially potent within menstruating women, birthing women, and women after giving birth
through their lochial blood—it is the force of creation itself. A direct connection is drawn between menstruation and divinity (Grahn, 1993; Jenett, 2005a, 2005b). In both Hindu Brahminical and Dravidian concepts of *shakti*, these powers represent an excess or overflow of creative life energies (Jenett, 2005b, p. 183). Menstruating women can enter into oracular (as in *prophetic wisdom*) and trance-inducing powers at this time of their cycle, crossing into other worlds. Menstrual blood is worshipped as a sacred substance within Tantric spiritual practice cosmologies (Jenett, 2005b, p. 180). As Women’s Spirituality scholars, we co-create towards sacred views that hold such potent understandings of this cyclical and central aspect of women’s lives. Through such views, Anya, Polly and I blended our gifts, arts and imaginings, sharing them with the conference setting to offer another path of knowledge. Such in-the-moment feminine *jouissance* (from the French—as in *an ecstasy, an ineffable pleasure beyond, a suffering from*) that the three of us were experiencing together, riding around in the car and creating the performance, entraining our hearts and minds, seemed only possible because of how deeply we each travel, live with, and love, such questions of female embodiment in our own lives and in community with each other.

Within our evening performance, Polly’s heart-felt, rhythmic songs and drum playing held Anya’s West African dances. Anya tells me that these dances are rooted in ancestral praise-dance and agricultural traditions of West Africa, expressing love for Earth and all cycles of life. Anya’s dancing is inspired, with bold movements that shift and shape the air around her, defying gravity, moving all who witness her embodied freedom. An audience member told me afterwards how happy she felt just watching Anya dance, how her energy transmits. Our combined actions and gestures played on an extended theme of a young woman’s rite of passage into womanhood through her menarche ceremony, a celebratory initiation practice mostly lost for girls within a modern cultural milieu. I performed the mature matron-mother, whom we envisioned as the ‘female instructing principle’ that guides and cares for the young woman-daughter, played by Anya, as she enters her menstrual seclusion ceremony. She is instructed and nurtured, undergoing a ritual bath, and returned to the community as a new woman. We timed our actions and movements with Polly’s singing throughout.

We opened the performance by unwinding ‘red thread’ throughout the audience, walking among their tables and chairs in the conference hotel ballroom. I unspool the shaktic-menarchal-red-thread-of-life among all as we move in a small, winding procession, softly singing the opening lines of Polly’s “Bledsung.” *No cut, no scrape, no knife, no gun, no wound; no cut, no
scrape, no knife, no gun, no wound. Over and over, we sing this as a mantra. Polly continues singing and Anya’s dancing begins until I catch Anya with a long red cloth to signal her first blood, bringing her into the seclusion and safety of the moon lodge for instruction. She sits in solitude, experiencing her initiation while Polly’s singing continues into songs such as “A River’s Right,” “Lovesick,” and “Patriarchy Blues: When the Women Reigned.”

For her instruction, I balance a pot on Anya’s head, a cup of water in her hand, and a carjack in the other. The carjack is a fun inside reference to our actual flat tire and tire changing experience on the road to Spokane. Anya displayed very real powers by fixing our tire by the side of the road. In our performance, Anya completes balancing and holding tasks as if receiving instructions on what it means to become the-one-who-bleeds, achieving the potency of bleeding and potential birth giving—learning the self-respect and responsibility of carrying this gift. On Anya’s emergence from the moon lodge, I ceremonially bath her with a wet cloth; I hand her a mirror so that she can view herself as the emerging goddess she represents in this moment. We run around performatively playing with the water, laughing until we walk again throughout the audience. We co-read Judy Grahn’s poem, “The woman whose head is on fire” (2008/1974, p. 98), a story line of the many-faceted lives of woman.

Playing behind us the whole time are soundless projections of three videos. This is Anya’s inspiration, that our performance become a multi-media event. We project the video of Anya’s WSMA thesis documentation of women hand-building a cob (mud and hay brick) moon lodge and community ritual space. We play my “Red thread in the forest” ritual video of this dissertation text—its second public viewing. We include video footage from Judy and Dianne’s research in Kerala India, which documents menarche ceremonies and dancing by women. The profound “métissage-ing” at work in this entire event is not lost on me as we blend our lives, practices, art and scholarship, simultaneously carrying forward the work of our teachers and mentors. We fearlessly embody, at a scholarly event, the artful, spirited scholars we were ‘trained’ to become from within our Women’s Spirituality degrees and mentors.

We close the performance by again moving throughout the audience, tying a piece of red thread to each person’s wrist as a token of their participation in our rite-of-passage ceremony. To finish, we get everybody onto their feet with hand-clapping encouragement. Now circulating their own blood, shaking themselves free of chairs and tables, everyone joins us for an initially awkward, then laughing, celebratory group circle dance around our initiated new woman. People are laughing and moving about, tensions dispersed as bodies release and play within the
circle dance. We thus offer another way of knowing menstruation and women’s bleeding as sacred through an artful, experiential performance of such.

The next day we three laugh ourselves into hysterics while re-capping events and watching ourselves in my video documentation of our performance. We are amazed at this Dakini-like moment of bravado.

As Polly later relays by email,

I found myself in stitches,
my tummy laughed until it was knotted,
simultaneously -
I felt I’d come undone with our laughter and intensity of purpose.

Nané - Home birth in the academy

Undertaking my Master of Arts degree within a newly emergent academic field, I fell headlong in love with the coursework in terms such as: “Embodied Spirituality,” “Archeomythology,” “Women, Spirituality and Cultural Transformation,” yet I was initially hesitant to take on the label that would come with this degree—Women’s Spirituality. I was shy to tell people this title, not from a lack of passion for the subject but from having to explain, and my lack of articulation about my involvement therein, “Oh, it’s kind of like women’s studies.” How could I describe this in one neat sentence? It was not a degree program anyone had ever heard of. Mostly, I preferred not to explain things unless it was with someone with a genuine interest in finding out what I was really up to. My deepest conversations with others came from a sense of communion with and dialogue on the subject.

I’m following a deep inner urge that is drawing me beside myself towards this program in the United States. I’ve tried to ignore this urge and get on with my life because I will have to travel to San Francisco (well, that might be okay), and go into debt, and find a way to do it as a young mother too. I’ve fought through the logic of this academic choice, is it a choice or a compulsion? In fact, there is no logic to it in the ordinary sense—what am I going to do with a degree in Women’s Spirituality? Despite all this my urge keeps bugging me and bothering me. It feels right; it feels like the way forward. I experience a deep swoon of longing. It is as if the longing were being met by these voices of other women across distances I can hardly measure.

I would say, generally, making a choice to enter graduate work is rooted in desire for something else. This something else pulls a student from one place of being and knowing to the next place one is apparently going in life, perhaps towards new jobs or more money, or the time to study something in particular, as in my case of following the inner voice of “Nané” connected to a thread of longing. For me, I was following an inner voice within my path of education that has a mind of its own. The responsibility of this mind becomes, at times, more than I can explain within rationally motivated logistics, it is best to surrender. I recognize such surrender in my body-mind, a kinesthetic awareness of the it-ness-of-it moment. Take the path that is given; follow the energy. Whose mind is this anyway?
I think through the impact of my Master’s degree, in being able to write, conduct research and publish, supporting my voice and sense of self, my passion for women’s education, health and justice work, in a literal and spiritually embodied sense. The curriculum participated academically in what I was already engaged with at the grassroots and community level. I was able to bring my life and passions into study and research itself. Working as a midwife apprentice, I often joked how I had finally found the midwifery of academia in the Women’s Spirituality graduate program. I could finally have a ‘home birth’ for my writing and research. Otherwise, it is indeed a challenge to have such a natural, physiologic, anesthesia free birth in a hospital or university surrounded by nurses and doctors or faculty who are trained to render ‘operational’ the pathologization of birth and being.

The midwife metaphor is apt. For anyone familiar with the North American lay midwifery re-emergence since at least the 1970s, the practices of midwives within African diaspora and Indigenous communities, or the parteras of Central America, where midwives care for physical, psycho-social and spiritual needs of women giving birth, and women’s agency is central to this care, this kind of analogy might make sense within academia. Suffice it to say that such education supported my female-based social, political and spiritual work in a profound way, from a whole-person perspective. In the teasing out of this process I undertake further research. I further my role as “midwife” towards the scholarly task of engaging birth processes within education and research, supporting the dispositions and values within which such scholarship is accomplished. I suggest my role as that of “philosopher-midwife.” Tending and watching, I act towards a model or philosophy of care in which such education / birthing is possible.
Program learning outcome # 2

ITP Program Review, MA in Women’s Spirituality, 2009

Students know that they are part of a tradition of women who have used and continue to use spiritual practices as change agents to help promote gender equality and social, economic and ecological justice.

Judy – *What would it mean if the world loved women?*

I’m internally focused right now because I’m working on a memoir, which is in part a history. I’m interviewing folks that I co-founded a movement with, Gay Women’s Liberation. Gay Women’s Liberation was liberation for everybody but with a focus on gay women. We said we were going to separate from everybody and find out who we were. We established women’s households that produced phenomenal contributions to the movement, especially in getting women’s voices out into the world. This happened in big ways, both in bookstores and in developing skills for women to get jobs. That was forty years ago, around 1969–75. The women who ran the bookstores, especially the “Woman’s Place” bookstore, short for “A Woman’s Place is in the World,” began the sorting process of pulling women’s thinking together from what was being published. They distributed all kinds of things amongst us including the early works of Mary Daly (1973) and Marija Gimbutas (1974). The moment Gimbutas arrived in the bookstore she was in my room and I started to read her. It was a very wonderful time that I’m just trying to get a grip on.

Living in households together grew out of necessity, and the cheap rents. There had already been hippie and leftist movements where kids lived together collectively. We said we were going to have it be women-only, and preferably lesbian-only households. Because we came together into these households from so many different classes and places, it catalyzed a great deal of activity. There weren’t any other structures to contain us, except the landlord. That made it an extraordinary time in history, very like a ‘cauldron.’ “Spirituality” was one of the outgrowths of all this activity. The Women’s Spirituality movement, at a grassroots level, came out of that kind of movement. It was grassroots all along the way. It was Wicca out in the woods and all other kinds of gatherings through the work of women like Luisah Teish, Starhawk, Z Budapest,
Vicki Noble, and Max Dashu, who started the “Suppressed History Archives” in 1970, which she first named “Matriarchives,” right here in the Bay area. This was the location and the cauldron. Later on came what we call “lesbian feminism,” but first we called ourselves “gay women’s liberation,” because it wasn’t strictly a feminist movement. We really had in mind a revolutionary movement that would impact everyone, on behalf of everybody. And Women’s Spirituality is like that.

This all fed into how Women’s Spirituality became part of the academy, which took another 30 years. Elinor Gadon, an art historian who wrote about the emergence of goddess mythology and symbolism within feminist art, put that in place. There were other things going on, other moments in the academy that were happening. But a full-fledged Women’s Spirituality program grew out of an art historian’s vision. Elinor couldn’t have done it without being dependent on the students. We were women in their 40s and 50s, who came to study with her in the initial Women’s Spirituality PhD cohort, at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Elinor worked closely with Ani Mander who was the feminist scholar who had made it possible for women’s psychology to be in the academy. Ani founded the first Women’s Psychology program at Antioch College. Grassroots contributions came right into the program from the Bay area, through the work of people like Z Budapest who had inherited Women’s Spirituality down a family lineage from Hungary where she was born before WWII. Then there were all of us who had secretly spiritual parents, who had an inherited ‘spirit.’ My father had inherited a spirit he talked to all the time but kept secret, that re-surfaced with me. There were all the other people who contributed to the grassroots Women’s Spirituality movement, like Paula Gunn Allen (1986, 1991). She was always seeking to know more about her Laguna-Pueblo roots on her mother’s side, as well as the Catholicism that she was raised within which gave her a lot of comprehension about what altars are for, how you approach Mary, and all the limitations of that as well. I lived with Paula for five years and worked with her, again in lesbian contexts. Paula was always looking for magic.

I was a world-known poet by 1980. My poetry was being reprinted in newsletters in India, toured in Australia, and translated in Germany. My work had legs. But I stayed right here and just kept evolving and getting deeper into the questions that I had asked. What would it mean if the world loved women - how would things look? What contributions have women made to culture? Those have been my two big questions.
And the questions stay. Everyone has questions in their lives that they are trying to answer beyond *who am I* and *where do I come from?* People have deeper questions that they don’t know how to articulate, but they have them anyway. These questions direct a life and bring you to places for answers, or a deepening of the questions.

The Women’s Spirituality field needs to understand just how grassroots it is. There’s a misunderstanding, in feminism as well, of understanding where things have come from, how much it’s been grassroots movements. How much it’s been working class women and lesbians and women of colour who have put these fields in place. Not in any romantic way, but out of certain felt necessities, out of inherited life experiences that needed answers. People needed to be able to articulate certain experiences that, for instance, Marxism simply doesn’t explain. For example, Marxism doesn’t explain the story of a jeweler I knew who was trying to make little gold mice. She’s a craftswoman and she couldn’t remember what mice exactly looked like. Her cat began bringing her dead mice and leaving them on her work hutch. That happened three or four times in the course of her project and it never happened again in 15 years of living with this cat. But it happened when she was working on a particular piece that required her to know what mice looked like. That’s an anecdotal story, but everybody has anecdotal experiences like that and they need some place to live. Of course we can get silly and start imagining that everything is a synchronicity, when it’s just, as Freud would say, “a cigar.” But there needs to be a legitimate place for that to live. That’s what I appreciate about working now within the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Instead of these anecdotal happenings being labeled “psychosis” or “delusion” or “make believe,” they are taken seriously as a part of human psychology as being “transpersonal,” as having rooted meanings towards a larger view of human consciousness. This woman had a relationship with her cat that is psychic and it’s useful. There are lots of stories like that of people interacting with creatures in nature who step across and engage with us.

We need to acknowledge that. Industrialism has made us into some pretty stupid kind of people in certain ways, with our real experiences denied a lot. The factory system demanded workers who became stupefied doing their work day after day, whatever it was, including mind numbing repetitive tasks like filing and typing. But when workers wake up and come alive and begin to acknowledge actual things that happen to them, “spirituality” enters in some really alive, intelligent and observable way. To me, this is what Women’s Spirituality is. It’s not
a prescription. It’s not someone telling that you scripture says, “It has to be this way.” Rather it comes out of people’s own experiences that they examine and critique and say, “Well, could it have been this? Is it like what you experienced?” “Is it like what happened when we all did such-and-such by way of ritual?” Women’s Spirituality is very alive in that way, it’s not polemical.

**Anya - The importance of my spirit**

For my Master of Arts, my idea was to find the authors I was reading and the places they were teaching. I had an ecofeminist book called *Reweaving the World* (1990) that I adored. Charlene Spretnak and Arisika Razak’s essays (1990) got me looking at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) because they were teaching there. I started to look at who was teaching in the Women’s Spirituality programs at New College and CIIS, including Starhawk’s work on magic, Earth-based spirituality and activism (1999, 1997), Judy Grahn’s work on menstruation (1993), and Dianne’s work on matriarchal cultures in Kerala, India. These women and their work were already in my library. I also knew that I eventually wanted to do a PhD. I had finally understood that some Master degrees go into a PhD and some don’t. When I found the Women’s Spirituality program I said, “I know it’s not the one that’s going to help me find out how to pay for it, but I know I’m doing a PhD next, so I’m going to allow myself to do this Master’s.” I’m still in debt from my WSMA studies. Coming from the class background that I do, it’s not an abstract thing to have made this huge commitment to my education. It was a compromise to be able to follow what I loved.

What happened during the course of the Women’s Spirituality MA is that I deeply needed to validate myself. I’m hyperconscious of privilege. I mean “privilege” in a multitude of different ways including the privilege of religious dominancy in this culture. People in the dominant religion can be so unconscious about the fact that they have their symbols around them all the time, whereas others have to work for that. I’m hyperconscious of class and cultural privilege because I grew up as an extreme outsider. I was raised within the community of a Hindu guru that my parents followed. I never called myself an outsider, we just didn’t even see the inside. That feels like an asset to me in doing the social justice work I do. But it was hard for me to figure out what do I deserve in a way? For example ‘dance,’ I am a dancer, that is a gift from the Great Goddess in my body. I know it’s something to cherish. But I really struggled with feeling like dance was a luxury. Audre Lorde has that quote, “poetry is not a luxury.”
Well I didn’t know that, I couldn’t. It was hard for me to figure out how is that going to help justice if I dance and do my happy-self-dancing?

When I was in Austin, Texas I got burned out in my job doing domestic violence work. There was a point where I realized I was working with my clients and I would not be listening to them, I would space out. I had gotten to a place where the wall that you have to climb every day when you do domestic violence work in this country was too big. I was coming from a place of fighting, not love. I couldn’t do this work that breaks my heart. One of my last cases was with a mom and her little girl. Mom had poor boundaries with Dad, going back and forth in their relationship. But this little girl was afraid to take a shower, with very strong sexual molestation happening. We had an active court case where I brought all the evidence about the molestation and the judge would still not cancel the dad’s rights to see his daughter. How do you hold that? I knew I was fighting and I was in a place of anger. I was fighting the system for that girl, but I wasn’t loving and trusting in spirit for her.

After that last case, I moved to El Salvador because I didn’t want to be in this country anymore. I went to El Salvador with a friend for three months of social and economic training in Spanish. I worked as a Presidential election observer. I felt really unquestionable truth in my life that I had to go around and learn from all of these things for myself, to figure out what I could use my privileged position to be of use for. It was there I realized I wanted to do my graduate degree next. When I was thinking about doing my Master’s degree I got to a point where I was really frustrated. I have all these passions, how do I pull them together? Why am I educated in all these different areas?

I was hoping I could figure out how this is so. I know from working in domestic violence that I have to have a connection with spirit in a really deep way. When I find the justice issues that I’m passionate about addressing, it’s essential that I have a really strong faith. A significant aspect of my WSMA studies that Judy and Dianne were always talking about with me is that they would say, “Anya, you came in with such a developed political consciousness.” I was conscious when I entered the WSMA about what I wanted to do. I gave myself the acknowledgement of the importance of my spirit. You could say “goddess,” that’s another word for when I say my “spirit.” I gave myself the importance of my spirit, “I’m interested in this so let me follow this thread.” That’s as valid as working for immigrant rights. The WSMA faculty hold spirit with such dignity. The WS program has developed such an ethical, culturally
conscious form of education. It’s hard for me to find people who have that level of dignity that I can really trust and work with.

Dianne – Another place to stand

I was part of somebody’s dissertation study at the end of my PhD program in Women’s Spirituality at CIIS, before I started teaching in the Women’s Spirituality MA program at New College. I told a story in this study group, focused on women who have had spirit work through their lives in career changes. The story I told tells a lot, it’s a touchstone I go back to. I thought my career change was that I was coming out of years of working in the high tech industry into having a PhD. I did not know exactly what I was going to do with the PhD. That journey really was one where I let spirit guide me without expectation. I really did not foresee how I would end up teaching in and co-directing the Women’s Spirituality degree program.

It’s a large part of the educational system today to have to answer the question, “What are you going to do with your PhD?” with a straight answer. As WSMA co-directors at ITP, we are going through the assessment process for the program. We see questions like, “What are the deliverables”? I remember “deliverables” from my business model. But even then there were the ‘tangible’ deliverables, which are the things that you said were going to do to cost justify your business, and then there were all the ‘intangibles.’ For instance in business, ‘intangibles’ happened when women weren’t in office typing pools anymore. All of a sudden information was accessible to everybody within the office structures. But how can you be in a Humanities program and talk about deliverables?

When women come into the WSMA, they ask us, “What are we going to do with this?” My answer is, “I have no idea. There is something in you bringing you here to do this work. I can tell you what we do.” We fill students up with material that they may have never heard of. It is material that women scholars have spent their whole lives researching, studying, and going all over the world to find. It’s scholarship that looks at where women have been. And it isn’t just a couple of women doing this research, it’s happening in every discipline. As co-directors of the program, we have the privilege of gathering this work all together and making it accessible for students to learn from.

Part of the language that I use to understand what it is we do is ‘giving women another place to stand.’ When women really get into contact with their deepest spirituality,
creativity or energetic, however you want to conceive of this, things fall into place in students’
lives. Then it becomes really clear why they were so drawn to these studies. But it may not be an
easy process, and it can feel dangerous or fearful for some. They might experience a lack of
understanding from those they are close to, or some struggle comes from the fear of the
unknown.

What I’ve seen and experienced about this process of learning, and being led by spirit, is
that other people often recognize your new abilities or knowledge before you can see it in
yourself. Women who have gone through this process are often especially attuned to this in
others. When I was finishing my PhD, I remember my friend at Sonoma State University
saying to me when we were having lunch, “You have to teach research for me.” I said, “I haven’t
taught research.” And she said, “Dianne, I can just tell by the way you’re talking about it that
you are the perfect teacher to teach research here, and I want you to teach it.” I was filled with
doubt about my own capabilities, it wasn’t anything I could see or understand. But because of
working through Women’s Spirituality, and that process I had of trusting spirit, I at least had
the idea that this is “goddess” talking through this person so I had better listen up. When it’s so
out of the ordinary, I understand that I need to show up and do it. Of course ultimately I’ve
loved teaching. But at the time I wasn’t there yet. Part of me was there, but not my emotional,
psychological self. I always want to be so good at what I do and it’s hard to take that next step
into the unknown.
Red thread in the forest

The mirror I arrive into a small clearing. I pull a circular mirror from my bag and face it upwards onto the ground in front of me, reflecting the sky. I carefully lift the mirror, offering its reflection in circular motions to the trees, forest beings, ancestors, and spirits about me. Passing over the trees, the reflected light looks like the round orb of the moon. This moon-like glow encourages me. I continue to make circles with the mirror’s reflected sunlight, feeling the depth of this place arise as my mind calms, absorbing presence and birds’ song. I give thanks for being here. I ask this place, its beings, trees, ancestors and spirits for guidance.

Practice with Aikya: Visioning for Women’s Spirituality

When I first suggested the idea of doing a practice together from Aikya’s current work/life she immediately said, “visioning.” In studying to become a practitioner of Religious Science since graduating from the WSMA, Aikya learned this practice done by groups in her church organization. Aikya spoke of how it took a year of visioning to arrive at a new plan for her church’s Prison Ministry which she is involved in. The visioning resulted in a project to audiotape the voices of incarcerated mothers reading storybooks to their children. The books and tapes are then delivered back to the children, supporting ongoing relationships between mother and child.

Aikya and I meet to practice visioning together on a warm summer day in late July, during my 2009 research trip. We decided to work together within a public park space near her apartment in Oakland. But first she brings me to a large newly built, hyper-modern Catholic Cathedral in downtown Oakland, the “Cathedral of Christ the Light.” She sometimes wanders into this place for quiet reflection in the midst of the city, and to sit with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the rear chapel. Aikya especially wants to share with me the huge sculptural mandorla, an almond-shaped ‘Vesica Piscis,’ that is the ceiling of the Cathedral itself. This is designed through interlocking edges that admit the outside light. Further slats of light come in from all sides through the roof, shaped within the vesica motif.

Aikya and I studied the mandorla symbol in the WSMA program with artist Rose Frances as a signifier of the sacred yoni, a vulva shape. In the Christian iconographic tradition this shape frames figures such as Mary or Jesus to signal spiritual importance. It is an eye and vulva shape all at once, a boat of the Queen of Heaven. From midwifery work, I recognize this shape as signaling the crowning of a baby’s head at birth through her/his mother into the world of ‘light’ in the moments before a baby’s head fully emerges. This is a time of intense, potentially overwhelming, and even ecstatic sensation for the mother. The light of this Cathedral, as its name implies, reflects the Spanish phrase for giving birth as “dar la luz,” into the light.

Aikya and I discuss her sense of this birthing image, whether consciously or unconsciously constructed as such by Church architects. Situated as the ‘crowning’ feature of the Church within the heart of a textually patriarchal tradition, we speak of the ways in which images so often contain spiritual lineages of the sacred female as a hidden text. These visual texts are buried, or unspoken, yet paradoxically glorified for all who can see and read other
meanings, a hermeneutic twist. This symbolic crowning-mother-figure gives birth to an adult image of Jesus himself. Situated strikingly as a hundred meter tall figure at the end of the church, he floats in space. He is fashioned from metallic reflective materials that play upon and reflect the light radiating from the birthing mandorla above. Being both the source of light and its void, ‘She’ is the primordial mother from which all forms arise and return, as in the paradox of emptiness and form of the Prajna Paramita of Tibetan Buddhism, or the Judeo-Christian figure of Sophia as primordial wisdom.

In mediating upon these visual forms together, the notion of “vision” in “vision-ing,” where one understands vision as both external sight with the eyes and as the inner vision of intuitive knowing, seeing with the ‘mind’s eye,’ strikes me as central to my experience of Aikya. The fluidity of this dual notion of “vision,” a non-dual notion of such, breaks down the binary of objective (outside) and subjective (inside) knowledge. Aikya draws deep knowledge from images and icons, significantly following them in her life’s spiritual path. Further, she creates artworks of her visions while developing intuition and inner sight as a practice that benefits others through “visioning.”

We move from the Cathedral and drive a short distance to the Oakland park. From Church to tree, we claim a bench under a large oak for our visioning practice. We admire the huge limbs of the tree with its multiple branches, listening to the birds sing from above. Aikya explains the process of visioning to me. We will ask a series of questions to goddess—what is goddess’ vision for us? In asking, we will close our eyes and allow pictures, images, colours, feelings, smells, and sounds to arise, one by one, and note each of these on paper in our laps. She speaks of how we are to let the sensations come, how this is easier or harder for differing people to allow what comes, and to not judge oneself or what arises, especially if nothing is seen or felt in the process. The question we will ask, pertaining to larger questions in this dissertation and our own lives is: what is goddess’ vision for Women’s Spirituality scholarship? We will ask this question a number of times, dwelling each time with a differing ‘sense,’ including sight, sound, smell, feel, quality, ability. We will share our answers together only after completing the whole practice in silence, except for the sound of Aikya’s voice asking each question.

Aikya opens our practice with a centring prayer and invitation to goddess to be with us in our visioning process. As we begin, I feel grateful for being with Aikya, the quiet hum of the park as groups of people sit and visit with each other, and a sense of being sheltered by this large tree. First Aikya asks what does goddess’ vision of Women’s Spirituality scholarship look
like? I immediately see the mandorla we had been discussing. Now it looks golden and vast, sitting within a black void of space. Centred within this mandorla is a large, partially open book. I cannot see the pages themselves, the book is turned so that only the spine is visible to me. Its title and back cover are written upon, but not in any language I can read. Text and writing are unmistakably sacred. Is this a text of women’s writing or verse? It is the lost and re-found book I ever write towards. Aikya sees a large, round green bush, growing wildly with new shoots coming forward, its life ever renewing in form.

Aikya then asks for the colour of goddess’ vision for Women’s Spirituality scholarship? I see soft, soft pink, in a misty cloud like form, and Aikya sees a soft rose colour and green. Green again, like new growth. Then we ask what is the sound of Women’s Spirituality? Our inner ears hear similar tones of women’s talking as others listen, we hear women’s singing, sounding, crying and laughing, the sounds of birds are everywhere. Then Aikya asks, what does it feel like? She feels a very open heart, and the sense of being open hearted with other people, feeling also a calm strength and sense of fearlessness. I feel physical sensations of prickly heat, which shifts into an expansive sense of love.

When asking what does goddess’ vision smell like? I sense an earthy smell of freshly turned soil for planting, mixed with something sweet like mangoes. Aikya smells copal and sage burning and clearing energetic fields, and then she senses a strong fragrance of flowers. Both of these scents will occur for me in the ‘outer vision’ of my upcoming week of further research. This vision anticipates the smells of the healing I will undergo with MamaCoAtl, and the freshly cut flower heads I will thread with Dianne and Judy as devotional offerings in a goddess puja. But I don’t know this at the time. It is only now because of writing that I can ‘see’ the connection and in-sight of goddess’ vision.

Aikya then asks what qualities do we need to embody for this vision to manifest? She feels a sense of goddess emerging—goddess is an emerging form. I sense qualities of joyfulness and caring, combined with a quality of release, an ability to let go or surrender within life. After this question of qualities, Aikya asks what must be released in order for goddess’ vision to manifest? I immediately sense that worry and resentment have to go. Aikya senses the release of ‘doing’ rather then ‘being.’

From the next question, what talent or ability do we bring to the fulfillment of Women’s Spirituality scholarship? I hear words such as, tenacity, containment, skillful means, art, and pleasure in spending time with others. Aikya sees her ability to see beyond the waking mind,
listening to others, acceptance of people wherever they are, knowing and following intuition as her talents. These talents lead to the question of how can we commit to this vision, and how does it feel to make that commitment? I see the great oak tree before us as both outer and inner sight/site, and realize my commitment feels just like this tree, rooted and real, coming from the roots of my life as a living being. Aikya feels a resounding Yes! She can commit to the vision, which is as Women’s Spirituality has always been for us in our studies and scholarship, fascinating, enticing, attractive, drawing us in with enchantment. It’s like there is nowhere else for us to go or to ever have been, despite the costs and questions of following such a path in these times.

The final question—is there anything else that needs to be known of goddess’ vision? I hear that I am to be like the branches of a tree, all connected yet each is unique. I am to make myself heard like the gaggle of geese that has just wandered by us in the park. The geese honk and trumpet loudly as they pass us as if calling for me to “Speak up and out!” Aikya sees an arrow, like a traffic sign, pointing this way and a set of words emerges as she writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{You are guided,} \\
&\text{Always remember,} \\
&\text{You are guided.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I am your inner compass,} \\
&\text{In all directions I dwell.} \\
&\text{I show the way,} \\
&\text{I am the way,} \\
&\text{As you.}
\end{align*}
\]

We end by visioning with affirmations of the vision:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I focus on the goddess emerging.} \\
&\text{I am joyous - I live joyously.}
\end{align*}
\]

I am joyous - I live joyously.
Chapter Seven: Gifts

I prefer a unified view of education, education that enables an alienated presentation to be healed. And I don’t mean healed in any kind of fantasy way, not leaving out the political realities of discrimination or family cruelty or any of that sort of thing, but healing in the sense of taking all of one’s own people into account. Taking into account where you come from and then learning to re-value that in relation to the rest of the world. In a sense it’s: how can you bring education home? (Judy Grahn, personal communication, 2009)

Red Thread 3: Gifts

Nané - Mother calling

My writing is interrupted by a phone call from my mother. We speak of the birthday gifts she has just sent me as I turn 40. Tomorrow is her birthday. We live far apart, at the Canadian distance of Toronto to Vancouver. For her birthday, I mailed her some simple soaps and a gift certificate. She says she is going to a local Fassbinder film festival (the German filmmaker) with this. She has sent me a beautiful brass Tibetan singing bowl. I play it for her on the phone as she explains the meaning of the symbols and text on it - Om Mane Padme Hum....hummmmmm, a singing hummmmmmm, hummmmmmmmm, huuuuuummmmmmmmmmmmmmm.....arises from the bowl as I draw the small wooden mallet around its rim.

“There is a sign for happiness written on the inside.” She continues, “The vibration of the sound is healing to the body and rejuvenates the cells.” I say, “It looks like goddess eyes are drawn on the bottom, like the eyes painted on the Stupas of Buddhist temples I visited in Nepal.” We talk of the beautiful green cushion she also sent for the bowl. I say, “The bowl has its own meditation cushion to sit on.” She bought a bowl for herself and a cushion too, one for me, one for you.

I enjoy my mother’s creative intelligence and humour, and appreciate the efforts we each make to be able to speak to each other thus. Yet into adulthood, I sometimes feared answering her phone calls. I am aware now, though I wasn’t when I began my WSMA, that living closely within this primal relationship as a daughter and now a mother myself, is part of what drives me to find self-location and transformation within relational, holistic forms of study and work as I have. This
includes my midwifery work and pursuit of Women’s Spirituality education. Both of these fields highlight understandings of social, psychological and spiritual wellbeing and healing. These callings are my spiritual “mothering refuge” (Kidd & Taylor, 2009, p. 186), concerned as I am about mothers of all kinds—worldly and divine.

In relation to healing family life, the curriculum of the Women’s Spirituality MA brings the content of women’s own lives into view. Re-inscribing emotional intelligence, students transform the capacities of their social and familial relations through experiencing empathic, emotionally sensitive approaches to learning. Students consciously or unconsciously surface their emotional-psychic selves and understandings of relationships with family members. Families and “home” are understood as situated within the larger play of social and historical dramas and traumas. Remothering work is collectively lived by WSMA faculty and students within various experiences of the limits of the nuclear family.

There is a social drive, of which my husband and I concur, to focus on children’s emotional needs and intelligence, to grow them up with non-harm, conscious as possible of adults’ healing so as not to transfer family and social wounds over again to the child. It’s an imperfect way of awareness we walk each day. It is a path in which I navigate my own experiences of suffering, connection and love, the paradox of this highlighted in relationships to my family of origin. Renegotiating family life and mothering/fathering is a central aspect of emergent North American feminisms (Kinser, 2008; Walker, 2007), in which families can be consciously created as we heal and transform selves and society. During my studies in the WSMA, investigating threads of my mother-father-lines, I was newly a mother myself and did not have to lose this aspect of my identity within the coursework and thesis writing. This is holistic education.

After my parents’ separation when I was around six-years-old, I spent half of the week with my mom, and half with my dad. As the acrimonious separation of our household became complete, I navigated their differing lives. My childhood initiation into the healing power of spirit came through immersions in the natural world. There, I intuitively relaxed and surrendered into a wider experience of myself, a consciousness that is both immanent within me, yet equally held in the wider world of all beings and relations. I rested within the gift of this innate spirituality, enjoying co-presence of the natural world, collecting milkweed fluff and caterpillars, watching starry skies at night when away from my city life on trips with my dad to our friends’ “Land.” I understood that
“I” am more then the limits of my human relationships. Ecstatic connectivity and love is available in this human form.

Growing up with my mother, an artist, I absorbed understanding of art making as lived experience, art as a way of life. She grew up in Toronto, after her families’ post-WWII immigration from Ireland where she was born. She completed a fine arts degree and a Masters of Fine Arts throughout the years of my childhood. My mom and I lived for many years in two rooms in a house shared with other artists. In days with my mom, we went everywhere together, to all her art events, dinners with friends, and parties. Her extensive library of literature was my source of teenage reading in authors such as Doris Lessing, Virginia Wolfe and Susan Sontag. My mother afforded me an open and artistically curious approach to the world. She was transparent with me in her struggles for self-definition and location as a creative, thinking woman, living and distilling to all about her an intensity of emotion.

My father remarried, and had two more children with my stepmother by the time I was a teenager. My stepmother became a vital other-parent in my life. Throughout the years of my childhood, my father and his business partner became a creative force within Canadian filmmaking, at one point working across social-racial lines by involvement with early days of Native-focused television (Adilman, 1993; Spirit Bay TV series, 1980s). I spent my young life on film sets, working as a family actor for their early films (e.g. “Fiddles and Whimmydiddles,” 1976), and later working in other jobs on film sets. I absorbed the craft of this kind of storytelling, the rapport of the crew, actors and long hours of work.

The recent birthday gifts my mother sent include pictures of my herself, my dad and I, all together as a family—an unusual marking of this past. The image is of us walking on a West Coast beach, on a 1972 journey west from Toronto. I was moved beyond knowing what to think on seeing these images. I had so carefully learned to maintain the physical and psychic separation of my original family. Photos of my baby years and early life (and theirs) were not on view in either home. Seeing this image, I have compassion for us all. I would soon encounter and then embrace double homes, a new stepmother, the births of my siblings, and a child’s view of multiple creative lives. Moving between this difference of homes, I learned to navigate multiplicity and mixed meanings. ‘Home’ was a shifting place. I encountered the groundlessness of existence at a young age, putting me on a spiritual, questing path for my own centre, before I understood my life as following such.
Now I live the vulnerability and simplicity of maintaining one family and home. I learn and re-learn to put my family and myself at the centre. I cannot do this work alone, *I am not alone in this work.*

Thus I come back to writing after conversations with my mother. I think of the material category of reproduction and birth I am about to embark upon in writing of the philosopher-midwife. I am thinking of female lineage, of my mother and I, of my mother and her mother, of the extension of life into my two daughters and I. This is a past, present and future in constant fluctuation with itself, as we trade and transform the roles of mother, daughter, grandmother—*catch, you’re it.* I am thinking of how this stream of reproduction carries incredible weight in its affect of birthing, forming and re-making lives. I think of my own entrapment and freedom in this primal birth web of mother-father, how my mother’s voice and stories hold me in a grip as I listen. The singing bowl and the photos reach to some other message my mother can’t say in words. I read them as an offering of hope and love, as some freedom in our complicated threads of being.
Students value the empathy, compassion, and understanding they can get from creating community and collaborating across differences.

Any – *Life giving you your path*

I grew up studying dance. But when I finished high school and went to college I didn’t even know there were professional dancers. My parents were very spiritual but they didn’t have cultural or political consciousness. I danced for the high school football team, but I was in a cultural backwater in Texas. I didn’t even know people took dance classes for fun. My director in high school told us about the community college in Texas that was world famous for their drill team so we emulated them. If you wanted to go anywhere, you tried out for them. But I couldn’t stand more of the drill team, so I dropped it. I didn’t dance for five years. I had a really strong feeling that dancing as a hobby was a ‘privilege’ thing. My parents used their art to make a living. I couldn’t rationalize paying for a dance class unless I was willing to make it my profession. That’s how I viewed dance from the age of 19 to 29.

When I quit college and moved to New Orleans I started studying samba, but it was a literal struggle. When it was time to go to the dance class on Wednesday at 7 PM the voice in my head would start with, “Well, do I want to be a professional dancer?” I attended 1/3 of the time because 2/3 of the time the voice would get me with, “I don’t know, I’m just going to do something else.” I was too afraid. It was an economics-value thing. I studied different dance forms here and there, but I was never committed to a class because I could never keep going.

When I was in Austin about eight years ago, I was so frustrated with my fear of going to dance class and wanting to go. It was driving me crazy every week. I saw a flyer about a West African woman from Paris teaching an intensive workshop where there’d be a performance at the end. I signed up and it was so advanced. It’s a very elaborate art form that looks easier then it is. There are anti-gravity movements that you do when you’re down, but you are really going up. I tried it but it was hard to learn in one week. Everybody else had done it before, but I still loved it. The teacher chose who would be in the performance and it was everyone else but
myself and another person. My pride as a dancer was crushed. I cried and didn’t go back. It was partially ego, but mostly just over my head.

I’m a Hip Hopper. I mostly danced at Hip Hop shows. A good Hip Hop MC is like a prophet, channeling and speaking spirit. That’s when I would let spirit come through me. I would really trust and let it come through. People would come up to me afterward and say, “I saw you dancing, you made me so happy.” But I also had a feeling of not being safe. If you dance like that, some men sexualize you and get too close. I’d have to elbow them sometimes, “Get out of my way.” I had to be harsh because I got so much attention and I didn’t want it. It was an intense struggle, because the only place that I allowed myself to dance was publically. All the joy of my life would come out in that second of dancing and I had to literally subdue the moves.

That was my dance experience until I came to New College. I started to sit with this and wrote a paper about it in the “Embodied Spirituality” class, during my fourth session of classes. When I started the WSMA degree in the spring I went to Kerala, India, with Judy and Dianne. We studied for a week at a traditional cultural, heritage and arts centre. We all chose three subjects to study. Tell me I did not struggle about how much to dance or not. But my friend said, “I’m doing dance for all three subjects!” She’s so bold about it. She’s a dancer, no problem. So I studied Bharatanatyam for a week and I loved it. I love every single part about dance and learning dance. I love being corrected by the teacher, the challenge of doing nineteen things and still remembering the eyes.

Then a month after we got back from Kerala I went for the first time to a West African dance class in Port Townsend. I went to that dance class and it was just like life giving you your path. I never missed a single class. That was three years ago. If I’m sick, I just go to sit and listen. I’m a different person now. The person who struggled about whether I can go or not is gone. For me, this is being able to truly accept and hold my identity and gifts as a dancer and not be embarrassed or ashamed. It’s not that I felt I didn’t have value, but I didn’t feel safe.

Port Townsend is a very tiny town of eight thousand people. There’s a 15-year history of people doing West African dance in the town with no teacher. This is a dance indigenous to West Africa, from agricultural people in the region where the jembe drum comes from. The movements are ritually-based, with a strong understanding that spirit ancestors are moving through you. It’s not choreographed, there are specific moves, but they are very old moves
that everybody does. When I started the class, a young West African dance teacher started to teach the dances her teachers taught her.

What I experience is a deep, profound sense of community in the dance class. Everybody knows each other, just like when you show up to a T-ball practice. At the beginning and end of every class we would say, “Thank you to the ancestors and spirit for being here with us and moving through us.” There are no mirrors, which was shocking for me. I had to develop an internal frame of reference. Every dance I’d ever learned was done through the way it looks. Now I had to learn what the movements felt like in my body. And there is no sense of separation between the drummers and the dancers. We all know that we are playing for enjoyment. I soaked it all up. I accepted it all and it was an instant transition because I wanted this so badly. I had been praying for years to find a dance form that I could commit to, to have confidence in, teach and perform. I was blessed with walking right into that.

Dianne – *Stand in these methodologies*

What I know is that when you are the most vulnerable, is when you have the most profound affect. I go back to an article that I wrote for publication about my teaching practice in Women’s Spirituality. I loved writing it and the editors could not understand what I was writing about. That’s work that I really care about and I want to keep re-writing it so that it will convey what I know to a larger audience. I know I’m skilled at communicating ideas in the classroom through the curriculum, that I can organize and present materials really well. But I am more challenged by things that have a deeply held emotional content. If I were an artist, maybe it wouldn’t be so hard? Understanding teaching and learning in Women’s Spirituality is in that in-between territory.

Women’s Spirituality is very interdisciplinary work. At New College, the WSMA had its own department. Now that it is situated within Transpersonal Psychology, we continue to stand in the teaching and research methodologies we’ve developed. We know we know what we are doing, but we are working on articulating it. I always talk and think about doing things with integrity. The shift from New College to ITP framed for me how I am the “curriculum manager.” When New College was closing we had to write WASC goals (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) to describe what are we teaching and why. I’m a process person. In terms of the WSMA structure, I understand what courses should be at the beginning, the
middle, and the end of the program, “This is really good but it shouldn’t come here, it should come there.” This voice comes from experience with my own development and through watching so many women over the years. If certain things are taught too early, they can be overwhelming because students don’t have a foundation for them. If you build the materials, then more women get held through the whole process.

In the fall, three classes are taught together which focus on personal processes and the bonding of the women, including “Spiritual Autobiography.” Beginning to personally reflect and bond with other students that you will go through the whole program with sets the stage for everything else to unfold. “Women, Religion and Social Change” is also taught where we introduce feminism and the concepts of how to have a feminist lens on religion. Not just religion as practice, but understanding religion as culture, how this is the “culture” that we swim in. Whether you have any religious beliefs or not, we have internalized a lot of these ideas. One of the things I saw happening over and over is that some students get so despairing. The information that has been written and said about women and our bodies, where shame, fear, and indoctrination comes from, is very deep and can be really overwhelming to take it in. Because of this, we’ve learned to bring in voices of women who have used spirituality and religion in liberatory ways. We show how this is what has been said, but this is what women really do. Those are two different things. If you look across the world at women, they are living, practicing, or resisting from another set of values. I use my research on the woman-centred ritual of Pongala in Kerala, India, to talk about that. What are these “domestic” rituals really about?

Another class taught in the first quarter is “Art as Sacred Practice.” The instructor brings in all kinds of sacred images of women. Students are flooded with a cornucopia of the female divine, and begin to re-orient their own embodiment by looking at what artists have created. Students are introduced to making art from their own lives and find ways to open artistic channels they may not have drawn from before. During this first quarter, some students also take Judy Grahn’s creative writing class. She supports them in finding a spoken and written voice through amazing coaching around how to handle your ‘inner critic,’ a voice that often stops women from writing and sharing their work with others. Then Vicki Noble will teach either priestessing or “Female Shamanism,” where students’ explore ritual and get a cultural
understanding of women’s contemporary spiritual practices and ancient lineages, in a woman-centred way.

The second quarter we take that learning deeper through “Metaformic Theory” and “Archeaomythology.” Both classes offer more complex theories and methods of understanding women’s histories and practices. Once you’ve got a foundation, these classes deepen the ideas. Both Metaformic theory and Archeaomythology talk about origin stories, and continue to use women’s own lives as information that they can bring to inform their research and work. By then, students are used to writing and seeing why from a feminist perspective your own story is so important. I say it over and over, “Unless you disclose who you are, how can someone evaluate what you are saying?”

“Embodied Spirituality” is also taught in the second quarter. Instructors offer students body-based modalities of dance, movement, and readings that confront and extend the kinds of physical and psychological limits that have been imposed on women and our bodies. It’s one of the hardest classes for students because of shame and issues around body image, being able to be seen and witnessed by others. Many women have deep trauma in their lives that they haven’t dealt with on any level. This is particularly true now in what we know now about biology and how trauma is stored in the body in the nervous system; it can be reactivated. That’s what “post-traumatic stress” is, when the body takes over and tries to protect you. The instructors of this class are highly skilled at moving students through that. They bring a lot of tools and techniques. For women who need more it starts them on their path. We give them a lot of resources if that’s something that resonates or doesn’t.

Other courses include: “Uncommon Kinship: Cultivating Community across Diverse Lines,” “Women’s Sacred Texts,” “Life Cycle Rituals,” “Organic Inquiry and Critical Analysis: Feminist Research,” “The Ancestral Journey: African and African-American Spiritual Culture in the West African Diaspora.” Students undertake a “Community Service Practicum” by volunteering or creating a project that has an activist or practical focus within a community. Then they write their MA thesis. The MA thesis is an integration of a student’s learning through her own unique focus. It’s something that really matters to her. Students have multiple avenues of expression to work from.

I always go back to the goals of the program we developed for WASC. Women really need to deeply understand themselves as sacred beings that have a lineage. The times we
live in are actually a blip out of this historical context. The understandings all over the world are that women are at the center, not at the margins. Just that information alone is so important, and it isn’t that men are not included elsewhere. Many women in the US don’t have this understanding and it changes the way that they are in the world. What is important about the way that women show up in our lives? Well, we really need agency. Where does that come from? It comes from understanding how the things that we do on a day-to-day basis are the most important things in the world. It’s having conversations like you and I are right now. It’s showing up at the hospital, it’s listening to your friend. And it’s asking questions of the past, like, “What did priestesses do? How did priestesses function?” We have a modern idea that we need psychologists, and not that psychology isn’t important, but I’m intrigued with the occupation of “spiritual guides,” or spiritual counselors for people. They had those in some traditions; it’s been an occupation of women for thousands of years.

Last year, ITP gave me an Engagement Award and it threw me into a state of grief because I know that it isn’t about me. I couldn’t accept the award without giving a speech about the faculty as a community. The co-directors, adjunct faculty, student and alumni voices are all included. This community voice comes from a deep engagement that we all have with these materials and with each other. We have WSMA faculty meetings four times a year that we all look forward to. We just had a meeting where we were working through who feels left out, whose voice needs to be heard more within the faculty? We also realize as co-directors that we are aging, how much longer are we going to be able to do this? What will happen when we are not all doing this together? It will just be different. But I so deeply value what we have created together, that discussion, engagement and open-heartedness that we all try to stay in.

Aikya – She knew every plant

The things we did in the WSMA were certainly not things that I’d done in any other classroom. But I was able to be open hearted and be there with the other students. My attitude towards my life is that it’s a huge experiment. Try it till it doesn’t work anymore, and if it works, “Wow!” I just loved Rose Frances, the director of the WSMA when we started. So much of what Rose gave us went right over my head. I wish I could do it over again because now I could understand it. She shared things with us about Native culture. She came from the Mid-west and knew about some of the early cultures that lived there. I had no idea. I wasn’t even
connected to my own Native background let alone knowing that all that incredible richness was right here in this country.

For me the WSMA was a beginning but not quite a flowering. It was a breakthrough, coming from having no woman-centred anything at all, to being immersed in it for a while and starting my healing. When I came into the WS program and for a several years afterwards I was still pretty freaked out, which had to do with my own personal emotional wounds. The healing wasn’t over because I got a degree. That’s one of the reasons I got into Religious Science. As soon as I walked into it in 2005 I said, “These people have a healing modality and I need it for me. And I want to learn how to give it away to others.”

Recently, I was in a workshop on the topic of “the patriarchal past” in relation to “the future of the Divine Feminine,” that a group of CIIS Women’s Spirituality students presented at a local conference (Davis, Truxler, Rowan, Schorman, & Slazar, 2007). Their panel included views of “menarche.” I was listening to them when I realized that I was mentally and physically unable to remember my Native heritage until I stopped menstruating, until menopause. I wanted to go up and tell one of the women about the potential for reinforcing and making part of your body whatever you find most precious during menstruation. I was thinking about saying that, when I realized how something else was being taught to me during all the years I was menstruating. It was the reinforcement of the dominant culture and how to be a ‘woman.’ How to hold my body as a woman in this culture overpowered everything I had learned from before that. It made me realize how important it is to have spiritual practice as Amma recommends during menstruation. I couldn’t remember my Native ancestry because it wasn’t part of what happened to me every month when I was bleeding—that was a huge for me to understand. There is a beautiful Native woman who comes to our Church to sit and listen with a Native elder named Grey Wolf. She has no idea either. She doesn’t know who she is. She hasn’t had the ‘Native’ experience. Her parents were perhaps being very modern or maybe didn’t know themselves.

I have Lenape or Cherokee lineage. In terms of my Native heritage, I didn’t remember anything from my background before doing the WSMA, such as the visits with my great aunt and uncle, or my father teaching me beading or leatherwork. After my grandfather died when I was 8, we didn’t talk about it anymore. In Judy Grahn’s course on “Feminist Theory” we had to pick a book from Judy’s list of titles to do a report on. I immediately picked Paula Gunn
Allen’s book, “The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition” (1992). We were supposed to pick something that had to do with us, our own embodiment, and I just really wanted to read Paula Gunn Allen’s book. At the time I had no conscious memory of myself being part Native. It was a nuisance that I had to explain what it had to do with me.

Then I remembered the turtle rattle that I had gotten at age three. I also remembered running into the room when my grandfather was having a vision and I saw the vision too. That was a really big deal as far as my grandfather was concerned. He was sitting as he often was, watching baseball on the TV, and between himself and the TV was a little adult male. Not like anyone I’d ever seen. He was not too much bigger then I was. He was wearing funny clothes, and I said to my grandfather, “Who’s that?” He’d never had anybody in the family see the things that he saw. He looked at me and wanted to explain him in some kind of age appropriate way, “Oh, that’s Jack Frost, that’s the one that paints the ice drawings on the window in the winter.” The little man was wearing clunky shoes and trousers with suspenders. I don’t know where this character came from or why my grandfather was seeing him. I’ve asked more people about it now. I discovered that the Lenape, the Cherokee, and all the East Coast Native peoples have the tradition of the little people. That’s as far as I’ve gotten. But because I saw him that started the, “Well, we better teach her about this stuff.” Then came the gift of the turtle rattle.

When I looked up my turtle rattle for the paper in Judy’s class, the one I had received was a Cherokee turtle rattle. I couldn’t figure out how I could have a Cherokee turtle rattle if I was in New Jersey. I studied the different groups that were there and found out how some Cherokee from down South had been slaves. They left the Cherokee Nation before the civil war, before the Trail of Tears, and moved up to Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. Even finding that out, I was still thinking I had to be a Lenape. But when I went to a Pow Wow in Pennsylvania to meet Lenape folks, they didn’t look like my grandfather. The Cherokee look like my grandfather. When the Cherokee came North they intermarried with the Lenape. In tracing identity, you have to find the real people as the history has been erased or is not told.

I was given the turtle rattle and a little hand drum between ages three and four, when we started visiting my great aunt and uncle on Long Island. The drum was very old, something my father or my grandfather had. My aunt was still living on Long Island in a fairly traditional life. She knew every plant. We went out gathering berries with her and carried them in wonderful baskets she had made. I loved her baskets and wanted to make them so my father taught
me some simple skills. But it was nothing like the elaborate things she made. I had forgotten all of that. I don’t have my original turtle rattle, but I made one after I graduated from the WSMA. A Lenape man from Pennsylvania taught me how to make it by email. He sent me pictures and told me how to get the turtle shell and how I needed to have a cedar bough. You put water pebbles inside.

Paula Gunn Allen has a lot of things to say about women as spiritual leaders in the Native community. I discovered simultaneously the work of an American anthropologist who really understood, photographed, and reported factually what was going on with the Pueblo women in their life cycle. I wanted to see what the people looked like that Paula Gunn Allen was writing about. She is Pueblo and I wanted to see the special hairdo of the menarchal woman. They wear this big hoop-like bun on either side. Then they get a haircut when they become mothers. These women have such distinct ways of showing up in the world. Thinking about menstruation like that, in my years in the ashram with Swami-ji, the Western women were gotten together one day and taught the proper way to behave when we had our periods in a Hindu environment, “You don’t come to the temple. You don’t go to the teacher.” This was explained to us by an uptight male. It felt very punitive and excluding, some of us were pretty angry about it. This man didn’t have any idea of the positive stuff that Hindu women might think or do. All we got was the negation, “You may not do this or that. You may not pick flowers for garlands or offering in the temple.” I discussed this with an Indian friend and she told me that the whole body is cleaning out. It’s not just the genital area that is bleeding, your skin is releasing too. If you touch things like flowers, or some foods, they’ll actually turn colour. She told me about the rules in her family during menstruation. You had to stay in a certain part of the house, you weren’t supposed to talk much to anybody and you didn’t cook at that time. The next time I got my period I called her and said, “You know what? I feel like sitting in the corner, not talking to anybody, and definitely not cooking.” From my own reaction I got the idea that maybe women had come up with all these rules. It wasn’t the men imposing some silliness. It was the women saying, “Hey, hold off.”
Red thread in the forest

The red thread mantle I enter this waking dream, transforming myself from the everyday. I begin to move through the forest wearing only the woven red thread mantle on my body. The red mantle is my guide into this forest. Placenta-like, its woven form is the interface of my body within the trees, exchanging nourishments with the Earth Mother of this place. Umbilical-like, long loose tendrils of red thread trail behind me as I carefully walk, catching and collecting twigs and leaves. Gathering such medicines by red thread, I take them with me. I move slowly and deliberately. I stop next to a cedar tree. I am drawn to this tree.

Practice with Vicki: Dakini mandala

Vicki picks me up from the bus stop as I arrive into Santa Cruz from San Francisco. We have breakfast together, catching up on our news. We then head to her cottage-like bungalow home, steps from the Santa Cruz beaches. I think of the contrast of this town and ocean infused space from her previous forest homes in the adjoining mountains, where I had visited her for workshop days during my WSMA studies. Back then, I drove long winding roads up and up across ridges with wonderful views and vultures flying out. Today, the sun shines down on us, highlighting the growing abundance of Vicki’s garden that extends from both the front and back of her house. Vicki has a passion and commitment to have her hands in the earth, growing food and herbal medicines in a desire for sustainable communion with the Earth and its cycles. She shows me, among many other plantings, tall Echinacea flowers and some newly planted raspberry bushes, a soon-to-be treat for her grandchildren.

We move to her back yard area, and the cottage studio that Vicki teaches her workshops and lessons from. Tibetan prayer flags adorn the yard area, waving out their prayers, and perhaps my own hopes for this day. I am uncertain as to any specific personal intentions for today’s practice beyond the idea to document it all for this dissertation. Having documentation media going admittedly makes me nervous, as if I won’t be completely able to relax into our time together. But I want to be open to what I learn in the ways that I have always come for teachings from Vicki. I have always left with a less conditioned self, a freer-female-being who opens to knowledge of her own truth, clearer feeling, like a good walk in the forest.

Our day will consist of Vicki’s Dakini practice adapted from Tibetan Buddhism which includes: a recitation and visualization practice, Dakini mandala making with collage materials cut from glossy magazines, and ongoing dialogues between us. Vicki draws from various resources to guide our day, including her preparation of my current astrological chart to see what larger forces are influencing my path, relationships and life. I have sought astrological guidance from Vicki in past dialogues via telephone, but had forgotten that our workings together today will include this. This catches me off guard as in my mind I am here to document Vicki’s ‘practice,’ the Dakini mandala, and am not so focused on my-self. Yet Vicki’s use and deep knowledge of astrology reminds me how closely she works with each woman who comes to study with her. Today I am that woman coming for study and insight. I am documenting the knowledge co-created between you-and-I, us, we, a never-ending relational process of learning.

While there is a practice and structure to contain today’s learning, in her workshops
Vicki often focuses on the specific needs and questions of each student who comes to her, tailored from a woman-centred location of spiritual practice within woman-to-woman dialogue. This is a truly unique way of receiving instructions, one in which I feel very much at home. I think of this now as a matriarchal relationship to learning, where matriarchy means, “mother at the centre.” As a scholar, Vicki has been a student and advocate of matriarchal studies for years, in ancient and living societies of such. Many of the images in Karen Vogel and her 1976 “Motherpeace Tarot” deck, centre from what has been corroborated in scholarly research documenting living matriarchal traditions from around the world as “Societies of Peace” (Goettner-Abendroth, 2009). Matriarchies are complex socio-cultural-economic systems that are gender egalitarian and cooperative societies. Familial relationships and property are located within mothers’ households without the influencing of bonds of marriage, divorce, domestic violence, child custody battles or illegitimacy that plague women, men and children within current North American society. In the words of Indigenous activist, actor and educator Russel Means:

This last 6,000 years is a convenient lie. From religion to governments, we have lived under a patriarchy with the leaders at the top of the proverbial pyramid… Within this strict system, there is no true freedom…The answer is to simply return to a matriarchy, based on the feminine. A matriarchy actually represents the origins of individual liberty through representative government. (Stanford University Talk, April, 2011)

Being with Vicki is an experience of centring within matristic, woman-centred learning processes. I always feel connected to something ancient, yet real, current and alive when practicing with her and other women in her groups. The teachings themselves must love this moment—the moment in which teacher and student meet and the teachings come alive, experiencing breath within bodies that bestow their grace.

We begin as Vicki lights the Dakini candles that sit on a low coffee, altar table. We sit close by on cushions on the floor. The candles will burn with us for the rest of the day: Blue Vajra Dakini in the East (water), Yellow Ratna Dakini to the South (earth), Red Padma Dakini in the West (fire), Green Karma Dakini in the North (air), and White Buddha Dakini at the centre. Vicki invites us to get into a different space, to open our hearts through repeating a mantra, \textit{Om - Ah - Hum}, and settle more into our bodies. She offers me a set of prayer beads to hold as we begin repeating this mantra to centre ourselves, saying \textit{Om - Ah - Hum, Om - Ah - Hum, Om - Ah - Hum, Om - Ah - Hum}, over and over, first in a slow cadence. I close my eyes and repeat the
mantra. Part of me feels self-conscious and somewhat scattered as tape and video equipment roll while we begin. I wonder what it means to document ourselves, how does the equipment affect our experience?

As we finish this round of mantras, Vicki explains that the “Om” opens the forehead and vision centre, the “Ah” opens the throat, voice and expression, and the “Hum” opens the heart—all three clear the lower centres (or chakras). We repeat the mantra again, this time faster and faster. *Om-Ah-Hum, Om-Ah-Hum, Om-Ah-Hum*... The sounds roll through my mouth. I sink more into these vibrations as our combined vocals become a low droning chant I can fall into, releasing my worries about the equipment. The thought arises that it is probably a good idea to tape us anyway. I wonder if anyone has taken the time to document Vicki’s practices?

As I had been initiated into the Dakini practice from Vicki in previous classes at her forest homes, we decide to launch into reading the Dakini invocations together. But first she shows me a pictorial template she is developing or re-conceiving from ancient wisdom. An Earth-based mandala, this image weaves together the lunation phases of the new, full, waxing, waning and quarters of the moon, with the solar yearly seasonal cycle, of solar solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter holidays. Vicki explains that many ancient cultures used this 8-sided wheel, a form of reckoning time with both lunar and solar templates. I sense the connection of this mandala work to Vicki’s earlier writing in “Shakti Woman” (1991) about the importance of women’s menstruation and its lunar entrainment in early calendars. The lunar, moon cycle, marks the days of women’s retreat and re-emergence from bleeding, and ritual attention to this. Vicki explains how we live inside of this set of relationships between Sun, Moon and Earth, we just don’t know it, track it, or honour it within Western linear, progressive time. Vicki is teaching this mandala in the WSMA through her Archeomythology classes at ITP. She has students practice with it different ways until they can really experience how we live inside of this sun-moon-earth mandala of relations that give birth, grow, retreat and die within monthly and yearly cycles. Living within cycles of birth, death and regeneration, we have allow phases of rest, learning how things are both born and come to an end.

In pondering cycles, I think of my own release at times into the elements and the co-presence of the natural world, my most basic and assured ‘spiritual’ practice. I think of the efforts of birthing my children, how the intense energies riveted me to the creative cycle of regeneration and birth as they each emerged. Picking up each of my babies at birth into my arms was the most potent ecstasy. Now, as I approach mid-life, this cycle of life continues as I watch
my daughters take bloom into their own young womanhoods and I now age. Simply looking at the moon and observing its waxing and waning cycles, taking time to admire its form is one such practice of entrainment within the mandala Vicki has set before me. Vicki discusses cross-cultural and timeless forms of this such as: the Chinese yin-yang symbols of dark and light, the 8-pointed flower of the ancient Sumerian goddess Inanna, the 8-pointed flower of the Virgin Mary, the 8-pointed star of the Tibetan goddess Tara, and the 8-points of the Aztec calendar. Vicki affirms this as the mandala-of-life on this planet. For us to come back into it, to anchor to it within our practices is very strong medicine, a template for understanding our relationships within natural cycles.

On that note, Vicki launches into a reading of recent and upcoming lunar and solar eclipses in my astrological chart. She cautions that lunar eclipses can have emotional openings with negative or challenging influences that emerge over time. I realize the day she mentions was a successful teaching day for me at UBC. I ran a textiles workshop with a graduate class of teachers. The students relished the opportunity to work with their hands and make a textile “muse” based from their own life stories. They spent hours absorbed in the materials I offered; tears even flowed during class as students connected with what mattered to them. This was also the day that I began to experience a painful sinus infection and toothache for which I was on antibiotics during my travel to California in this time. This event later set off a dental and health crisis that would stop my work for several months thereafter.

I know this all now, in the spring of 2011, in hindsight of that teaching and research summer of 2009 with Vicki and others. How to grasp this flux and flow of time and perspective? I could not have anticipated my descent, surrendering to a health crisis upon finishing the fieldwork aspect of this research. My descent of late 2009 and into 2010 re-ordered my abilities and priorities. After complications with the dental work, I entered a mind-numbing daily fog and absolute fatigue that stopped me in my tracks. Fearful for my health and life, I had lost the ability to travel, focus on the computer, and move through basic tasks of my day. I spent time with and cared for my family as best I could, but life was a challenge within extreme symptoms. I returned to the embodied energy and healing work that had shifted from my view as the years of this PhD took over with its propeller of external, mind-filling focus. I lay fallow within a process of forced regeneration, searching for what seemed to be my lost heart, entraining with the needs of my sensitive nervous system, unplugging from draining energies of the work I had taken on. Vicki, in looking at the location of another eclipse in my astrological
chart, suggested to me that upon my return from this trip I take time for ritual and emotional integration of everything I’ve taken in. This anticipates in hindsight the months-long process of collapse, recovery, and the death of my previous grasping.

I see now a further integration in the process of life writing about the experiences of this research process. It was and is a lot of ritual, healing and practice work to have undertaken, to move through and with the energies and offerings of each woman in close succession as I did for the purposes of this study. In hindsight, each practice became a healing of the research, and the researcher, of this text. These became metaphoric-metaformic (à la Grahn, 1993) experiences that engage my body-mind-being as a stand-in for others, working with, through and beyond life-draining energies—so that readers might sense such embodied notions of healing from within this text.

The eclipse that Vicki speaks of is right on my astrological sun sign of Aquarius, and is thus tied to the development of my whole identity. Vicki notes that recent events will continue to be important for me throughout at least the next year or even many years to come. This makes total sense in light of this dissertation and its unfolding in and of my life, how I am the body of the text. Vicki reminds me that whatever or however one is doing, thinking or behaving during an eclipse gets multiplied. One must work mindfully or within ritual space during the exact timing of the upcoming eclipse. Such mindfulness amplifies the power of a steady consciousness, rather then any habituated tendencies or reactivity in life. Vicki then offers me an inspiring photocopied page of images she has collected of Dakinis, women who fly through space. These ancient images and icons included a winged bird-woman from Hungary of 5,000 BC, a Mexican sculpture of a winged woman in 1500 BC, a winged Gorgon of Greece in the 1st millennium holding snakes in each hand—her tongue hanging out, and a European witch flying on her broomstick across the sky. With these images in mind, we begin to recite the Dakini practice by calling in each Dakini and her associated element of water, earth, fire and air.

Vicki rings a bell as we begin, clearing the air with its high loud tones, calling forth the sacred energies we invoke. As we call in each Dakini, the Dakini transforms overwhelming or habituated emotions and tendencies into their wisdom aspects within the cauldron of our practice, such that anger moves towards compassion, arrogance seeks generosity, craving and obsession are released into warm presence, and anxiety abates within spontaneous accomplishment. We visualize each Dakini pouring the contents of her precious vase into the top of our heads and down into our hearts for healing. This is both a prayer and a meditation, a
strong visualization in four and five dimensions if you make it so in your mind’s eye. Seeing the
colourful mandala of Dakinis surrounding you, while calling back lost parts of oneself, does the
healing work of soul retrieval. The Dakinis return dissipated energies that are so easy to lose in
day-to-day life, energies that we have unconsciously given away, over-stepped, or that have
been taken from us (even unknowingly) by others. The practice can be approached as a
recitation of poetic verse with an affect of its own when one focuses on the meaning of the text.
With the White Buddha Dakini at the centre, Vicki explains this as a pacification ritual, calming
and healing to the nervous system, integrative of nourishing life forces.

I fall into this familiar text as we recite it. I have practiced it at home since a group
workshop with Vicki where she initiated us into the practice just after completing my WSMA.
But I struggled in recent years with the process of reading the practice from a page, and making
it come more alive for my own purposes without the presence of other women and my dear
teacher. I had not fully owned the practice for myself. Thus I engaged these focused Dakini
energies only sporadically in the last years since my WSMA. Now, I feel I can continue this
work with renewed potency and aliveness. Sitting in transmission again with Vicki, I somehow
integrate the images and ideas into more layers of my being and take them to heart, feeling a
larger sense of my own purpose and self-empowerment in the presence of the Dakinis. I realize
how much time it takes to learn something. I have moved through many layers of myself over
the actual distance, effort and time it takes me to come physically back and forth to these
teachings over a course of years as I have. I am still learning. I am not alone in this work. I
cannot do this work alone.

After our recitation and visualization we move into the collage process. This is my first
time doing this aspect of the Dakini mandala practice with Vicki, though I have heard her speak
of it for some time and seen examples of her own mandalas. She pulls one out to show me, a
large poster collage she recently worked on for herself. Vicki’s images on this page are crowded
and layered, striking with vibrant text and words added as various stories and synchronicities
emerge in their placements. I see lush gardens, flowers, a desire to grow food, a sweet picture of
Leonard Cohen, the words “splendor” and “joy” sit in the yellow section of the earth element.
Vicki explains that always, no matter who is making it, the centre contains white-toned pictures,
while blue and green hues are at the top on separate sides but layer into each other; yellow and
red follow around to the bottom of the collage. She says it’s as if you are on the inside of this in
three-dimensions. You are in the centre with the Buddha Dakini over your head. You are always
looking east at the blue Vajra Dakini. With the yellow on your right, Vicki explains that you start to frame yourself in that way, with the red behind you, and the green in the north. Everywhere you go there is this “tent” of Dakinis surrounding you, vibrationally it’s true.

Vicki brings out another mandala collage, a finished one that is now laminated to hold the images and words nicely together. In one corner a group of bees hovers with the words “reinvent the world.” Vicki says, isn’t this just what we do every time we come back in? We and the bees re-invent the world every time, the real world, and now we and the bees are somewhat endangered. I know she means “we” as in women re-finding each other throughout life times, in a kind of Buddhist sense of the reincarnation of creative paths of study. In this way, Vicki and I have practiced together and within communities of women throughout many times. It’s why I so easily recognize her and assimilate the teachings. We pick up red threads and keep going with this work.

A picture of the Canadian writer and journalist Naomi Klein sits to one side of Vicki’s mandala with the words “change maker” next to her. I smile, remembering how both Vicki and I are fans of Naomi and her critical, political books (2000, 2007). She represents a beacon of clear female speaking power, a woman using her critical mind. Vicki then pulls out two large blank sheets of poster paper for us to create our mandalas of the day. She has heaped baskets with images and words cut out of magazines to choose from. Thus begins an hours long process of mandala making together; we sit side by side to play, explore, be absorbed and create. First, we look through all the pictures, picking, choosing and making piles from what we are attracted to, what draws us in, starting to group the images by colour for each Dakini quadrant. This takes us the rest of the morning and we fall into ongoing conversations.

I speak to Vicki about the topics of “form” and “structure” and “method” in her teaching and practice work, drawing from my memory of the stories she shared with me on the first leg of this research in February 2009. In that time we had talked a lot about the archeologist Marija Gimbutas’ “method” of archeomythology, which Vicki now teaches within the WSMA at ITP. Gimbutas had an ability to make broad leaps of knowledge across the disciplines she was well versed in, through what Vicki called her “associative mind.” Gimbutas’ method went beyond standard academic practices, and allowed her to paint a picture of what life might have been like for European Neolithic ancestors within what she identified as “matristic,” early agricultural societies.

On the topic of “form,” I share with Vicki how being in her workshops years ago and
sitting in circle with other women, I learned a lot about how to hold circles from observing her at work. She says that holding the circle was really the most basic important thing for her work when she started teaching groups of women. The circle calls forth the deep “structure” of the whole event. When women come together and hold hands to form a circuit, the uses of singing, ritual or speaking can take shape from there. Vicki shares about the impact that teaching in Italy has had on her practice, where she has big groups of women to work with again. Fifty to one hundred women will fill a room, calling forth more teachings and practices from her. These women “pull it out of her” as Vicki develops the practices they ask for. They want Black Dakini workshops, and Vicki responds.

In all this talk, I ask Vicki about my recent practices of Chöd, working with the Black Dakini after Tsultrim Allione’s form of this practice work (Allione, 2008). Lama Tsultrim is an American Tibetan Buddhist whose teachings I was introduced to through Vicki. She has been one of Vicki’s Buddhist teachers. I had focused on the Chöd practice to subdue and cut through fears and overwhelming emotions in my life. This is especially true recently in my academic path, dissertation work, and in primary relationships with my mother, my partner, and with various issues that cause me pain or discomfort in relation to others—the practice aides me to recognize and face qualities at work in myself and others. I work with my own limits, or self-negating voices, in a desire to cultivate self-care and love. In practicing Chöd, you visualize and offer your entire being to the ‘other,’ or the quality of emotion, visualized as a demon. You work with the underlying need of this demon, which is often for “love,” “peace,” or for “safety” beneath a threatening situation. I have been able to soften and work towards healing challenging relations of self and other through this practice. I also more and more accept the limits of what I can and cannot force or change within my life.

I fall into speaking about this dissertation work, all the fears and demons I face in bringing this critical, yet perceived as “soft,” vulnerable, relational discourse of Women’s Spirituality further into the secular, materialist, still largely patriarchal academy. I had not imagined that my work would end up thus, as a bridging of terms and text so literally through offering my own body and experiences. There is vulnerability and provocative-ness identified in my work by my supervising committee at UBC. I ask Vicki, what does that mean “provocative”? Vicki says it means you stir people up, and they could send you bad energy; nobody is in good control of their thoughts and we often don’t understand that energy follows thought. You can be psychically attacked if you are not protected, but you don’t want to be so
protected that you are shielded from others. She says that the Dakini mandala can create protection as it surrounds your being energetically.

I realize now that part of my resistance to the Dakini mandala practice is that it can be hard for me to get beyond a sense of ‘being alone.’ I carry a personality burden of feeling like I have to be overly self-sufficient from my childhood days of navigating multiple households and adult personalities. Within the protective tent of Dakinis, and within my wider studies of Women’s Spirituality, I learn to accept benevolent and supportive beings and energies available to me that I am worthy to receive. In both living and spiritual relations, I accept interdependency. I am not alone in this work. I cannot do this work alone. To think that I am alone is to suffer in ignorance. Receiving love and care, allowing it to come through, becomes my practice as I equally reach across to others with this love.

Vicki views her Dakini collage making as the “feasting” aspect of the traditional Tibetan Dakini practices. The community creates full altars rich with offerings of foods, meat, fruits and sweets, gold, silver, jewels and cloth, flowers and incense. She says that all the beauty and texture you bring to the ritual is what we do every time we make a collage with this array of images and words. It is a fun and powerful, playful and serious process to create one’s personal mandala altar with so much text. I sift through and collect piles of the images, my feasting. Pictures of women at rest or floating in water especially appeal to me, looking relaxed and peaceful they become the Blue Vajra Dakini of my mandala. More energetically, I choose a woman laughing and riding a white bicycle and place her near the centre. A soft white polar bear family, a mother and two cubs reminds me of the closeness of my daughters and I. Pictured sleeping snuggled together, I keep these still young beings close to my heart. A beautiful white bed sitting outside in a garden forms the centre of my mandala, inviting the rest I long for, and will need in months to come. The words “Vajra Yogini” appear and become the title of my outdoor bed, sitting at the centre of my mandala.

I choose women in India dancing with joyous abandon. Dressed in red, they are Red Padma Dakini of my mandala. I pick icons of the Buddha, and images of the temples of Anchor Wat in Cambodia for my earth-based corner of yellow and brown hues of colour. An image of a strong male in statue becomes Chris, my husband. Placing him within my mandala, he is the consort of this busy yogini. As a father he is admired for his ability to care for and thoughtfully tend to our children. Within our evolving co-creation of such parenting, I pursue this work.

A woman holding a twisting yoga pose dressed in green becomes the Green Karma
Dakini, as do images of gardens in the sun in which I’d love to dwell more. Prophetically, these sun filled images mirror the warmth and heat of the sun on my body during the summer of 2010, which provides a languid energizing I need. I pick a large spider, and lots of words and sentences like “gratitude,” “Peace on Earth,” “more power when you need it the most,” “witches,” “focus,” and wonderfully “the goddess of ease” appears. I am amazed by how flashy media magazine content can be re-appropriated into such a focused exuberance of life with its meanings changed to suit our mandala purposes of sacred female empowerment. Vicki knows this of course, and says how for years she used to find images of women in the Dakini pose in fashion magazines, in a bent-leg posture, and an arm up in the air.

As I layer and add to the images, Vicki works on hers beside mine. We continue in measures of silence and speaking, sometimes about an image itself, the story or idea it evokes. The days pass as we talk, cut, work, organize, and eventually glue and fix the images to the paper. I laugh about adding words like “ultra advanced” to my mandala and Vicki responds by slapping her thigh, with a laugh saying kinda like ahead of your time! We pass images back and forth as Vicki offers me some to look at more closely. Throughout this, the candles of the Dakini mandala burn behind us, holding a sacred container of space.

After some time, Vicki brings out my astrological chart again. She speaks of how Neptune is travelling over my mid-heaven and the long-range impact of this into the year 2012. Neptune is sure to dissolve all the forms I have been working in, which in this case is probably most potently my work in the academy itself. She says that my experience of my calling and how it shows up in the world will shift completely. I am somewhat stunned with this news, and lean back on the cushions because I’m not really ready to hear this. I imagine myself being a bastion of focused efficiency in the year to come in order to complete the dissertation. 2009 has been a ‘banner’ year of external activities for me, in the amount of research and travel I have been able to accomplish and the scholarly networks I reach out within, including working on a research project in the UBC Department of Midwifery, working on a dream of a research team in Life Writing methodology, running Artful Inquiry Salons in the UBC Faculty of Education, co-creating a Goddess Studies section in the American Academy of Religion in California (Tate, 2010), and earning a UBC Graduate Fellowship for this WSMA study. Beyond the usual strains of doing it all, I truly feel like my path is unfolding. Yet the passage of Neptune will feel hazy and unclear as one thing dissolves to make room for another. This can feel like a fog of not knowing, or like dying to the self, which is exactly where I went.
Working on self-knowledge and awareness in relation to my “path” has been a theme in my astrological readings with Vicki over the years as I work to make sense of my complex vocation and callings in this life. My sense of vocation is strong, yet has challenging outcomes in relation to earning a living, subsisting and being ‘relaxed’ within the culture at large. Vicki indentifies elements within my chart that mark my birth date with the revolutionary impulses and tensions of the late-1960s. Not simply marked by my birth into this historical time, I embody the gender, social and ecological justice urges arising from those times, and the radical desire to free human consciousness within everyday life. I live towards, and am inclined to act as a pioneer for, what the New College of California motto identified as a just, sacred and sustainable world.

My path is also closely linked to my experiences of motherhood, and the creative tensions between mother-work and work beyond mothering. I loved having my babies, and absolutely willingly entered motherhood. Yet when my children were very young and I had no other tasks in sight, I felt devoured at times by the close, constant, psychic physicality and emotionality of tending to small ones’ needs. I felt a dualistic strain between mothering work and what I wanted to be doing ‘out there’ in the world as an artist or scholar. In past readings with Vicki, I struggled to make sense of my path, feeling cut off from ‘the world’ and yet at the same time sensing that ‘the world’ was right here at my feet in the forms of my own family. I understand more and more how recouping relational love and recreating home is at the heart of my own processes of healing and living. Mothering and work tensions have ultimately played into my scholarly and artistic inquires and contributions, as I navigate desire for integrity and wholeness.

On this path, I have not assumed material possessions and comforts of a regular career, such as home ownership and expendable money. In initial pursuit of my callings, I had not really focused on these, but more on the qualities of people I intuitively wanted to be around, pursuing needed studies and experiences. Choosing to do my PhD at UBC within the field of Education was a conscious decision to re-enter the academy and be able to work from my transformative values while attaining the highest-level of university degree in a field that others could recognize. It was also a conscious decision to continue to locate within Vancouver where my young family has the stability of known community in East Vancouver with its alternative, activist, left-of-centre, queer conscious, organic food culture and artistically-minded social values that we embrace. It is the place into which my daughters were born. We have basic
resources of co-op housing in an otherwise expensive city, and my husband is locally employed within work he is mostly satisfied with.

Much as I feel challenged at times by pressures within the academy, I have always loved the dream of the university and all this higher learning, seeking after (and after) truth. Undertaking a PhD, it was if I had arrived somewhere in the hallowed sense of ‘arriving’ on the green expanse of the UBC campus, the forests and ocean shores that surround it. The collection of buildings and libraries (I especially love the libraries) invite the great purpose of the learned. The campus is the site-sight and process of my studies. My she find herself, *may she lose herself.*

*May she find herself, may she lose herself.*

I can attest to the significance of Vicki’s reading now in 2011 to my ongoing transformation. Months of illness and low energy after being able to follow so many threads prompted many external and internal adjustments. I fell into a concerted personal reflection on the finitude of death with its knife-edge of consciousness, Kali’s sword cutting through my ego and false demons. I felt the cold, hard stare of the goddess as ‘void.’ She erased my defenses, knocking down any over-striving I was carrying. I had so needed to be worthy and to be “seen” by others, but even these needed to go so I could take my next step. What is my own fearless voice and gift? I am no longer so tied to worries or attachments about how my work should unfold, especially in relation to academic tracks, though vulnerability and desire continue. I know I need to study, research and teach within Women’s Spirituality and the university-at-large, following red threads of my longing.

Who am I in this generation of feminism? I am an ‘artist-scholar-midwife-yogini,’ doggedly committed to raising her family, living and healing wounds and ecstasies of her own childhood, opening and bridging new ways of doing research and being within scholarly studies, following a woman-centred spiritual path with others. Currently, my art practice begs more attention, and poetic writing processes are important to me. I claim my *need* for writing. Yet I’m not happy when an obsessive pull of work eclipses my sense of my family and myself, and the people I love, from being at the centre of life. How do I live and work in equal measures, demanding and gifting so much of (and to) others/my-self? I know how much it takes to cultivate a nourishing home life and stay with what is. A focus on simplicity arises for me in recent months—if such a thing can be said.

Sitting in Vicki’s practice room, I would not have identified all this two years ago. I was
in blur of stress about carrying the work of the research and how I could *fit into* the academy. I was making my strong points about the necessity of spirituality, in particular the little known characteristics of Women’s Spirituality. I felt pulled at home between the demands of the PhD and being able to give and receive attention with my husband and children. I felt enormous responsibility for holding the women’s stories and practices in the context of this research, and the designation of concepts of “Women’s Spirituality” within wider circles of study. I had pursued this research from a sense of joy in sharing such work. Yet my doctoral experience is tinged with a sense of struggle I have continually worked to articulate but cannot seem to fully name.

A shamanistic healer I worked with in 2010 during my collapse called this “spiritual grief” (Prider, personal communication, 2010). Spiritual grief can build up when administering healing work towards others, or when working for social and ecological justice, knowing how big the issues truly are. Carrying a certain weight while working on behalf of others, whether real, projected or imagined, this grief needs to be acknowledged and transformed so that the healer may continue on her or his path. In the process of doing this research, I was coming into deeper and deeper contact with invisible but projected layers of ‘male-stream’ culture and its institutional manifestations, of which Women’s Spirituality is perhaps anathema. I also became deeply aware of the suffering that each of the women in my study had transcended within their own lives. They are deeply aware of, and work on behalf of others to shift, local and global issues of gender, social and ecological injustice. While I recognize the joy of a life lived in spirit and gifting, I feel this crucible of suffering, my own included. Spirituality is not something one can ‘fight’ for; *spirituality cannot be defended*. I could not anticipate the impact upon me of bringing such work and voices across borders of all kinds, nations and states of mind. I discovered I am the most vulnerable aspect of this work.

That day with Vicki, looking at Mercury in my chart, she talks about a bigger fate unfolding for me, as a process is taking place. *A process is taking place.* I immediately suggest it as being *the process of this dissertation* with all the steps along the way and how I (and the dissertation) am held in the container of doing these practices. Vicki says this is *somehow going to be really important, it’s my fate.* Then she says, *and look at this, your Mars has progressed to 22/46, that’s my Sun—and here you are in this room. I don’t know why that would be so key in this whole thing?*

I laugh, *what do you mean you don’t know why? Because that’s exactly the point, isn’t*
it—that I am here with you?

Vicki laughs with me and continues, it has to do with your north node being in Aries, my Sun is on your north node, but this is much more exact. Mars would have gone over your north node several years ago, but now your Mars is totally exactly on my Sun, my Sun is 22/43.

As the prophetic synchronicities of astrology strike me, Vicki and I integrate the meaning of the message. What I already know about this is that Vicki is a natural teacher for me. I just ‘get’ her work, absorbing and assimilating her ideas very quickly as if they were my own. I read her books, but it is especially important for me to spend actual time in her presence and listen to her stories. Vicki responds to my comments saying its lineage, and you are about to take this work out there. Vicki indicates that Mars in my chart is about doing the thing that I am here on Earth to do.

I realized long ago that within spiritual and educational contexts I don’t follow gurus in that sense of the word, where an often male figure is accorded great privilege deserved or otherwise for spiritual insight (sometimes including sexual relations). I never looked towards male spiritual teachers. Nor did I have to get over being raised in a patriarchal religious tradition as many women write about overcoming within the Women’s Spirituality movement. This could be a generational shift of feminism and goddess studies, where I was born into the paradigm. Yet I have pursued studies with women teachers as very strong directive from my inner life. I went directly to midwives and birthing energies, and then I found Vicki. Vicki, like other female teachers I encounter in Women’s Spirituality, does not live her leadership and teaching as a guru-style context of learning. Perhaps women’s teachings are more secret and close-to-the-bone, not there are no conflicts or power struggles. They do not garner the large cash flow and attention that males generate in the larger culture. It seems to me that such women do not seek the stage in the same way, working within what is a matriarchal relationship to learning.

Vicki and I fall into talking about the nuances of her teaching, and what it means to have a lineage of students out in the world. I have shared time and friendship over the years with a couple of Vicki’s other long-term students. I am deeply inspired by their work (Amazzone, 2010; Lin, 2008). We each have unique voices, which Vicki notes is the meaning of lineage, it’s not about being a copy of the teacher. Vicki teaches and disseminates knowledge in workshops and classes, but lineage is about bringing the thread through the eye of the needle. It keeps the work alive and brings it forward to the next generation. It is not about creating a copy of “form” which has no substance. Lineage is the secret teachings, it’s in the background and can appear
invisible to others. We are back to our discussion of “form” as Vicki continues,

*Lineage is never about form—it’s about making your own form.*

*You take this essence and do something fun with it. Do what you do with it.*

*It’s a funny thing in our culture because it’s not well understood.*

*People think that nothing is happening if there is no form and it doesn’t have a licensing structure and a certificate at the end.*

We finish our day admiring our mandalas, discussing the images and relationships between them. I will bring this poster home to where it now sits on my altar of 2011, a feast of imaginings, dreams and invocations, still relevant to my work as the word “gratitude” catches my eye, the polar bear family sleeps in bliss, women laugh and smile in exuberance, and gardens invite me into their sun filled expanse. Vicki and I return to our cushions next to the Dakini mandala of candles. Ringing the bell, Vicki offers thanks for the presence and support of the Dakinis throughout our day.

*We ask that all merit generated by our practice be shared with all beings,*

*May all beings realize the Dakini,*

*May all beings be free from suffering and know happiness,*

*May there be peace on Earth.*

May there be peace on Earth.
Red Thread 4: Gifts continued…

Nané - Grandmas’ gifts

I am sitting upstairs in my paternal grandma’s modest bungalow home in East Toronto, only months before her death in July 2010; but I don’t know this at the time. Her home is far from a world of e-mails and business, no Internet connections here. I am sitting in the second of two bedrooms. Here are the same two single beds that I slept in on many nights of my childhood over 35 years ago. I think of how my grandma, my father’s mother, was only 47-years-old when I was born. I think of the way she is and was always in my life—a pure giving presence. She taught me a way of going forth in the world with this presence, with curiosity, interest and love, though she herself remained rooted to this very home, husband, place. Hers was a pre-feminist life in analysis; yet I admire now her rootedness, steadfast, her home of so many years and the focus she keeps on those around her. She keeps little in the way of things, her home is always in careful order. She knits and reads most days, maintaining a schedule of visits with others. I think of her as a peaceful, deliberate contemplative. Beyond the stage of the busy householder, what she does keep are family photos, images of us all, and even my own children, her great-grandchildren in Vancouver, BC, so far away. She holds us close at heart. The family albums are carefully piled in the room where I sleep and I love to leaf through them here before going to bed. I read the narratives of our lives and the storied pictures of others who lived before us from my grandma’s childhood—her parents, brothers and sisters—I see the gift of all this, how I just am because of her.

The Dalai Lama is frequently quoted as saying that he first learned the quality of compassion from his mother. Compassion, that potential for boundless sense of love and attention for others is given without expectation of return or reward, was first given to him by his mother. He explains this as its initial transmission in his life. Now within larger world-stage circles he circulates this gift of compassion. His point is simple, clear—the work and being of mothers as a central teaching principle of Buddhism. Mothers and what they do predate Buddhism.

As I leave my grandma’s home in a taxi, she stands just inside the screen door and waves at me, her small, aging frame outlined, clutching her cane for balance. Her pure white hair makes a halo around her head—I wave back at her, and keep waving as the cab takes me from her view. It is our old habit since I was a small girl, to not stop waving till we can’t see each other anymore from
her spot in the doorway. We are smiling and beaming at each other, and the cab driver says with great enthusiasm, “You are lucky!”

And I say, “I know I am, I know I am.”

My mother’s mother lived as a sojourner in Canada, an immigrant who never fully settled into her new country, or made social connections beyond her immediate nuclear family. She talked of Ireland as home, living her life through the veil of this other place and culture. My maternal grandmother’s life could be considered to have been centred on reproduction and home as defined by society and the needs of others. An oldest girl of twelve or thirteen children, she often relayed to me how she and her brother got the best marks in school, but it was her brother who went on to further education, while she was made to toil at home to care for the rest of her siblings. I lived in this storied knowledge, and even fear of such female limitations, that my own life held choices and opportunities of which she only imagined. I did not then imagine how I would navigate my own birth-givings.

From within the conditions of her time, I do not fully know if or how my maternal grandmother celebrated or loved her births. I only know that she spoke of bringing my mother home from a traumatic hospital birth in Ireland of 1946, and that she put her in a drawer for a bed. Grandma said my mom cried constantly, a source of incredible stress to her that initiated a lifetime pattern of such irritations it seems. Pregnancy marked my grandma’s entrance to marriage, and birth marked her life as a wife, brought by husband away from her Irish village and close-knit family to live in Canada with two small children after World War II.

What is it that I live that she didn’t? What did she live that I can never know? It seems a sense of responsibility for my choices, education and rights-rites plays out within my life within the context of social difference from the work of my mothers—my grandmothers. Upon phoning the news of my second pregnancy to my mother while I was completing my WSMA degree, my mother wanted to conceal this news for some time from my grandma. She thought grandma would worry, what are you to become with these babies? It seems being pregnant was not a moment to celebrate within my maternal genealogy, a kind of straining towards feminist consciousness that knows the ominous limits of reproduction for women’s lives. I pay attention to ‘birth’ as both a practical

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5 These opening paragraphs are adapted from Jordan, N. (in press). A poetics of the placenta.
reality of living female difference, and its metaphoric and spiritual sense of what comes to being within this. In such a feminist spirituality of struggle my mother and grandmas’ lives bleed into my own life and its stories. As in Razak (1991), the midwife returns again and again to the body and its births.

In a way my mom and grandma were right. My babies limited me incredibly, affecting and altering everything in my life that came after their births. Despite rising to the challenge of completing my MA in the US while my first daughter was three to four-years-old, I was not able to further this education in ways I thought I might have after the birth of my second child. I completed my WSMA thesis in 2002, writing in two-hour spurts between breast feedings, sleepless nights, and breaks that my husband could give me from our baby while he took an extended four-month parental leave from work. The following year, Judy Grahn offered me a fellowship to undertake an MFA in Creative Inquiry at New College. A one-year program for students with previous MA degrees, the MFA was an opportunity to extend the artistic contributions of one’s work, while providing a terminal degree that is a university teaching credential in the fine arts. I was thrilled with this opportunity, which spoke to my deepest desires to continue the work I had started. I could focus on developing my artistic practice within a Women’s Spirituality sensitive container, something unavailable elsewhere.

I discussed this plan with my husband. I was excited about it through I knew he would not be fully supportive given our familial circumstances, and the natural resistance he had had to my undertaking the original WSMA in the first place. I thought the offer of the fellowship would lesson the economic hardship. Yet this wouldn’t mitigate my continued need for border crossings and travel from home. My husband was just then beginning a MEd program he had been preparing for at UBC that would give him a credential to work as a counselor within the school system. As a high school science teacher, he had long been wanting to ‘get out of the classroom.’ You might imagine the kinds of stresses we were under, living full-on parenting-academic-work lives. When I told him of the MFA idea, his immediate response was resounding—he would leave me if I pursued this any further. He would simply not discuss it, and I went into emotional shock at the line being drawn in the sand. I knew at another level that his response came from a sense of exhaustion of our communal abilities and resources.

With a baby and young child, I re-entered my life as a stay-at-home mom, managing the
day-to-day care of our small children. I wanted our family to thrive and to be with them, as much as I wanted to pursue my own urgings, callings and a paid career. It was a difficult inner time for me as I struggled with these seemingly conflicting needs through which I could see no clear pathway. Seeking the idea of later doctoral studies, I entered the world of the mother-scholar, pursuing my creative work on the side of mothering by attending and presenting papers at academic conferences of the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) in Toronto (Jordan, 2002, 2003), and coordinating with other feminist spirituality scholars through the National Women’s Studies Association (Jordan, 2005, 2006) in the US. Though it was hard to travel to these from the poverty of our finances, attending such conferences saved me, *like academic Church*. I was so thirsty to be with other critical and creative thinking women. Presenting papers gave me confidence in my work as I met with others who responded to what I offered, sharing research and passions.

I read and read into the ARM journal publications. I read newly-minted anthologies that eloquently spoke to the tensions of the “Double Lives” (Cowan, Lam & Stonehouse, 2008) of mother-writers. I met regularly with other women scholars within a scholar-writer’s support group in Vancouver, BC, called “Women Writing Women.” These voices gave me strength and community in which I could understand my own conditions. I found my way into the doctoral field of Education at UBC, a process guided by friends studying in Cross-Faculty Inquiry in Education (Armstrong, 2006; Bickel, 2004). UBC offered tuition funding and job opportunities, and was local for my family’s needs. Thus, I re-entered the academy with the identity and workload of a mother within the constant love and muck of tending my young family’s needs and lives. I willingly but awkwardly shifted gears into the role of doctoral student, sobered by the knowledge that mothers in the academy face high stress and rates of attrition—how would I attend to my *being* in the *becoming*?
Program learning outcome # 4

ITP Program Review, MA in Women’s Spirituality, 2009

Students increase their oral and written skills.

Vicki – It’s such an integration

I made friends with my spiritual friend Tulku Thubten, a Tibetan lama who now calls himself by his name, Anam Thubten. He decided to drop the formal “Tulku” designation from his name, which indicates a high-ranking Lama. I have such a good connection with him. He came to the big house in the forest when I was living there. He held wonderful meetings with his Dharma group, 50 people would come to my house and we would get it ready for him. That’s the kind of big group that I wanted to happen with the women when I put it out to my people. A few women came; we had Dakini days and made shrines all over the land. We made a Blue Dakini shrine at the waterfall. The groups were a great idea, but again it just didn’t really come in. It was Anam Thubten’s work that happened up there in a big way.

Anam Thubten and I really bonded around the idea of writing a book. We were going to write a book about the Black Dakini. I was going to compare all the concepts from the Tibetan Buddhist stream of Dzogchen from my interviews with him, with radical feminist Mary Daly’s book “Quintessence- realizing the archaic future” (1998). Everything Daly said was everything he said. I wrote about how my awakening to feminism in the early 1970s, and then my Dzogchen awakening which happened in the late 1970s, had the same characteristics. You awaken to your real nature and something comes off. It’s classic. Anyway, the book didn’t happen either. That decade between being 50 and 60-years-old was a nightmare for me in getting my work out, “Not quite dear, keep trying!” “Okay, what should I be doing?”

Now I bring the Dakini Mandala into my “Female Shamanism” class in the WSMA; I teach it as female shamanism. It’s the mandala, it’s shamanistic, it’s completely rooted in pre-Buddhist female shamanism and Goddess, old pagan, or Earth-based Goddess religion. The Dakini Mandala is such an integration of all the streams of my life work. In 1989 I went to Chile to teach twice. In 1989 I also had my Motherpeace school going in the US, things were really flourishing at that moment in my life. When I went to Chile, a whole community of women came out for that, it was incredible. I did workshops every night and all weekend.
We did big healing rituals, where I began to develop those more. I was also invited to speak at a Tibetan Buddhist centre. The second time I went I was invited as the main speaker at this centre. It was such an honour; I was honoured like a teacher in the Buddhist tradition. I spoke about female shamanism, feminism, and the Black Dakini. I felt how this is so integrated, that is all that I am, everything that I identify with. These are all the streams converging in me that want to be in one work, but are so separated in our culture. They were able to come together and I could to speak about it. People felt it was a wonderful gift. Which is so different then in the United States. The feminists are critical of Buddhism and Buddhists don’t like to integrate feminism. But at that moment in 1989 I was able to be myself and share it. Everybody was fine with it and asked me to come again. I thought, “That will probably never happen in my own country, just impossible.” This was a moment. Ever since then I feel like I’ve been weaving those pieces of my work together.

In the early days it was hard to get women in my women’s spirituality circles to even chant for an hour, it was so concentrated. I had a dream when I was teaching my school, we were sitting in circle and all the women, one woman at a time, would fall out of the circle and not be able to hold the focus. One of them went to watch TV, and one of them was tired and had to lie down. I woke up from the dream and at the end of the dream the message was, “It doesn’t matter what you do in the circle, you just have to learn to hold the circle.” For the next five years that’s all I taught. Everywhere I went that was my message. I said, “We can do Motherpeace cards, we can do chanting, we can do female shamanism exercises, but what matters is that we hold the focus and learn to do that.”

Later, I began to use the Dakini practice myself in a serious way because I needed it. Then I started to offer it to my students. At that point for me it was a method. We have so much ‘intuitive,’ so much ‘flow,’ so much art and creativity in the Women’s Spirituality movement, but we don’t have method and we need it. And I didn’t choose Buddhism, Buddhism chose me. The experiences I had are classic Dzogchen experiences around the treasure tradition, in what they describe as the pulling out of your treasure, where teachings emerge that have been dormant or waiting for the right circumstances to manifest. Fortunately, I wrote about my background and my series of experiences in “Shakti Woman” (1991) before I knew what they were. I wrote about it as “female shamanism” for lack of a more precise understanding of it.
I've been going to Buddhist centres for 30 years. But I've never been able to position myself inside of a Buddhist organization because of the male domination, and I never took it upon myself to critique that from within the organization. Back then there was almost nothing written or taught about the terma tradition. The little bit that I learned about it later made sense. A terma is a ritual text or object that is found after being deliberately hidden, sometimes hundreds of years previously. Or it can mean a set of teachings that emerge through a teacher at specific times. The Motherpeace cards were an obvious ‘treasure,’ because they very clearly came through Karen and I. We had never drawn pictures before and we never did pictures again. I did all the writing from the images themselves. In the last ten years there have been numerous books translated and written in English about Dzogchen and the terma tradition. Every detail of what I've fortunately written down and documented has been very authorizing for me. Whether anyone else regards it as that does not matter to me. I couldn’t possibly fabricate it. The tradition is being disseminated now. Dzogchen, as in female shamanism, draws on the natural ability to become empty, taking some of its most sublime metaphors from mothering, and the gestating, birth-giving body.

MamaCoAtl – *The original blueprint of the human soul*

I learned many beautiful things from the WSMA program that transformed my life incredibly. The work of the blood for instance was very important for me, now it’s part of my curriculum. It’s part of my way of teaching my daughter how to be in the world, the fact that your menstrual blood is so powerful. It’s enough to make a crusade against people throwing their blood in the garbage. Planting your blood on the Earth is something that we used to do. Judy Grahn didn’t make this up. Indigenous peoples did this back in the day. But something that also happens in the Women’s Spirituality program is that it can feel like this is such uncharted territory when it’s not only Judy’s discovery. Yet I am very grateful that she wrote the book and provoked me so much with it. I guess the academic world makes you say certain things, or claim certain things for yourself. I love Women’s Spirituality work because it describes it all, like the American women who go to the ancient Neolithic sites in Malta and they acquire this and film that. They represent the ancient knowledge as if it was reinventing the wheel. My whole protest during the WSMA work was, “Why are you teaching me about some Imperial goddess in Sumeria when we are standing on this land that has our own faces and
representations of Pachamama of Mother Earth, the divine feminine? Why do I have to go all the way over there?” There was a lot of “goddess” and “goddessing” in the WSMA. What I enjoyed the most about that was the fact that I didn’t have to subject to the curriculum like you do in other institutions.

I decided to read a lot of anthropology for my thesis research that poisoned my mind in ideas like, “I’m not afraid to say that the Aztecs were Imperialist.” I was very macho back in the day. Sí, muy macho—learning and rebellion, learning and resistance. I’m learning now that I’m hitting menopause that resistance and rebellion are gems of victimhood. Resistance makes the body sick. You are only in that mode when you are confused, when you don’t see the truth. When you have found the clean water of what is, then you no longer need to live there, you live in a different space.

I am feeling much better then I did in those days. I appreciate the fire that led me to do what I did in the MA, because those were my baby steps. If it inspires other women to do outrageous work then I’d be happy. But I am going back to my MA thesis where I quoted those anthropologists about Aztec culture. It’s not accurate, it’s coming from a wrongful premise. I was angry and I really didn’t know. I was affirming what the white man said, that my ancient people sacrificed hundreds of thousands of people, which is not accurate. I recently wrote my Women’s Spirituality teachers and I said, “Okay, everything I said was wrong, let me back up a little bit.”

Now I’m looking for education to the people who have not gone to school, to the people of my ancestors. Beyond this goddessing paradigm, we have our names in Nahuatl, the Uto-Aztecan root language, that describe those very complex concepts that ended up being called “goddesses.” The English language, this version of reality, does not explain these concepts. They are actually very precise scientific understandings of nature. You will be running around for your freedom trying to find it, but it’s not in the English language, it’s not in the paradigm. All you can do in that paradigm is perpetuate it.

The idea of femicide I worked with in my MA is very much a part of the genocide, the end plan for the people who are left from the original genocides. When I was in the WS program I was very much working out all my rage and impotence in regards to this. I put that in many of my rituals. Imagine a woman whose daughter has been stolen from her and murdered, what does she have? She doesn’t have the government. She doesn’t have the clergy. She
doesn’t have anything or any resource at her disposal because she’s poor, because she’s
Indigenous even if she doesn’t know it. But what does she have? She has a candle, and a corner
in her house to beg for miracles to some Saint. So I’m going to work from that point, from the
place where nobody can steal my hope. That’s how I wrote the heart of my thesis.

Over the years I’ve been able to heal a lot. I’m no longer working from rage or
impotence. The work has developed. I still once in awhile go to the corner of 16th and Mission
Street and I give blessings to people. I collect a group of healers, artists and activists. The idea
behind “artivism” is that healers, artists and activists get together to synergize the work, to
reconcile the work, and to allow a coherent declaration to come out from the altar, from the
spirituality of the Earth. Not from the religious pulpit, but from the womb of the mother. What
do we want to see as women? We do this work to heal and to have a community that’s healthy,
and because we have children.

I do a healing modality called ‘Absolute Balance Mastery.’ I was very lucky to receive this
training from a woman here in San Francisco. Within this frame, I’m able to develop my
Indigenous craft, which is *la limpias*, the clearing, *la limpias*. I incorporate my ancient vein in a
very contemporary way as a healing session. And it works. I came to this work when I returned
from Peru, where I was doing the plant medicine work of Ayahuasca, the sacraments of the hills
and the medicine of the people. When we came back I felt very neurotic because there is hardly
any electro magnetic pollution down there. When you cross the border, you feel like you are
penetrating this incredible synthetic bubble of sorts. Once you’re in, there’s a bug in your brain
that says, “America, bur, rah, bar, America,” like an AM radio station. I’m listening to this voice
where rampant hate is bouncing off the sidewalks—hate, vice and escapism. Hearing and feeling
people’s thoughts and all the addiction put me into deep despair. The hate towards the Mexican
people, the hate towards the people that produce the food you put on your table is incredibly
toxic for everybody in this culture. I started getting worse and more fragile. I was suffering.
Then somebody introduced me to some one who did the ‘absolute balance mastery’ healing
work. After one session, I could feel myself landing back into my body from the experience of
fear. Friends and healers helped me to disconnect from the paranoia of being Mexican, from the
paranoia of being subjected to humiliation because of who I am and the victimhood and
suffering of my people. Because I’m no longer there, I’m able to do something for others.
With my ritual work, I disconnect all of my vital centres from the fallacy. I've done performances with the question, “What is the world?” I'm sure you've heard that the world is round. The world is not round, the world is a pyramid, a little pyramid on the American one-dollar bill. How is this pyramid floating on the planet? Do you notice that your shoulders hurt? You are carrying the world on your shoulders; that's that pyramid. They say that you can build a pyramid with one basic truth and a bunch of lies. What happens if you take out a few bricks? What happens if you take out a few shoulders? That's my question. When I am invited to perform and sing in festivals I clear that. I'm singing all over this neighbourhood too. I sing in Spanish, Spanglish and English. I ask people about this world on their shoulders and I disconnect as many people as I can from that fallacy. I wanted to save the world, and now I realize that you are the world. My job is to disconnect from all the erroneous perceptions of who we are, to call back the original blueprint of the human soul. Come back to inhabit us.

Judy – *Ritual has my attention*

Ritual is such a big part of what drives me down my path. At heart, metaformic theory says that we're ritual beings and that women's blood rituals are the heart. Then men have their blood rituals. And then there are all the rituals that either don't have anything to do with blood, or are pretending they don't have anything to do with blood. It's not 'ritual' in the same way that Western intellectuals have tried to get rid of that word by saying that it's an obsessive doing of something over and over again in some mindless way. That's not what ritual is from a metaformic point of view. From a metaformic view, it's methods of interacting and being in dialogue with forces of nature. Either the connection is there and it works, or it isn't and it goes away and comes back. When it's there, actual events occur as a consequence. Ritual has my attention. Metaformia has defined everything that we do as ritual or stemming from ritual. Having coffee in the morning, getting married, driving a car, all this stems from rituals that we've had all along the way. We're building on what's already gone past by respecting the past, respecting our ancestral peoples. Not in any route way, but because they created us and we owe them something. It may not be my people who created potatoes, but my people may have created eyeglasses or some other fantastic thing. But potatoes are a very good creation.

Metaformia is a large part of the WSMA program. I keep revising the course to make it better. We now have an advanced course and I want more in place for that. This subject
could be an entire program. Students come out of it with a different set of eyes and go into the world with these new eyes. It’s in the teaching of it that it most comes to life. You make it that much more real by externalizing it. That’s why teaching is so exciting, because the teacher continues to grow and see new things. The students bring in new ideas and the teacher interacts. It becomes this evolving subject. Metaformia is particularly exciting because it’s so not known and not well understood. Perhaps it’s like what early psychology students must have felt, or early students of evolution, “Well, who are we going to explain this to?”

I was reading a student paper yesterday and her husband said, “Well just supposing this was all true, so what?” “So what?” I’ve had people ask me that question. It’s an annoying question, but it’s an important one because, what are the implications? We are beginning to see how to explain the implications. Prior to having some kind of theoretical basis, or philosophical basis, a scientific basis, or theological basis, or however we want to describe a ritual basis for understanding, metaformia fits into all those categories. Metaformia explains the part that women have had in producing human culture and human differentiation in humans from animals. No one really realizes the toll it takes or the burden that women live under of not really being here, of not mattering in the story, or not being in the story. Watching movies, reading books, reading articles, listening to lectures, and they’re not there. Women weren’t there with the ‘caveman,’ women weren’t there with ‘the farmers,’ they weren’t there with the ‘early science,’ they weren’t out there ‘hunting,’ they weren’t there with this, that and the other. It’s a completely one-sided story. There are a few voices missing and they are all gendered. Only the male story has been told, and only part of the male, only some of the males, and only North European males and so on. There are many more ways to tell stories of human origins and they are very inclusive and they include the women.

Number one, include the women, then all other gendered categories can also be part of the story. As soon as you start telling it from the women’s point of view, all the creatures who influence us enter in. It’s all there in the stories and the iconography. Just go down to the river and look, take seriously another culture’s origin story and not just say, “This couldn’t be the same as the Darwinian.” But it can fit in there if you just decode it. Take the time to decode stories and not just along the lines of one gender. Just for that metaformia is very exciting and students are changed.
What I see in students who come out of the WS program is a happiness that they didn’t have before. And happiness is not something that’s valued in education. You wouldn’t say, “What’s so wonderful about this origin story is that its foundation is love and relationships. It’s about how sons and daughters love their mothers and uncles and grandfathers.” Well, that couldn’t be important. And yet, when those values are included in the story, when people feel included in the story because they are and can see it, they are given the clues to see this everywhere, every day. You can always find the sacred feminine wherever you are. You can notice the shapes, see the colours, smell the coffee. You know where it comes from. You know there were women at the heart of this and you can be at home in the world. That leads to a certain level of happiness that has been illusive for women. When women are not happy, nobody’s happy.

The “Uncommon Kinship” class was an outgrowth of metaformia. Luisah Teish picked up on how this could make a great class. That is her title, “Uncommon Kinship.” She had rituals ideas to work with, but she needed someone to co-teach it with her who could hold the space for the white students and be just as honest and out front as Teish is. It requires complete honestly to do any kind of diversity studies. I call this “diversity studies” rather than “diversity training” because it’s not training. The course is grounded within rituals that help us know when we are reaching across race, class, gender and such lines. To know when we are succeeding and to know when we are not. To know that it’s okay to try, that others are trying also, so pay attention.

My doctoral research in South India gave me the theoretical basis for talking about diversity as “cultural obversity.” It’s a different creature then what we take for granted. Living within cultural and global diversity we often bump into psychological constructs of our own sense of ‘the good.’ What constitutes ‘the good’ and the right way to do everything bumps us into trouble over and over again in definitions of what is really, truly, good human behavior and what is not. It’s an exciting class. It’s so exciting that the whole faculty has participated in it. Faculty are just as avidly engrossed in learning about the subject as students, and wanting to know how to teach it. I credit that as a very exciting development of metaformia.

I’m grateful to Women’s Spirituality for giving metaformia a place to live. Because I’m a poet, there’s no place that I could have taken it. It’s not a literary theory, and anthropologists are not accepting of it in this country. They might be in England. Chris Knight (1991) has a
menstrual origin story that they are teaching very effectively in England. I have total respect for what he is doing and he’s an anthropologist. But even there, the spiritual aspects are not appealing. We are now calling it “metaformic consciousness,” something else then a ‘theory.’ People are now saying metaformia, not metaformic theory. We want to get away from the ‘isms’ and from the nouns. As a philosophy, metaformia is like the energy surrounding metaforms. It’s embodied and relational. It’s everything in your kitchen, and there’s nothing theoretical about that, that’s breakfast. Breakfast comes out of ideas as much as it comes out of, “We’re hungry, let’s eat something!” You put eggs on a round plate, sunny side up, that have been processed in some kind of way. There is nothing in the whole world that is more economically suited to us then to just crush the egg and suck the innards out of it. Why do you need a plate? Why do you need a spoon? Why do you need to heat it up? You don’t, but we do. The amazing thing is that what seems as though it’s counter-economic is part of our success. And we are so successful we are suffering from our successes.

But it’s all a lot to laugh about too. Another thing about Women’s Spirituality is that we laugh a lot! Divine hilarity, it can all be very funny. It’s really joyful to bring this work to people. That’s what it’s like to be an artist, or what it aught to be like when artists are well grounded. Teaching is like that, there’s something fun if you watch mothers teaching their four-year-olds how to draw. It’s really delightful to see it happening. With Women’s Spirituality materials it’s that same feeling though writ bigger because this work has been pent up for so long. It’s the joy of discovery.
Red thread in the forest

The cedar tree, the ferns I want to stay close to this cedar tree. I wrap the woven red thread mantle around her. Taking it from my own human-body, it becomes a shawl adornment for her tree-body. I wrap filaments of red thread onto her branches and over her fronds, seeking connection through this offering of threads. I wrap myself into the weaving, and onto the tree. I close my eyes and listen within the silence and sounds of the forest. Time bends and rests. Time bends and rests, until I leave the tree. I carefully unwrap myself from the red mantle, unwrapping red threads from her branches. Wearing again the red thread mantle, I enter a nearby glade of ferns. I lie down among the ferns to breath there like the deer do. I offer myself, releasing, waiting for further instructions from this place. I want to breath with the ferns’ breath.

Practice with Dianne and Judy: Goddess puja

Dianne’s altar room and library is a peaceful sanctuary of goddess icons, statues, art, collages, images of the goddess Bhadrakali of Kerala, India, and a library of shelved books, of which I love to browse and read. There are so many Women’s Spirituality titles, women’s psycho-spirituality, writing as healing processes, scholarship on goddesses of the Indian subcontinent, menstruation cultural studies, Hinduism and Tantric scholarly studies and more and more. As in my own working space, the goddess altars and books collide, as if books are the altars and altars are made upon books. Being here is a manifestation of the visioning practice with Aikya, in what Women’s Spirituality scholarship “looks” like. I see the sacred Mandorla of the text that floated before me in my mind’s eye with Aikya, women’s altars of reading and writing light the way.

This is also the home of Judy Grahn and her spouse, they live in the lower suite and co-create the vitality of this household. We make the time to practice a goddess puja together in the backyard sanctuary of their home. The puja is a blessing that generates relationship and honouring between deity and human. As a “puja,” the practice we undertake is a modified, trans-cultural form developed from Dianne and Judy’s experiences of participating within goddess-centred ceremonies in Kerala, India during years of their research there. This is a home-based ritual practice I had not done with Dianne and Judy previously. I suggest this ritual as reflective of their shared spaces, research and lives. I knew they practiced this goddess puja in for example, the context of running a mentoring circle for recent WSMA alumni from their home, and for special celebratory occasions such as Judy and her wife’s wedding ceremony. This practice reflects for me their combined lives, their co-commitment to teaching from within sacred understandings of the transformative power of a woman-centred curriculum, and their cross-cultural research and work within goddess-centred communities of Kerala.

Ours is an occasion of making offerings to and seeking connection with goddess in the context of my dissertation research. We are renewing connections with each other and Her, receiving Her blessings, and opening lines of energy, shakti and compassion among all. The text of this Women’s Spirituality work is the flow of love within our lives, an extended moment to acknowledge the mysteries and space/void of which we are not ourselves in control, within which we surrender ourselves to wider consciousness and wisdom.

We begin by gathering ourselves from distractions and work activities to prepare the ritual space and implements. I follow Dianne with my video camera. She first polishes and
washes the heavy two-foot tall brass oil lamp in the kitchen sink. The lamp is from Kerala; Dianne tells me how it is always used within menarche rituals. The lamp is considered to be the goddess herself and is worshipped as such. There is an entire beautiful ritual to the lamp consisting of reciting the 1001 names of the goddess, with offerings made after each invocation, with incense, foods, and especially flowers. Traditionally done at home as a family-based ritual, this ritual is now done by women together in mass public ceremonies in Kerala, women celebrate with circle dances around the lamp. Lamps are also given to young girls at menarche. Dianne reminds me about Judy’s metaformic understanding of the merged identification of lamp and goddess and menarchal maiden.

The lamp comes alive for me in Dianne’s stories. She gleams with the polished satisfaction of our attention. We carry the lamp outside and place her near the two-foot tall black, sharp-edged, obsidian-like stone that sits at the edge of their backyard patio, beneath an apple tree in the garden area. This black stone will become the focus of our puja ceremony and devotion, embodying goddess through our care-full worship of her. The tree overhead has recently dropped some apples. They lay around the black, sharp-edged rock, a pre-echo of our own offerings to come. The sun is out, warm and languid in this yard area as birds sing overhead. A soft trickle of water is heard from the Buddha fountain, running a constant flow of water to which small birds fly, rest and drink.

Dianne and I move to the front of the house to collect garden roses and other flowers from plantings on either side of the sidewalk. She tells me, to my great delight, that the rose bushes at the front of the house were specifically planted by Judy and herself as dedicated offerings to goddess. She speaks of how the first blooms are Hers, are offered to Her each year. Dianne lovingly clips flower heads into a bowl, saying how they just love to be used by us, regenerating the whole plant as more and more flowers appear on the bushes each year. The rich, life-imbued blossoms fill the bowl with fragrant colours of white, a tinge of soft violet, yellow, red, and bright fuchsia pink. The visioning practice with Aikya on our question of, “What is goddess’ vision of Women’s Spirituality scholarship?” is now alive in my hands and senses as I hold this bowl of fragrant flowers.

We walk around the house towards the backyard, stopping to cut more and more flowers from various locations. Blooms of many varieties and shapes fill the bowl. After gathering, we place the bowl on the backyard table. Judy has laid out a jar of turmeric, a spray bottle of lavender, sticks of incense, a quart of milk, lemons, a lovely colourful tin full of threads and
sewing materials, and a brass tray holding a variety of small brass ritual implements from India that includes a small lamp, little bowls, and an incense holder. A large brass urn stands next to all these. The urn has an admirable round female shape with a waist, ready to pour out our liquid libations.

We sit down together, each taking a needle and thread to sew the flowers onto lengths of string. Our task is to make long garlands of flowers, attaching them end to end to make one long length of beauteous-flower-glory. We will adorn the black stone with this sweet-scented necklace during the course of the puja. We talk as we sit and sew. Dianne explains how in Kerala each flower is tied to the thread with tight threaded wrappings in a well-honed skill, so that the flowers become very close knit together. Alternating, the flowers hold a beautiful rounded shape when finished. We thread our blooms through the ends of each flower, some holding better than others, gathering them together on the thread so that they at least bunch up with colour and texture.

I ask more about when and how often they might do a puja ceremony? Dianne answers that sometimes it’s on the full moon, or for Judy’s wedding, and when my grandson got sick. Dianne and Judy do this when they need to—it’s like a meditation. Most often the whole family does it together. As we string and speak, Dianne adds that this is such a good example of how you have to figure out how to make these kinds of rituals and ceremonies really work for the circumstances of your particular life.

We admire and talk about the flowers, seeing how the roses form the strongest base of our work. Absorbed in our work, a bird chirps along beside us. Judy finishes her garland and holds it up as we admire it. Judy tells me that the lemon, the bathing and the anointing, have to do with cooling down shakti—sandalwood paste and turmeric are natural coolants. Right now everything astrologically is heating up, it’s good to get lemon and turmeric into things to cool things down. Judy speaks more about how when she and Dianne returned from India, they had been at some very strong shakti rituals with people dancing all night with provocative drumming to bring the spirits into the body, it’s very sensual—it’s ecstatic. They attended these rituals for weeks, often standing in the middle of the drums. When they came home from India, they were so full of shakti that Dianne had to put turmeric on their film casings to get the cameras to play. They ended up bathing themselves with turmeric, rose water, sandalwood and milk. I wonder out loud when do we want shakti, and when do we not? Judy says you want it when you’re creative, but then you need to cool it off to be able to do things like drive a car, or
think about what to cook for dinner. Dianne adds that there are so many stories about the
goddess that way, you work to bring her up, but then you need to cool her down again because
she can’t operate through heat all the time. She can create so much it becomes chaotic, so death
has to come in. It can’t be non-stop creativity, there has to be a cycle.

I think of my own writing about the relationship of shakti to birth-giving energies
(Jordan, 2009b), and the challenges of medical and midwifery health care practices. The
dominant culture wants to cool down women’s birthing shakti, as if to contain the big openings
of physical, emotional, sexual and psychic energies of birthing women with anesthetics and
technology. Birth is reduced to the ‘fear’ of surrendering to its overwhelming experience and
potential sensuality. There is also the fear of death (mortality) in birth. Within a medicalized
context, the mother can end up with an externally and forcefully controlled experience of her
own power and the baby coming through her. Such experiences can lead to “birth trauma” (see
http://www.vancouverbirthtrauma.ca/home.html). Grassroots midwifery, as I knew it, is
woman-centred, working with the birthing, shaktic, life-force energies of the moaning,
sensation-filled, rocking, bleeding, fluid, emotional body, towards ecstatic, joyful and relieved
re-union of mother and baby at the moment of birth.

I reflect upon how so much of what I do lately may be too cooling. I feel like I need
Kung Fu! I need to be able to generate and push energy out in expressive bursts. I need to fall
into laughter and abandon, especially in my day-to-day context of being ‘mom’ and holding a
background presence of tending to home, meal prep, care of children and family lives. This
schedule can become too cool, as does my recent doctoral life in the context of UBC where the
idea is to arrive on campus all thoughtful and collected. I realize I need these other rituals, the
ones that bring out heat, ecstasy, and the emotion at my core—and more dancing, dancing,
instead of walking around feeling closed, wondering what’s missing. I see how akin this
conversation is to the incredible bursts of energies Anya, Polly and I generated through our
“Music for Metaformia” performance in Spokane. We created so much heat and energy with our
singing, drumming, dancing, and videos of the rituals playing behind us. I mention to Judy and
Dianne how the creative energy of this performance was most intensely expressed through our
ecstatic post-performance response of hilarious, gut wrenching laughter with each other. Our
laughter dissipated the stress and exhilaration of having crossed the contained academic
conference thresholds of taboo and formality. I also realize why I had felt so scattered, keyed
up, yet exhausted, in the days following our Spokane performance—I was opening and closing
such energies within my own body, and needing *grounding* to recuperate.

Throughout all this talk, Dianne, Judy and I have tied our garlands together into a beautiful circular strand of flowers. We are ready to perform the ritual. After sweeping the site, Dianne draws a Kolam on the stone slate next to the black rock. This is a tradition of Kerala, to sweep the front of the home, or the earth itself, and draw mandala-shaped symbols with rice flour. Kolams mark the site or ceremony as sacred with the actualizing potency of symbols. We each light a stick of incense and place this into a holder next to the lamp and rock. The air fills with the pungent aroma of its sweet smell as we light the lamp itself. Dianne and Judy sing traditional mantras they have learned for such ceremonies.

Both smoke and sound fill the air, inviting sacred presence and our combined consciousness to drop into and centre within this ritual space. I bath the rock with the milk, pouring liquid over her form, washing her over again with water and then spraying her with the lavender scent. Such fluid-logic is the medium of our devotion. Judy cautions me to be careful not to cut myself on her sharp edges as I pour and spray more fluids over her form. Dianne tosses large handfuls of turmeric over and around her until she is covered in this bright yellow powder, gleaming with her make-up adornment. Next, Dianne brings the red sari cloth and wraps it carefully around her, tied at the back. *She is dressed.* I stand watching and feeling the presence of goddess emerge and merge with the rock. *She is lovingly created or revealed before our eyes.*

Dianne and Judy each hold a side of our long flower wreath. They double it together and place it around and over her. *She is bathed, dressed and adorned.* As the flower necklace lies around her, I admire her form and feel a sudden surge of tears well up within me. I begin to spontaneously cry and ask for her guidance; Judy and Dianne move to sit on either side of me. I suddenly feel the emotional impact of how much I have taken on in this one week by meeting simultaneously with each of my co-participants. I sense the effort of presence and focus needed to meet the individuality of each woman as I practice with her. My tears wash away the stress of working to stay in ‘not knowing’ until I feel myself *open to the unknown without grasping.* I drop into a place of relaxed curiosity; and then something else emerges.

Within this clearing of tears, I feel an immense sense of gratitude for this life and my relationships within it. I am grateful for all the paths that have opened before me in my devotion to life, to women’s life-based ways, to “her” as divine presence(s), and for the travels that bring me closer to her even as she resides always within me. Judy and Dianne sit quietly and closely
next to me as I release these tears. She and they are mothers holding their child, warriors standing guard as feelings flow. I tell her I know she has always been there and within me, as gratitude, tears, love, gratitude, tears, love, come through. As my tears fade and become another liquid offering, we continue to sit together in the *washed and adorned quiet*. We collect the apples that have fallen from the tree and place them next to her—more offerings. I stand up to meditate on the presence of this event and admire its creation. I grasp my camera again, and turn to see Judy and Dianne smiling and beaming, focusing intently on her fully adorned form. Judy’s hands are extended with palms open in a welcome or a benediction. A small honeybee has arrived and sits within the wreath of flowers. Taking nectar from our collected blossoms, the bee lingers, hovers, blesses, and leaves us in delight.

*The bee lingers, hovers, blesses, and leaves us in delight.*

Chapter Eight: New Philosophies

We are calling for female-based leadership. We are not saying that women as a generic group be leaders, but rather that there are wisdoms in women’s traditions that have been left out for a while. We think that those are some of the things needed to knit new philosophies. What is being called for are philosophies that can perceive economics and power relations and the Earth in integrated ways, in ways that can help human beings be more balanced. (Judy Grahn, personal communication, 2009)

Red Thread 5: New Philosophies

Nané - Dreaming birth

Another dream - I am on the University of British Columbia campus in a large classroom in the basement level of a campus building. There are desks and chairs scattered around this room. Hard linoleum floors gleam with polish. The ceiling is low, the room lit by low-grade fluorescent lights.

A woman is having a baby in this room.

A woman is having a baby in this room. Friends and birth helpers surround her. We are supposedly all there to help her have the baby, but it is loud—everyone is talking. I check on the progress of her labour. She is 3 cm dilated and thus very early on in the birth. She is resting on a blanket on the classroom floor, or trying to rest. She lies among a small group of friends. Everybody is talking and moving around like any other day, busy, busy, busy. It’s too busy in here. The birthing woman seems to like all the business but it’s not helping her to give birth.

At some point I appear to be the most experienced so-called ‘midwife’ present, though this woman is really birthing on her own as if unattended. Sitting with me are three of my mentors, teachers of birth and women’s body-wisdom, including Vicki Noble. We are all there to be with this birthing woman on the UBC campus, so in a way she has attendants. We talk of inducing her with a herbal remedy to get the birth going. Consulting together, we sit in a pile of blankets like schoolgirls gossiping with each other. Jeannine Parvati Baker (1974) says, “Well, I’ll suggest a yin remedy and you add a yang one, they should balance out.” We wonder what is best to do? Should
this woman rest and sleep, or should we give her a remedy to speed up the birth? Something is
needed.

Then, busting down the hallway and into the classroom come UBC authorities, people in
uniforms. We are all getting busted for what we are doing here, helping this woman to have her
baby on the UBC campus. I think I am going to end up in jail, for either attending the birth or
some kind of public mischief. We all quickly disperse. But I notice video recorders over the
classroom door. We were being recorded all along. The authorities take the woman to the hospital
on a stretcher. I can feel that she will be given a cesarean section. She is tired and exhausted looking.
I see the outline of her baby through her belly’s skin. The edges of hard limbs are poking through.
It’s like all the water is gone from the mother’s belly and only the baby’s outline is left. I can feel the
baby moving through her skin—she is alive, but there is fear for her life.

After we all disperse, I understand that I should have spoken up and told people to be quiet.
She needed to be held by us, to be put at the centre of our attention.

*She needed to be put at the centre of our attention.*
Program learning outcome # 5
ITP Program Review, MA in Women’s Spirituality, 2009

Students can employ and teach techniques that promote healing, reflection, self-authorization for themselves and their communities.

MamaCoAtl - You are a piece of time

The WSMA gave me permission to express what I wanted to express, even though I have not used it in the economic sense of what is this MA for? Who is going to hire me? What kind of job can I get with what kind of corporation? The MA and the MFA are for my use in what I’m doing. I use it when I give my bio. I do my healing work with that credential. I can speak about women’s issues because I have a Masters degree in Women's Spirituality. But in reality, it was more like stepping stones for continuing to investigate more of what is the truth behind all this. With respect to all the academics and structures of the Women’s Spirituality movement, I appreciate what they are doing. They housed me, my rage and my resistance. They held me there and they helped me tremendously. But I truly feel like academic structures are obsolete. It’s going to crumble because it’s not real. It doesn’t take us anywhere but to status. We don’t need status right now. What we need is food, clean food.

In Canada, in the United States, the situation is global, we are realizing now that the American public and the first world population is not benefiting from the suffering of others. When we realize the human suffering that is involved to put food on our plate, we can appreciate why there are so many diseases in the first world. Imagine eating all that grief? All those tears, all those lives, all those women who are losing their babies because they are being sprayed on. There is tremendous karma that the white people and the privileged people are imposing on their own children. There is no denying that these crimes are being committed, the same crimes and the same perpetrators, from 500 years ago, from 5000 years ago. To me, we are living in an extraordinary moment, and this is the moment in which we can collapse time. We need to heal those ancestors of the genocides.

As a Mexican woman I have both within me, the rapist and the raped. I am a creature that is a product of genocide. This is why my face is pale, colonized in my blood stream. Still,
my Indigenosity is in my heart, it is my reason for being. To me the most important thing that I've been maturing to is how to recover your original blueprint of the human soul. Where is the prison we are talking about? There is no bigger prison or slave then the one who thinks she is free. So you think you’re free? You’re not free, you’re comfortable. Many people come to the US from the South because their land has been polluted. Their land is occupied by corporations who are perpetrating the same crimes, kicking Indigenous people off their land and polluting the land, making it useless. People come here, they buy a car, rent an apartment with an air conditioner, with a heater, they buy clothes and they think that’s freedom. After several years they realize that when they came here they were butterflies and now they’ve degenerated to worms in front of the TV. Many people are realizing the ways in which the system steals your essence, your source and your joy.

I am here in this neighbourhood because everybody comes and goes from North to South. The people that I find in the South I find here. There is a prophecy going on of the unification of the Eagle and the Condor. And there is a prophecy of the return of Quetzalcoatl. I investigate all these things because that’s my quest. When Europeans came in the 1500s or 1492, we were very close to another Venus alignment. It is happening now years later. This Venus alignment is Quetzalcoatl for us. The history books say that our ancestors were waiting for a white bearded man called Quetzalcoatl, that they mistook the white man for Quetzalcoatl and he was able to destroy us because we worshipped him. This story denies the Indigenous genius that is still active, and completely timeless. Now we are in the time from 2004 until 2012 in which there is another window of opportunity for consciousness to shift. It is the same time it was back then, when the white man first came. Had the white man been open, we would have that paradise on Earth of human sister and brotherhood that the very eldest prophesies of the Hopi told of the white brother who comes back home. But they didn’t do that—they killed us. Six hundred million of our people were decimated and continue to be decimated today.

This window of opportunity lasts about eight years in which humanity has the opportunity to realign. If we don’t realign, whatever mold we set in motion stays for hundreds of years. Quetzalcoatl is not a man, much less a white man. Quetzalcoatl is Venus. When this alignment happens in the sky, you see a rainbow serpent. We are scientific people. We are people with art and science, and the harmonious language. Did you know our language, Nauhatl, has no bad words? It refers to nature and has the ‘tl’ syllable which is a Mexican
word. ‘Atlanta’ is a Mexican word, ‘atl’ means ‘water.’ ‘Michigan’ is a Mexican word that means ‘lake of fish.’

How do you recover who you truly are? How do you peel off all of these layers of shame, rage and resistance? How do you realize where the prison is in your mind, in the psychological structure of the English language? All the Imperial languages were created to get you away from your natural resonance, and have you develop a faith in the black book. You can no longer see the face of God, but only the word of God. All our ancestors, my grandfathers, my grandmothers said, “You ain’t nothing but a chunk of earth, a breath of air, a bit of fire, some water, and a piece of time.” You are a piece of time. That’s all we are. We didn’t need to have faith because we knew our math. All of that has been stripped from us and we are recovering that. You don’t need faith if you are living in nature and you are in the moment because you know, you can measure, you can see. You don’t have to create something to refer to that. The ‘goddesses’ were all manifestations of nature. Not ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses,’ they are manifestations of nature. They are scientific principles of life and biology and how life happens. We know what it means to talk to the birds, how to talk with the elements of nature.

Our count of time is the most accurate count of time ever. Our clock, our cosmic clock has the movements of time for all the planets in the solar system. We know when it is summer in Mars or Venus. We know the sun in all the planets. It’s beautiful. All the images are metaphors. But they were called ‘gods’ or ‘goddesses’ because the invaders were ignorant, they didn’t know better. Our time keeping is completely in alignment with human gestation. We have 13 weeks, or 13 times 20. This is so beautiful it brings me to tears. This is the real wealth of our humanity that’s being denied every time we mistreat a Mexican. This lack of gratitude is driving us to extinction. This July 29th marked the end of darkness and the beginning of a new sun, and we don’t know what time it is.

The name of this land from Nicaragua onto the North is called Anahuak, the Confederation of the Eagle. From Nicaragua to the South is Tiwantinsuyo, the people of the Condor. There is a prophecy that the Condor and the Eagle are going to unite. What you see now are a lot of runs for dignity of Indigenous people working quietly and effectively. This past July 2009 had many dates that were sculpted in the stone for thousands of years. From July 23rd to the 29th people were recovering and reconnecting their roots, bringing representatives of
Indigenous peoples from all areas to go to sacred places and have ceremonies there for awakening.

So what is it to begin to experience gratitude? Gratitude for earth, for air, for water, gratitude for the most humble people who put out food on your plate, gratitude for all those so called illegal ‘aliens’ who are the rightful owners of the Earth? Many aware young people are already feeding the holy, which is nature. For every creation that we come out with, even if it’s only mentally, if it’s only on paper, we rip some aspect of the invisible. We acquire a dept with the invisible. When anthropologists go to ancient gravesites they find little shells, round stones with the circle in the middle. Those are coins. Those pay the invisible for that gift of creativity. For every flint knife that was created you paid coins to the invisible. All these coins are buried in the earth because that’s how you pay Pachamama back. All the gold, all the quartz, all the things that get taken out of the earth bring us out of balance. What we need to do is bury that stuff back where it belongs.

Aikya – How the goddess came to me

When we went it South India in the WS program, it was very clear to all of us that we were being re-birthed. We were going into a culture that we didn’t understand. We didn’t know how to go to the bathroom in this new place because they don’t have the same kind of toilets and facilities that we do. We had to eat differently and we had to dress differently. It was like being a baby again, like having to go through toilet training as an adult. We went through these stages very quickly. Dianne and Judy were the ones who did understand. In the beginning we viewed Judy and Dianne like mom and dad, like our parents. It was stressful for them. We were the first group they took to India, now they do it differently. At that time, they were still going through jet lag and had all these needy babies. We even went through adolescence, not wanting to eat with our hands. We wanted to eat with a fork and went through this little rebellion and then it cooled. But if I hadn’t gone to India, that quality of the WS program where teachers are like mothers and it is woman-centred wouldn’t have been so clear. The whole program was like that—it wasn’t just that trip. I hadn’t discovered myself as a woman, as a sacred being because of having a female body. That’s huge, that’s enormous.

The most interesting thing for me about the culture in Kerala is that even now 30% of the people are matrilineal. I was fascinated by just the possibility of that, that there could
actually be somewhere like this. I was curious about what the men are like. They actually seemed very content. I used to exchange emails with a Keralan man who had a business. His mother and sister and everybody live in Northern Kerala. His sister has children but there’s no husband discussed, and he sends money to his mother.

We went to many goddess temples while we were there. I’ll never forget going to the Naga (snake) temple at Mannarsala to meet the high priestess. She’s highly revered. In her family the oldest woman becomes the high priestess. She and her husband are no longer married because she has the duty of worshipping the nagas. In particular, the naga that Lord Vishnu reclines on is believed to live in the basement of her temple compound. Everything about this temple has to do with healing. Nagas are the embodiment of life energy. We went to meet the priestess and got into a line to go up to her room. It was in a big compound with all these doors, one door, another door, door, door. Her door had two parts, with the top open. There she was saying “Hello” to everybody from within her little room. There was group of schoolboys ahead of us worried about their exams. They were giggling and itchy, very forlorn and scared. She blessed them and told them it would be okay and they were happy. Then we came up and of course she didn’t know English, and we couldn’t speak Malayalam, but we still had an exchange. It was some time afterward that I realized we had just visited a huge traditional matrilineal home. Each of the daughters has her own room and can welcome in whoever she wishes. This is how ‘home’ shows up if you are living this way.

We also went to a small Pongala celebration at one of the temples. It was fun to see some of the things that Dianne writes about. The Pongala ritual is cooking rice and water with some cashews, raisons, jaquary, and cardamom. It’s interesting from the point of view of Western women who are trying to avoid cooking at all costs, to think of people making a religious ritual out of cooking a pot of cereal.

Because of my studies in Hinduism I could go around to the Hindu temples and say, “Well they do this and that because of such and such.” But none of the temples moved me. Then we went to the Catholic Church because in Kerala the Catholic tradition descends from the time of the apostles. I noticed all the cultural differences, everywhere else in India people sit on the floor, but in the Catholic Church they stand up. All of a sudden on one of the pillars, very high up, I saw a statue of St. Anne. St. Anne was the one my mother prayed to when all the doctors had said, “Put her in an institution and forget about her. You’ll have other
I had hydrocephaly at birth, water on the brain, which was considered incurable. My mother took me home and decided she’d take care of me and pray to St. Anne. I saw St. Anne in that Church and I started crying. That was how the goddess came to me in India. That’s how I got to have this body, because my mother was busy talking to St. Anne. I still don’t physically see very well because of congenital issues that came along with hydrocephalic syndrome. But that was the thing that got to me in India, St. Anne with her daughter and her book. What is that book, and where did it come from?

In Religious Science there is a ‘visioning’ piece. I’m new to it, but we took a whole year of visioning about the prison ministry. The idea is that what you have visioned will easily come forward without a great deal of stress or effort on your part. You hear this and think, “Okay, maybe.” But it’s happening with the prison ministry right now, the things we visioned are showing up. Within the Church, everybody who has a bright idea has to get together with other people and vision for a minimum of six months. Through visioning, what I’m starting to understand is that we are practicing opening our consciousness in a different sort of way. As I change ‘me’ what’s around me changes. As I focus on a particular thing the ‘me’ becomes bigger. All these things that I saw in my visioning are showing up, so I must be bigger then this shape.

Judy – *A life of creative inquiry*

I am preparing new classes for the fall. One is for an arts program called Creative Inquiry. I’m defining what I mean by ‘Creative Inquiry’ and showing students examples of how an art life is an entire life. From birth on, we have an inquiry that’s something, maybe several things, and art can further that, it is a vehicle and a methodology. What are the actual steps artists take to create a life, what keeps it spinning? I am attempting to have some slightly different art theory then what constitutes commercial success, or what does longevity have to do with it, or what is great art? I am not asking any of those questions. I am asking, “How can you have a life of creative inquiry?” As an artist you are acting as shaman for a community. It could be a community of 10,000 people who make use of what you are doing. Or you may not know who is going to make use of what you are doing but you have to trust. You may be doing something on behalf of all of the butterflies by making butterfly drawings. So butterflies are your community, or butterflies benefit from your work because people will treasure them and pay attention when monarchs are wiped off the face of the Earth. People will want to do
something about it. Another example are Dorthea Lange’s photographs. She evoked what the
1930s depression did to the population of poor people. Here’s what they look like, here’s how
real they are, and human they are. There can be empathy. With those images it’s not as easy for
people to dismiss the poor as being lazy or not caring. Those faces so intensely care about life,
children, survival and the next meal.

I’ve been influenced by Eastern ideas ever since I came to California. People don’t realize
how influenced by Asia California is, but it permeates the culture. It had permeated the Bay
area culture when I arrived here. There was Ravi Shankar all over the streets, incense burning
and paisley curtains. Before that the Beatniks got involved with the Buddhists, and with Japan.
And the poetry tradition is very strong in the Bay area, and has been influenced by Eastern
philosophy for a long time. In Women’s Spirituality there is this same turn to the East and
India. Living goddesses are still deeply imbedded in the culture block by block. As a Westerner,
you have to know how to get away from the hotels and imbed yourself in the culture to find it.
Dianne was superb for that, making our co-research and my dissertation study possible. That
research has given our program a rootedness in a reality that I appreciate. We are not fantasizing
about female icons from 25,000 years ago and making up what might or might not have
surrounded them. We are able to go and find literature and people and practices that exist in
which millions of women participate and men as well. What are those traditions made of
becomes an answerable question.

Without the East we would have no words for some things. You’d have a hard time
explaining ‘eros’ in relation to childbirth, whereas ‘shakti’ as you say is very useful in
understanding the energies of childbirth. Eros is just not used generally enough, and shakti is.
Shakti can be lightening. All manner of shattering things can be shakti, because it’s such a
powerful energy. I appreciate even the limited amount of knowledge that we have about Indian
concepts. They are invaluable to us because of the position taking that is lost in our Western
vocabularies, lost from the Earth-based sciences that pre-existed modern sciences. I appreciate
the sciences that replaced them to a large degree, but I am also wary of them because they are
partial and don’t concern themselves with ethics. They can ignore the common good with a
focus on commercialism. This has led to abominable excesses and exploitations in the name of
“science.”
At its heart science is an ethical and spiritual practice. It needs to be just as dedicated to the common good as poetry is. Poetry is a calling. You don’t go into poetry in order to make a huge name for yourself or make a great deal of money. You are asking a different set of questions. This is a similar set of questions that a spiritual path elicits from people who set foot upon it. There will be poets who disagree with me, but only a little bit. In general any poet that you would ask, “What was your motive?” They do not say “financial success” or any worldly responses. For many of us, even the renown has not been nearly the pull that people might imagine. Rather, it’s the satisfaction of having poetry received in communities and by individuals who then say, “Look what this did for me, look what this meant to me. Look how I taught it to my children and kept it alive.”

Both spirituality and the arts have to find ways to be sustaining in a capitalist world that finds both of them dangerous and gives huge rewards in other directions. How do we do that? Community is again and again the answer. Stay in community. Don’t go crawl off by yourself and try to do it alone. Stay connected. We tell that to our students. It makes all the difference in the quality of the experience. You'll want to find ways to do it more. The unexpected joy of working with Dianne and D’vorah in the program as co-directors is the great deal of fun we have together. We have ways of working things out and we have ways of having fun. I can’t imagine being in a situation of collaboration that wasn’t like this.

As group of three co-directors, we don’t have a fixed religion that we situate within. We have ways that we were raised with, and we have paths that have chosen us or we have chosen out of exploration. That makes us multidimensional where spirituality is concerned. That’s a prerequisite for teaching in a Women’s Spirituality program. If someone has a particular religious viewpoint then her underpinning of spirituality might be compromised. Our definition of spirituality in the WSMA has been made broadly enough to sustain anybody who could possibly come into the program to be included. Whether they are against the tradition they were raised in, or whether they are trying to find their way back to it, whether they are indifferent to it, or whether they are atheistic.

Women’s Spirituality is pedagogy, it is content, it is theoretical and it is a philosophical set of viewpoints. It's been in protected space for a long time because of the indifference of the outside world, their antipathy to the subject from their own biases and our own protectiveness. We understood that it wouldn’t get to develop if we didn’t throw some borders around
these materials and just say, “We won’t actually go out and become proselytizers for this. We are not going to make any claims for it.” But this is now a mature program with mature content. The British Museum has an Enheduanna fan club connected to Betty Meador’s work (2000, 2009). This tells us that something as established as the British Museum loves Betty’s translations and loves Enheduanna, who was the high priestess-poet of ancient Sumer and the goddess Inanna. These are such deeply integrated aspects of the WS curriculum, teaching women’s psychology from the descent myth of Inanna, teaching about the ancient poetry written to Inanna by the first recorded poet who is a woman, Enheduanna. There are some Iraqi people in England involved in the British Museum club. They are reclaiming their decimated culture after the horrific invasion of their county by the US. People are reaching out for what we are sitting on. A woman who has a Greek poetry journal based on menstruation recently wrote to me saying, “When I first read, “Blood, Bread and Roses” (1993) I thought this was your personal obsession. But now that I’ve read all these articles, I’m realizing that this is viable theory and it has credibility.” These are all indications to me.
Red thread in the forest

Getting lost I rise slowly from the glade of ferns. My mind is still, serene in its rest. I walk away from the tree to return to the mirror and complete this work. But my steps do not find the way, though they feel purposeful in their direction. I am walking again through the forest but I cannot see the red thread that I came in with. I cannot find the mirror. I realize I am lost in this ritual. We are lost in this ritual.

Nané - *The library of being*

The central interchange is the body in metamorphosis. What the dream shows us in its theatre is the translation, in the open, of what we cannot see, of what is not visible but can be sensed in reality….And this teaches me many things I do not know about my own secrets. (Cixous, 1997, p. 28)

Mary Daly writes of the Lady of Words as a “cosmic writer and librarian,” the goddess Isis, or Skeh(u)t, the “one before the divine place of books” (1984, p. 119). My maternal grandmother spoke of my great grandmother in Ireland, a mother of twelve children and worked to the bone, yet she read, she read. Everyday she could be found in the afternoon in a book, sitting in her chair in the back of the house, magically bypassing the humming chaos of children, an alcoholic husband, the household around her. She read and read and read.

How to pour my own body into words on the page, a book, a text, for others to read? The ritual transmutation of being into something someone else can hold, look at, experience. Research, writing and art as physical acts seeking interface with another beyond the requirements of bodily presence, transcending the usual requirements of time and presence to communicate, to commune. An intimation of immortality, no wonder so much is at stake.

In another recent dream the image that stays with me are the books. So many books, walls and walls of books form rooms, corridors, and places to live. The books are in shelf-like cabinets. The cabinets are walls themselves. Glass casing protects each shelf. You can lift the glass up to reach for a book. I am struck by the sheer numbers of books around me, all in different sizes and colours. Stacked side by side, their columns and titles beam out a multiplicity of colour, texture and message. Within all these books, I notice a growing sensation of dampness. Soft rain is falling around me in a misting drizzle. I am looking at the cases of books with their glass covers and wondering, how they will ever stay dry? The dampness is slowly, gradually, getting to them. Watermarks and stains are forming. Thick bunches of pages begin to bend and gently twist as I realize that I am in an outdoor dwelling of books. This library is completely open to the elements. There is no roof over my head. This library is outside—outside. I am standing on soft grass in a garden of books. The elements are at work, slowly dissolving and softening these texts.

I am in this condition of writing the book, a function of the times I travel. I will write the
book and work at this scribbling. All the while rain falls, slowly dissolving these words, these pages, this text.

And so more liquids inhabit my dreams. This dreambody (Mindell, 1985) I am building, or is building me, is conditioned by fluids and their subtle affects and effects. Their ability to dissolve, soften, and transform, is the message I return to over and over again within such fluid relations of life. Fluids convey the ability to nourish beyond words from the bodily encounters of human experience. Fluids are the sensual, life-giving vehicle of human-to-human growth, communication and communion—in pregnancy, in birth, in breast-feeding, in sexuality. Fluids fall from sky and pour from river to human, earth to plant to animal. Fluids are the threshold of touch and our inter-being with the other. Though seemingly separate entities, we are conjoined to others by the liminality of fluids, in a quest of knowing our “elemental integrity” (Daly, 1984, p. 136). In my dream, so many volumes of books are caught and held and nursed by this rain, a gentle rain upon this library of being. I want to inhabit the library of being.

The body in metamorphosis, finding my own secrets—how to maintain a search for that which I keep hidden even from myself? Submerged, the portals and channels of communication are blocked from too open a view. In finding secrets, I unlock visions and phantoms of the heart. This heart knows all, beating liquid blood filled with the ancient water cells of a million, billion years, revealing through time what the body is ready to hold and experience through dreams, imagination and the calling of the small self towards large Self.
Nané - *The philosopher-midwife herself*

I cannot do this work alone. *I am not alone in this work.*

How am I making my-self as a thinker and a researcher, coming into the larger field of education? Who am I as re-searcher in the re-search? The notion of *birth* becomes central, or already was to my research process. *Birth* as real, as more then a metaphor. The pull of its earthly constitution brought me to and through Women’s Spirituality as education. I like to think of the larger context of birth, what is it to know *birth* as a force within a woman’s life, within all lives? What is it to see natality for what it is, as we are each born into this life, born into this moment of time through our mothers? Unmediated consciousness of birth seems asleep within the dominant culture or buried deep within us. Yet such simple fact is attended to over and over by the midwife, her prayer and continuance. Birth comes with a knowing of the fragile beauty we each are, set into a web of others by our mother’s task. Our head stretches into mother’s soft tissues, we bulge out from inside of her. Rounding out her vulva, we pass from watery life into air-centred being. She pushes us through feelings of intense burning or ecstatic joy, what do we each sense in this moment? In painful or ecstatic sensation, she pushes through much more then the word ‘stretching’ can contain.

What does it mean to come fully to knowledge and wisdom of such fragile incarnation through the mother and the birth we each take? Midwives are concerned with the immediate physical presence of birthing women. Mid-wife means *with-woman.* ‘Wife’ is etymologically derived from the Old English term for ‘woman.’ My work as a birth attendant was in *this way,* being with the flesh, breath and moaning trance of a woman’s task of giving birth. I lived an activism of birth love, furthering women’s deep experiences of birthing within joy, pain, struggle and the simple normalness of the experience of such. I was drawn to this primal state of being with another human being in her intense work. I experience this state as getting past the yackety-yak of so-called ‘regular’ conscious life. Attending home births of freely birthing women exudes a kind of darshan. I would say that birth and baby darshan is a feeling of being simply blessed in the experience, sensing the abundance of the good, a rightness to breath, flesh and blood, of the effort of it all, of being in and with bodies that do this work. I would not have called this ‘spirituality’ at the time, or even ‘Women’s Spirituality,’ but what names for it?
Attending births I experienced attunement, heart to heart of present moment. I wrote my Women’s Spirituality Master’s thesis on the topic of ecofeminism and women’s birth experiences through midwifery-type care. I included my own experiences of attending births and giving birth (Jordan, 2002). Giving birth in modern times of overly prevalent medical interventions, caesarian section, forceps, vacuum extractions, and analgesics, I highlight the body wisdom of birth and women’s self-described experiences of such. I write of how women in North America are living and giving birth in the context of social change and cultural transformation of birth practices. Women are birthing beyond the fear and mis-education of the birth process (Arms, 1996; Gaskin, 1990) towards its ecstatic possibilities.

The Women’s Spirituality degree had the parameters within which I could undertake my inquiry into theory and practice of birth. I co-researched the topic with those I understood to be the experts at hand, mothers themselves. The resurgence of midwifery and home birth in North America marks the feminist blend of spirituality and politics of the lay midwife, whose quiet renewal came along the more visible gains of liberal feminism (Shroff, 1997). Midwives work with birth energy and the social milieu of the birthing woman—midwifery is woman-centred. Midwives work against the over-technologization of birth. Many women feel de-humanized by authoritative applications of too numerous medical interventions, and experience body- and self-integrity through home birth (Davis-Floyd, 1992; Klassen, 2001). Giving birth subjugates the experience of time and regular ego consciousness in heightened sensitivity towards the realm of the extra-ordinary. What might be called pain arises, but this has also been experienced as intense sensation and trance consciousness by women, as corroborated by mothers in my MA thesis research (Jordan, 2002). There is the feeling of being taken over by the physical-psychic forces of birth-giving, and the potential of surrendering to this. “It’s so formless and it’s just energy....Not just a vessel like you’re empty, but like a doorway for another life” (Leanne in Jordan, 2002, p. 132).

Equal to my love of birth are my own mystical or matter-of-fact experiences of being in nature and the world-at-large. Knowing that one is the world beyond and within the so-called regular self, world comes through trees, grasses, tadpoles, and finding rocks on the beach. Being in such a state as a child I experienced my first sense of spiritual salvation. As a child, I immersed myself for hours in the raptures of milkweed fluff and the cocooning designs of caterpillars. I wandered grassy hillsides, collecting mint tea and making healing herbal potions by the stream in
the forest. Cosmologist Richard Tarnas calls this immersed sense of self, held within Earthly ecologies of a giving and receiving cosmos, a “primal world view.” There is a “radical permeability and embeddedness with respect to the world” (2006, p. 18). World is permeated with meaning that is both human and cosmic, as the presence of tree, animal, rock and spirits, are felt and acknowledged. As a child I kept close to my heart this view of being in the world, not forming words to name it because what was the name for it? I thought these were such personal experiences of immersive consciousness. Yet certainly people have always felt and feel such kinship with world-Earth-nature-cosmos. Tarnas names the modern condition of disconnection from nature and attending environmental degradation as a “disenchantment” of the cosmos, a disenchantment of “participation mystique” when the world is voided of “spiritual, symbolic, or expressive dimensions” (p. 20). Despite the prevalence of modernity within my life, or because of it, living and attuning with nature became my primary spiritual practice beginning in childhood.

There is a tension in my work and coming to voice in scholarship that has to do with calling to the trace of the immediate presence of the birthing woman, and calling to the trace of the land. The birthing woman does not present herself to me here upon this page, but I call to my relation with ‘her.’ Can being a birth attendant, midwife, a child being born, and a woman giving birth, be a way of thinking? Can this relational-birthing-Earth-ing call speak through writing if I am supposed to be an individual, writing from a location of a fixed autonomous identity, writing from a category of the production of “my” scholarly work. Can I have this home birth in the academy? What I propose as “thinking” seems always between places, arising within practice and theory as I have come to each in my life. I am making thinking, writing, art and research out of this life.

I am creating a researcher persona in my scholarly research, or perhaps this persona is creating me, my “cosmic twin” (MamaCoAtl, personal communication, 2009). I invoke a position, ideal, or apparition, from which my work might follow. This apparition is that of the ‘philosopher-midwife.’ She is a figure arising in the consciousness of my doctoral studies, coalescing thought patterns and senses into her form. Like a sketch of a garment ‘she’ needs stitching and sewing. She needs the right threads, weave, and colours, the touch and feel of her to wear upon and through my skin. She calls to me through various texts, art, intuitions, dreams, fluids, and of course through attention to the female capacity for reproduction and birth, the inspired meanings and manifestations of birth-giving. I weave towards her with my red thread, spinning and dying the
wool of her red mantle, wearing it upon my body as I walk into the forest to collect her old and new wisdom. It is unclear if I am creating her, or she is creating me. I attend to her calling and I call to her. I give form and meaning to what I gather she is and who I am. She is not a category I can claim as being my-self. I never completely arrive in her making.

The philosopher-midwife is an apparition or daemon in the ancient sense of that word as the spirit or otherworld figure who whispered into the ear of Socrates. She calls to my inner and outer workings as I step along her path of discovery, her path of un-covery. I willfully and not-so-willfully follow in her name, before I know her name.

In Tantric traditions of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism of visualizing and invoking a deity (Chopra, 2006), one centres oneself on the immense qualities, capacities, and the form or image of the desired deity. One offers devotion towards the deity and yearns to be in her presence. One imagines merging with the deity, attracting and incorporating her attributes, qualities, the energetics of her infinite compassion, her enlightenment. One rests in and with the deity, the spaciousness of co-presence.

I cannot do this work alone, I am not alone in this work.
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I cannot do this work alone, I am not alone in this work.
Program learning outcome # 6
ITP Program Review, MA in Women’s Spirituality, 2009

Students understand and can apply critical theories and perspectives to a variety of issues and to suggest strategies to address worldwide needs with compassion and effectiveness.

Dianne – Be in a place of unknowing

Students in the WS program always want to show us how much they know when they come in, and I remember that. Now we say, “Whatever it is you think you’ve come here to do, put that on hold for a couple of semesters and be in a place of unknowing.” Students struggle with that and let it happen. The truth is that if you already know something then you can’t learn. There’s hardly any place in our culture that says that you need to sit in unknowing. It’s all about mastery. It’s fine to do something and get better at it until you can do it in your sleep. But in this globalized world, the skill that is really valuable is to be able to sit in the unknowing and say, “I really do not understand what’s going on here. I’m going to be really present until I get enough knowledge to actually be able to make some sense of it.” Think about all of the ways that we react out of thinking we know something. If you evaluated the situation, it’s our defensiveness of being unwilling to be not only in an unfamiliar situation, but an unfamiliar situation that we don’t know and feel vulnerable in. During all of my research in India, the only way I’ve ever been able to understand anything is to know that I don’t understand. To stay open to that is a deep intelligence.

We’ve been doing assessments for the WSMA, talking to students about their learning experiences. We want to figure out how to do an assessment on this kind of transformative learning. It’s very difficult. Almost every student talks first about the “Spiritual Autobiography” class, how profound an experience that was to both tell your own story, and to hold and to witness everybody else’s stories. The stories build upon and intersect with each other. We start out with the two instructors and teaching assistants telling their own stories. Right away that’s a new model of education.

Last year, I really had a dilemma. My co-instructor usually does some form of her
Hawaiian story and dances—it’s so beautiful. I was in the early days of my grandson’s hospitalization in intensive care and he was not expected to live. These were all fairly new students and I’m mindful of not putting emotional responsibility on students. But I went with my intuition, and told the story of what I’d gotten from my own grandmothers. That’s what I was drawing on throughout my grandson’s hospitalization. It was the first time that I really understood what it was to be a grandmother and not a mother. I still remember the touch of one of my own grandmothers. My grandmother was almost blind the first time she saw my daughter. She touched her with such gentleness and engaged with her in a way that I’d never seen anybody else in my family do. That subtlety was what was called upon for my own grandson in the hospital. I needed so desperately to be able to draw from that because most of my life I’m here there and yonder. I needed to be able to slow down and say there is something else required here, to hold everything I had been taught about life and death. I got it in every cell in my body that I was standing there with this child and could hold any possibility completely. I got that from my other grandmother who had battled illness after illness. She was a diabetic very early on in her life. I came to appreciate my grandmothers in ways that I had never thought about before. That’s what we do in Spiritual Autobiography. It was a very intense story and women were sobbing, but it tapped into that mystery.

Being a grandmother now, it’s so clear that it’s really about him, my grandson. He keeps me on this path of how we have this unique baby. We said, “What does a baby like this need?” If we are going to raise this child in the intensive care unit, what do we think is required? One of the things required is that somebody is there with him all the time. We don’t want him to be alone with the buzzers and lines. Not because we didn’t trust the nurses, but this was a time where human attention and presence was required. That’s what we did, everybody in the family rearranged who they were. That’s part of what my Spiritual Autobiography was. My life is shifting. There may be times when I’m not going to be as present in my teaching and other roles. Part of me was thinking, “Should I tell students this?” There’s that voice that’s trying to assume and take care of students’ reactions, and that’s a valid voice. And there’s a deeper voice that says this is what really is. This is non-negotiable and I need to say this. The response was amazing. I felt myself have an extraordinary relationship with these students. It gave them permission to say all the things that they needed to say without worrying about us. There’s that model of vulnerability in education.
It’s also important for me to talk about the fact that my daughter and her spouse are a married couple who are both women. I talk about how grateful they were that there was so much support within the hospital for them as a couple, because it could be very difficult without that. They became a focal point for all of the gay community in the hospital because they did this beautiful modeling with all of the grandparents. It was an amazing experience. I talked about the fullness of that. Again, this sets certain parameters for the classroom conversations that can happen.

For the next three class times of Spiritual Autobiography we meet all day long. Each student has 45 minutes to tell their story. They can use pictures, or ritual, or bring in powerpoints. Almost everybody sets up an altar and each one is so different. A belly dancer might dance part of it, or somebody might bring in her art or poetry. Stories students haven’t ever told before come out, or not. We use a book called “Writing as a Way of Healing” (1999). Louise DeSalvo does a wonderful job of talking about how to use writing in a way that doesn’t re-traumatize but is useful for yourself. You set appropriate boundaries for disclosure. Some women need to be able to express things that they haven’t said. For other women it’s learning how to set their own containment fields. That’s what I love about having these years of experience now, is being able to say, “Where am I going to encourage this woman? Am I going to encourage more or less?” I can say in the classroom, “You are really learning to do this, or this seems to be really serving you.” That’s the re-mothering aspect of WSMA education. We know what the larger goals of the program are. We are very clear up front that this is a program where a lot of psychological and family stuff can come up. But it’s not the point of the program. We do not frame it that way or intentionally provoke that material. We do know that that’s part of what women bring in. Women bring their lived experiences and this needs expression. We find ways to hold these and let them live so that it’s not hidden or spilt off.

Spiritual Autobiography, as the educator, shows me the terrain of the WSMA. Students write a story about a woman in their lives that influenced them. It helps them look into their lineage to say, “Who were my role models? Who were these people?” There is almost no place in our lives where we can learn about our parents in a socio-historical context. What were the forces at work on our families? Because the WSMA is intergenerational, women begin to have empathy and see each other’s stories. A 25-year-old hears the story of a 50-year-old and hears what was at work in her life. Women find this amazing because they think of their
mothers, or their aunts or their fathers, and they get a snapshot of what that little girl or kid experienced. Learning about the forces impacting their mothers, students begin to understand what forces are impacting their own lives. What is history doing now? We are living it.

Vicki – I worship the energy

This is an image of Vajrayogini, the Queen of the Dakinis in Tibetan Buddhism. She is her stepping out pose, her action pose, where she goes into the world to help people. In her wrathful erotic pose she’s drinking her menstrual blood out of a skull cup, and holds up her chopper knife. Menstrual blood is in the tradition. Her altar is made so that the mirror in the centre faces up to catch her menstrual blood. I’m always tracking part of her iconography. Right now I am interested in the criss-cross adornment around her breasts. One Tibetan image I have has a rosette at its centre. A figure from Afghanistan has the same thing. I have figures from Turkey, from 2300 BC, who are wearing this same criss-cross adornment. It’s also something that the Tibetan Lamas wear when they do Dakini dances in costume. And I’ve seen images from Africa that have this. Vajrayogini has a mirror at the centre. The Dalai Lama’s oracle wears a mirror, as do Tuva women shamans. Buddhism flowed into Tibet from central Asia as well as India. For Vajrayogini, they often say her link is from India, in part from early Tantric practices there. But her counterpart, her alter-ego, is Vajravarahi, who is a sow goddess. She’s red with a pig-head, and she dances. The two merged in Tibetan Buddhism. They are the same for people who study them and work with them in practices. The Vajrayogini practice is behind the Dakini mandala and collages practices I do. Vajrayogini is like an umbrella; she is the prototype of the Dakini.

I teach the Vajrayogini practice in Italy. My teaching work in Italy, who knew? They published all my books. They read them and come in droves to the workshops. The students are very serious and come back a second and third year. They want advanced teachings. It pushes me to create new practices and teachings for them, which is very creative. I go twice a year now. It’s that integration again of all the streams within me.

“Dakini” is a goddess, though the Buddhists have many conceptualizations around how the deities aren’t really deities. It’s complicated philosophically, but Dakinis are basically goddesses. I feel finally liberated to do my own thing so that my own spontaneity, vision and understanding of the practices and teachings can come through me in a way that’s not
borrowed. I do the practices and I know the teachings, but I am already sitting somewhere that is “Goddess Buddhism.” No one has developed Goddess Buddhism for good reason because there’s a big edge against it. It’s very confirming to see how the women in Italy take to it, how profound the work can be when you have 50 women in a room doing the practices.

If there were a spectrum from the feminist Buddhist material all the way to the basic Women’s Spirituality materials, the WSMA program is located in goddess worship, goddess pedagogy, with goddess at the centre. This is important because there’s always an energetic in our culture that wants to move away from that and embrace all women and any other religion or practice that they bring to the program. The danger with that is if there is a strong push that way, and nothing holds the centre, then the goddess at the centre won’t hold because the larger culture would like to see her disappear. My presence in the WSMA is important because there needs to be a very strong goddess location within the program; it can so easily dissipate.

Within my WSMA classes at ITP and what was New College, I can’t teach the Dakini mandala in such a devotional way as I do in Italy. I don’t want to scare off anybody who’s not that devotional. I tell them how powerful it is, what it means for me, and offer it as a method that you can use. I ask students that if they don’t have an objection, to please do it for a month and write to me about what happens. We make it part of what they report on during the class. They observe and are attentive to this practice as a vibrational method, a shamanistic method, and if they take to it that’s fine.

Sometimes there’s resistance. I remember teaching my “Female Shamanism” course at New College. I had a student who had been studying shamanism elsewhere who challenged me. She was saying, “What’s this?” She pushed me to articulate what I do and to differentiate it. I was teaching the female background of shamanism and the Dakini practice. I got very inspired and wrote a letter to my students telling them what female shamanism is. It was a great exercise because I outlined my contribution, what happened for me in the 1970s, then how in the 1980s shamanism became a trend and the men took over, but that doesn’t mean female shamanism isn’t important, it’s just not recognized. I talked about the “Snake Power” journal and I talk about “Shakti Woman” (1991). I talked about my shamanic school and outlined the context of my work. That was useful and became something I could give to people.

Women’s Spirituality as a degree program is like an oxymoron; many of us in the grassroots field didn’t have the credentials to teach in it. But the WSMA is an amalgam
of the grassroots and the academy, and that’s important. We’re fortunate to have an opportunity to do this work where the women who want to can come and participate. We are teaching and training leaders, but it may not be about changing the university. It’s more likely that the university will change our methods. The university is already changing my methods. But it is an absolutely precious opportunity that we have in the WS program. It is so subversive that we are able to be present for the women who come and go through the kinds of transformations they do when they come to us. And the scholarship and thesis work of the students is fabulous. It is allowed to have creative manifestations. We expect that as an outcome. It’s thrilling to hold that container.

The formal requirements in the syllabus were challenging for me this year. I wrote my syllabus and Dianne told me it had to be written in “goals and objectives” and that the learning outcomes had to match the goals and objectives of the program as mediated by WASC and the university. Once I had established my goals and objectives, Dianne lifted them out from what I had written and put them into bullet points. I remember saying to Dianne, “I can’t think like this. I cannot think in bullets.” Then you’re trapped inside of your goals and objectives because the evaluation sheets are very formal. The evaluations are totally pro forma from the bullet points. The goals and objectives are then used for students to evaluate the course and I. Then I use the goals and objectives to evaluate my students. It becomes a whole template for education. But then you turn the evaluation sheet over and there’s space to write notes so you can differentiate a little between students. It’s not that I don’t have ‘form,’ I do. But I don’t worship the form, I worship the energy. When I was a Yoga teacher I figured that out. I told people, “This isn’t Iyengar, I’m interested in the asanas (poses) because they transport you to a bliss state and they open your Kundalini. If you like that come and work with me.” For a while lots of people did, and then it moved into the direction of form and I didn’t teach yoga anymore.

In this same way, I have never done an outline for a book in advance, I just write. Usually I hear the first line and I have to sit down to catch it. Then it goes where it goes. The “Motherpeace” book (1994/1983) was my first experience of this in a big way. In the book it was clear that this was a method, but not one in which I am in control. My frontal lobe is not controlling things. I start to write, I hear the thing, I start, it goes. It’s tangential at times and goes way out. But at the end, in just the right amount of time at the end of a chapter it doubles back and completes. I am not doing that with intentionality. It’s a precious, amazing
thing. I’m sure I’m not the only one having that process. It is some way that writing happens and it is definitely not about an outline in advance. I couldn’t teach you how to do that, but I honour it like a miracle.

Anya – *That lightening did something*

The deeper truth of the story about my going to India and the story of my being in the WSMA program at all is that since I was fifteen I’ve had very strong menstrual cramps. Since I was 20-years-old I’ve felt those in an altered state way and have been doing my personal inquires into it. I don’t feel like speaking when I’m bleeding. If I want to talk with you I will say two or three words. I have been doing this as a practice for years and it’s really important to me. I know there’s knowledge in this. If half of us humans are doing this a fourth to a third of the time, and we are not even talking about it, this is pretty amazing. It’s not pathological, what are these practices about? I had a really strong sense that there’s knowledge in the menstrual hut that I knew was important and we need to get there. I’ve always wanted to write books about matriarchal cultures and about menstruation in a style between pop culture and academic. I want this work to be accessible to people, to the boyfriends who would never think about talking about how girls get their periods, but they would be open to it, they just need exposure.

It was important for me to present my paper about Kerala at an academic conference (Lapham, 2007a). I could feel the authenticity of my work when it’s something I’ve known my whole life and it’s what I needed to say. I had the colleagues and context to do it. I had written very few papers in college because in the schools I attended you didn’t have to write many papers. It was the first paper I wrote during my MA and it was not anything I learned in school. Everything that I wrote about was exactly what I had in my throat wanting to be said. It was based from Judy and Dianne’s research and what I saw for myself. That’s the menstruation work for me, the underlying core directive. Being able to say this to the rest of the world is as valuable as the social work I know I’m good at. I am waking up to the responsibility of my inner value, because those words need to be said. There is always something in women’s education about getting beyond how the outer patriarchy gets to say what is important or not. You still take that in, as much as you know otherwise. It affects you somewhere in this inner place.

The deeper story is that when I went to Kerala, I was bleeding while I was there. Kerala happened and I had a context to write about menstruation. The story is that I went to see
an Ayurvedic doctor when I was in India for my menstrual problems. We had a strong connection. We were excited to talk to each other because it he is Nayar, which is matriarchal lineage that I had studied and read about. He was drawn to the rituals within that community, and I was telling him about my menstrual ritual interests in the US. Then amidst all our exclaiming, lightening came right into the room and hit him. Lightening just came in, and he was only a tiny bit away from me. That lightening did something. It came from behind me into the room and hit him. I was facing sideways, so I saw it go across the entire room. It was six feet long and I saw all of it. Later on, I drew a picture of it. In the picture, I am wearing my big red sari dress and the lightening goes straight through me from the top of my shoulder and down, over and in front of me. When I looked at the picture that I drew, I saw how the lightening went straight through my belly and yoni. I don't want to theorize it, but I think that affected my opening and re-alignment. Something enabled the dance to finally come through. I found the dance class three weeks after I got back.

Another important thing I received from the WSMA is that I met my mentors and colleagues. I had been looking for mentors, knowing I needed older women to mentor me. I needed to be taken under somebody’s wing and I knew it. To be honoured by Judy, Dianne, D’vorah and Teish, that these women would find such value in me is important. They understand, “You’re the next generation.” I didn’t have a connection with my aunties or grandmas because I was raised away from them. I also had no connection to my ancestors. I was scared in a way, with no familiarity or connected feeling. I’ve done more ancestor work now. When I feel like something is hard or if I am praying for something, I can say, “Thank you for bringing me to this point, for being with me, I know I’m not alone now. I’m from people who wanted me to be here and made who I am to do what I’m to do.” I had been alone in how I could voluntarily chose what I wanted to do and when I wanted to drop out. Presenting my Kerala paper at that conference for the first time, Dianne called me, “Anya, are you doing this or not?” I said, “I can’t.” She said, “Do it now, go sit down and write the essay.” I did it and I wouldn’t have. I had a huge fear of academics, thinking I’m not valid. One time when I was flying back from a weekend of WSMA classes I read a poem that said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for letting me stand on your shoulders.”

The program directors and teachers were important to me because they’re role models. I always had a sense of the work I wanted to do, it is academic, it is activist, it is art and it
is spiritual, but I had no models really, not in my family or my culture. I will think about “How is poetry so important that Judy is a poet? She spent all this time as a poet.” I said that to myself a million times when I was working through the dance question, you know, ‘just poems.’ The teachers offered me models that I didn’t have before, how interdisciplinary they are and engaged in their hearts. They don’t hide that behind a mission statement. I also have role models and colleagues in other alumni. That’s why it’s really important to me that you are doing this dissertation work. It’s a part of a co-story. I just know that it’s very important work that’s been happening in the WSMA even if we don’t have all the words for it yet. It’s important to me that you’re doing this dissertation because Women’s Spirituality is like a spirit-driven, experimental process.
Red thread in the forest

Re-finding the red thread Lost, I pass out of the density of forest and onto the pathway with my friend who has been video-documenting this ritual. We are both looking for the red thread. I ponder the means of this ritual, to be sent inside my own mantra, “may she find herself, may she lose herself.” Becoming lost is both alarming and very, very humorous. We laugh out loud at my wild, half-naked appearance on this network of forest pathways that we are nervously running up and down upon, looking for red thread. Yet no one pays us much attention. I imagine having to run across the whole UBC campus like this. I give myself over completely to this image of a wild, running, half-naked woman in a woven red mantle, streaming red threads across the university, when we re-find the red thread wrapped to the tree. Relieved, we follow it back into the forest. The forest has played with us, keeping us for today...

I am Little Red Riding Hood gone mad,
I am Eve escaping from the Garden,
I am Tsonoqua, wild woman of the woods, looking for lost children,
I am the midwife, sage femme, partera, my hands covered with birth blood,
I am Mirabai the female sage, intoxicated with love for Krishna,
I am Ariadne dancing the labyrinth,
I am the wise woman of the forest, the yogini-witch living at the edges of all.
Practice with MamaCoAtl: Limpias

As I walk to MamaCoAtl’s house in the Mission district of San Francisco, I stop and look at the abundance of mural art en route to her street. Not only walls of buildings, but metal boxes on street corners are painted with evocative images. A woman with a long black braid paints the word “Paz” in one image; Malcolm X and a feathered-being of Aztec cosmology share the sides of another box; a long wall painting includes images of youths on a bus, painting the world outside next to the declaration “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us!” This image blends into the next as the words “No one is illegal” and “We’re indigenous 2 this land” are woven into dozens of people standing in protest holding a poster painted “Si Se Puede – The struggle for worker’s rights has no borders.” This justice and colour infused art lights up the pathway to MamaCoAtl’s address. Beautiful images evoke community, social justice, and the spiritual guiding presence(s) of bright figures of Aztec cosmology in feathery strokes of colour and design. I stop to photograph some in anticipation of listening to MamaCoAtl’s stories and doing a practice together.

After time spent sharing and taping stories, sitting at MamaCoAtl’s table drinking tea in the warm sunlight of a south facing window, we move to the centre of her living room. In talking with MamaCoAtl, we decide that she will perform a limpias and energetic clearing on me. This practice exemplifies her healing work with both individual clients and large groups. This limpias is a gift, my final experience of sharing and receiving practices from and with the women in this study. All of these practices are gifts, bestowed within powers of direct relationship and experience. There is no practice without a ‘you-me,’ an ‘us,’ a ‘we.’

I attune to this moment, breathing in wisps of smoke from the smudge MamaCoAtl burns to begin the healing, a small piece of a wood from a tree in Peru. Her healing work is a mystery to me tinged with familiarity of spiritual processes I have previously experienced. I trust this offering she makes as what is needed. I am experiencing her gift, her compassion to assist. She rings two bells together into the sounds of the room as a siren blares by outside. As bells ring, she calls in and welcomes ancestral guides, our cosmic companions, and all of who we are into this present moment. She thanks them to come and be here for my beautiful sister Nané, who is here to make changes and release what is meant to be let go of for the highest good. MamaCoAtl sets the grid for healing within this space.

We have decided together that I want to clear the energetic cords I carry from institutional and social forms that drain and disempower the more vulnerable and heart-centred
aspects of my research, causing me anxiety. The dilemma I have lived for many years, in both lay midwifery practice and now in doing Women’s Spirituality in the academy, is the question of social change from within, or without of, the ‘system.’ Does the system inevitably change and distort what you seek to bring to it, or can you modify its form for the benefit of all? Living ongoing tensions of this question, I lose myself at times within strictures and structures of academic hierarchies and ego-based forms that I am functioning within, even as I seek to modify these and offer alternatives. I am both inside and outside, collapsing such binaries towards ‘true’ (beautiful-paradoxical) knowing.

MamaCoAtl speaks of how as beings we are a ‘house’ generating energy, *when our house is built of words that are not for our highest good, these things need to be cleared.* Her Eagle feathers begin to work their way across and over my body as I stand with my hands lose at my side. I open them, palms out-stretched to receive and allow the clearing she is performing over my body and my energetic field. MamaCoAtl works briskly with the feathers to clear the excess charge. As a bird’s wing cuts through static to lift off for flight, we bypass the cumbersome weight of bi-pedal locomotion. Feathers defy gravity to claim air and a view from above. My feet already feel heavy and more firmly planted upon the floor, upon the Earth, a reminder that I am indeed a body, a body experiencing itself. Within this softened state of awareness I feel how energy moves through my arms and out of my hands, a gentle pull as I drop into an awareness of other levels of being. I become a fuller human form. I ask for centre, centring my mind in a prayer-thought of opening.

MamaCoAtl puts the feathers aside and moves her hands over energy centres of my body, asking of each place if it is in the present moment, or residing in past or future. She asks out loud about the presence of cords in my body and energetic chakra system and receives her answers of where the work is to be done. Grasping again the small piece of sacred wood as her tool, she removes cords from the top of my head, making circles with the wood like a little wand. She works in circles with her hands, putting the energy of released cords into a smudge bowl at the side for transformation. Moving into my third eye area there’s worry here that is not yours—in serving it you’ve consumed it. She circles my forehead pulling out more worry threads from the middle of my head and dropping them to into the bowl.

Moving into my throat and upper chest area, MamaCoAtl holds her hands at either side of this place. Working again with her small tool, she says prophetically of my struggle, *I really want to recommend to you that you find an environment in which you can speak your truth,*
because your thyroid gland is going to suffer. When you allow yourself to be in situations in which you cannot speak, when you have to say half-truths, it’s just bad for your thyroid. Never mind the project, never mind things like that, it’s just bad for your thyroid. She has already discerned my sluggish thyroid, the weight I carry in not feeling more able to speak my own truth. It’s as if I don’t know what my truth is, hiding it from myself.

MamaCoAtl begins working with both hands around my belly, moving and twisting her hands to release and unhinge masses of energy built up in this area. Almost bound by fears to not act, or to push through and keep up as if in a ‘fight,’ my breathing was blocked at mid-waist for many months previously. From this tight knot I ask for release. Why and what and who do I carry? I want to move beyond such fear—find another way of navigation. MamaCoAtl moves up to my heart and pulls out more of the excess of what is not mine but have been carrying over time. She twists her hands and snaps her fingers, moving up and down the front areas of my body in healing attunement of these energetic centres.

MamaCoAtl moves into a questioning invocation, asking of her guides and higher powers if we can release any patterns within my lifestyle or thinking, imprint or legacy that renders me subordinate to the school of thought, that renders me impotent to the school of thought. She speaks of how I, Nané, want to create this new thought, this new work, this new flow of knowledge, but then you find yourself bound by the structures. So is it possible to disconnect from these structures that are old, that are outdated? Is it possible for you to do that, would you like to do that? And then can we put into this pot, this thing that we are going to disconnect you from, all these structures. Structures of what? The structures of the status quo, the structure of education in the Imperial sense of that word, the structure in which knowledge becomes a tool for legitimizing violence and injustice—yes, can we disconnect you from that?

MamaCoAtl’s hands form a long, slow arc away from my body as she pulls out the vestiges of these cords, disconnecting them from my being. She is disconnecting cords binding me with over-stress and fear of admonishment from the patriarchal academy, my previous months-long fears while preparing research, doing coursework, writing comprehensive exams, undergoing ethical review, wanting to create holistic and integral kinds of research. As I navigate contrasting waters of the University of British Columbia with its privilege and collegial opportunities I want to become a part of, while simultaneously recouping my New College days in Women’s Spirituality, I see so clearly how this was such an alternative learning environment. MamaCoAtl is helping me to cut any ties I might have to ways of scholarship I fear will kill
rather then promote life, to be able to work from the Earth her-self. After disconnecting these
cords, she draws her hands slowly back towards my being, as if holding an orb. She calls back
my own pure vital energy. She calls back *my spirit, my magnificence, my innocence, my life
force to inhabit my being once again*, running her upwards over my head, and down the back of
my body. She holds a hand over my belly and names *my essence and my spirit, keeping
everything else out, especially the outdated structures*.

Working further with her hands in wide sweeps over my form, MamaCoAtl speaks of
clearing the cellular memory of my being, clearing *the magnetic entity that you are, clearing
from your mineral self, from the tree of life that you are, from your organs, from your hair, from
your skin, from your carbon, from your electricity, from your glands, from your stomach, your
chakras, from every aspect of your creativity, your birthing ability, from the trunk of this tree,
the roots of this tree*. I feel the pull and sweep of all these movements of energy that surround
and now free me. I raise my hands up in a welcoming gesture as MamaCoAtl works. I bend and
stretch my knees, breathing in and out with releases of air. Mama aligns my physical, emotional,
mental, causal and spiritual energetic bodies as her hands smooth through and define these
layers of my being.

She says *it’s time to collapse this reality, this structure—this slimy thing*. Grasping it in
front of me between her hands, she crushes it down. Turning it over and over into a smaller and
smaller ball she places it into her smudge bowl for full release. I find myself rocking from side
to side, humming a song under my breath, feeling a lightness of being I can sing to. MamaCoAtl
lights the small wooden smudge wand again, brushing this along and over me once more. Her
vision for me within this shortened healing is that I must later lie down on the Earth for further
release. When I am lying there I must let go of layers of shame and despair *all of these emotions
you just let them go*. She walks around me with prayerful words, asking if I am ready to sink
into this place of love, grace and compassion in every place, in every event, in every
circumstance with every player involved, especially forgiving yourself.

MamaCoAtl places a hand over each of my energetic centres. On my throat she calls
again for me to *speak my truth, asking for what I want and expressing my true creativity in
complete alignment with my freedom*. Over my heart she asks that I *fully forgive every
circumstance, every player, and especially myself*. I repeat with her a prayer that asks for
forgiveness from all lines of my being, down through time into my ancestral lineage. *Dear
father-mother-daughter-son, all is one, divine creator, if I, my family, my relatives, my ancestors

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have ever offended you, in any way shape or form, words, actions, reactions, emotions, we ask that all these energies we are still experiencing in all this pain, all this shame, all these toxic energies be transmuted and turned into pristine energy, energy that is charged with vitality. You are the magnifier for the new life and all the places, and all the relations, and all the possibilities that will make this reality happen.

MamaCoAtl asks that I feel this information and wisdom running down my legs, out of the soles of my feet, connecting me to my roots, *feeling my roots travel into the depths of the Earth, under all those structures, all those roots, everything that’s buried under the world of the dead, under the magma, under the waters, until you reach the heart of the Earth, there you find the heart of Pachamama, feel her heart for a moment and allow yourself to feel the warmth and her heartbeat. She is anchoring you right at this moment, anchoring you, and returning this blessing, this wisdom up through your roots along with this blessing, along with a promise to keep your anchor there.*

We pull the blessing and wisdom of Pachamama into my being from the centre of the Earth. We draw it up through my being and into the cosmos. Then MamaCoAtl showers me with the image of becoming an atmosphere of *pure clean air, pure clean sap and dew.*

*Everything around you is clear and this is the correct alignment with Pachamama right now in this moment.*

Everything around you is clear and this is the correct alignment with Pachamama, right now in this moment,

*right now at this moment.*
Red thread in the forest

Back at the mirror We arrive back at the mirror. Lost and re-found, I view my reflection. I lift the mirror in circles around my head, thanking the forest, its beings, trees, ancestors and spirits for their presence and teaching. I thank the Earth Mother of this place and the red thread itself. I thank them all for playing with us, for leading us back to where we started so that I might finish this task. I follow the red thread out of the forest. Wearing my street clothes again, I hold the woven red mantle over my arm. I carry it like a shorn skin, untangling my way out of the forest, pulling at red threads of the mantle caught here and there on branches and twigs. I move towards the pathway I came in upon. Walking on this path, I wind the red thread back onto the ball to signal that I am done with weaving this dream, for now.

After-words

As I finishing writing, I blow out the centre candle. She is White Buddha Dakini of the Dakini mandala of candles sitting atop the low filing cabinet next to my computer desk. Her candle flame disappears into a wisp of smoke. My altars remain, icons and pictures of goddesses, statuettes and home-made dolls, treasures of nature as rocks and shells, birch tree bark, Motherpeace tarot cards, spools of red thread in cotton and silk, yarn finger weavings made by my daughters, cedar smudge sticks, pictures of my daughters at various ages, and a few small bottles of water from different places meaningful to me, including San Francisco and Vancouver, BC.

New additions to my altars include a post-dissertation-examination gift of a travelling brass altar box of the Tibetan goddess Tara holding a miniature scroll of her mantra, *Om Tara Tuttare Ture Söha*. A bouquet of celebration flowers now sits in front of the image of my grandma. It is a new time of being afterwards—after all the words, after living and weaving red threads of this dissertation. I might reflect upon this as birth-work, or as a journey process, ongoing. I am aware of the resistance and struggle I experience-d in academy, life and text. Curriculum scholar David Smith calls this the “agon” (1994, p. i), the struggle “over something of great importance, such as the condition of one’s soul” (p. i). I play the “wounded healer” where “the wound reveals the cure” (*Hygieia-Asclepius*) across spheres of personal and collective suffering. I unravel knots, retying threads towards love through a lived sense of interconnection with others in this text. The stories and practices with my co-participants become rich resting, learning and healing places, inspiriting for me as the researcher, provoking the reader of these worlds and words towards your own unraveling and retying. Being-with the women in this study, I/we contribute to rejuvenating processes of research, inspiriting the academy and its call of study. To *inspirit* is to put life to, to encourage, and to animate.

Within the deep gifts of sharing I experienced in this research, this inquiry is my love-song to the Women’s Spirituality community. It is a love-song amongst the too many death-knells heard across past and current human centuries. It is my way to document, discern and celebrate the deep study and strength of women who are meeting the social and spiritual challenges of the break-down, break-through century we live in. The year 2012 fast approaches with its prophesies for collective action and renewal. As education, we contribute to individual and collective healing and rejuvenation processes being called for from within women’s leadership, forwarding new/old
forms of co-leadership, co-council and wisdom ways in caring for each other as human beings and
the ways in which we live upon the Earth. What has been “left out” is called forth as the
philosopher-midwife picks up her artful medicine bag of skillful relations—her birthing wisdom,
hers gift economy, her creative imagination, her fierce mother-love of life.

I wonder now at these overflowing pages, being and singing out from within. They are a
veritable artistic storyboard of values, curiosities, relationships, beliefs, inquiries, travels, and
something more, something emerging I can’t put my finger on but have to trust in its coming into
form, how this unfolds in my life and in the lives of others, how we attend to and inspirit this
unfolding. I cannot do this work alone, *I am not alone in this work.*


Red Hen Press.


University Press.


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Appendix A

New College of California
Women’s Spirituality MA Program
Program Brochure excerpt, 2000

Drawing on the grass-roots Women’s Spirituality and Ecofeminist movements, this innovative course of study reclaims women’s history and pre-history, spiritual experience and creative expression. The visual and symbolic languages of art and mythology are integrated with oral traditions and written language, honouring a multiplicity of expressions. Our feminist learning community, located in the heart of San Francisco, offers strong mutual support and mentoring, encouraging the development of new theory through an integration of scholarly re-search, spirituality, activism and the arts.

The philosophy of feminist education enables each woman to contribute her scholarly achievements in a non-hierarchical structure. It allows for a re-examination of knowledge and information and the restoration of women and all other sentient beings to their rightful positions in history, the correction of omissions, exploration of new forms, creation of new visions and revisions. In keeping with New College’s mission of social activism, feminist education attempts to balance theory and practice. We emphasize the advising relationship between each student and a member of the faculty and encourage students to be active participants in their course of study.

New College and Alternate Education

The tradition of alternative schools in this country has been rich with innovative and inspiring ideas and techniques for visionary education. In the fall of 1971, New College of California was established as part of this tradition. The name “New College” dates back to New College of Oxford, England, founded in 1479. The purpose of this first “new college” was to turn away from the institutionalized education of the day, and toward an older concept of an independent community of scholars. New College now has over a thousand students and a six-million dollar budget. Offering undergraduate degrees in the humanities, a Weekend College, graduate degree programs in psychology and poetics, a Bilingual Teacher credential program, and a public-interest Law school, New College seeks to demystify and energize the process of learning, and empower students in their lives, integrating education with community service.

(Text excerpt from New College of California (NCoC) WSMA program information brochure. Printed brochure produced by WSMA NCoC program offices, 777 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA, circa 1999/2000)
Appendix B

Media Announcement For Immediate Release:

WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY WEEKEND MA PROGRAM TO START AT INSTITUTE OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY IN PALO ALTO

Program explores the Sacred Feminine and the values of justice and equality associated with Her

February 15, 2008 -- The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California is pleased to announce the creation of a new Women’s Spirituality MA Program, one of only two such programs in the country. The weekend program beginning in September 2008 (subject to WASC approval) provides a woman-centered innovative education for personal transformation and social activism based in the values of the Sacred Feminine.

The curriculum is taught by supportive, diverse, leading practitioners in the fields of women's spirituality and spiritual activism, as well as leading authors, scholars, artists and ritualists. The curriculum explores women’s roles in pre-history and history, women’s spiritual and religious leadership, women’s psychology, women's work in healing and social activism, and women’s ritual, literary, social and artistic contributions. The classes, which are small graduate seminars in a cohort model, meet one or two weekends a month and the program can be completed in two calendar years of full-time study. The Sacred Feminine and the values of justice and equality associated with Her are explored in multi-spiritual traditions including those of Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas, the Ancient Near East/Middle East and Australia.

The program promotes intellectual and creative expression; explores and integrates global and historic intellectual, social, artistic, psychological and spiritual aspects of womanhood, and prepares graduates to transform society through transforming themselves. Classes include Ancient & Contemporary Female Shamanism; Women, Religion and Social Change; Spiritual Autobiography; Metaformic Theory; Feminist Perspectives on Transpersonal Psychology; Organic Inquiry/Feminist Research; Ancestral Journey: African Spiritual Culture in the West African Diaspora; Embodied Spirituality; Women’s Sacred Texts; South Indian Ritual and Arts; Art As A Sacred Practice; Uncommon Kinship: Cultivating Community Across Diverse Lines; Women’s Psychology and Rituals, and Lifecycle Rituals.

Although the curriculum is new to ITP, the closely-knit faculty co-directing the program, Dianne Jenett, Judy Grahn and Deborah Grenn, have been teaching Women's Spirituality together for ten years. Judy Grahn, Ph.D. is internationally known as a "the common woman's poet," woman-centered cultural theorist, co-founder of lesbian-feminism, and early contributor to the literature of women’s spirituality. She is editor of Metaformia: A Journal of Menstruation and Culture (www.metaformia.org); some of her most recent works may also be found at www.judygrahn.org. Dianne Jenett, Ph.D., has done her research on women-centered rituals in Kerala, India, qualitative research methods and women’s psycho-spiritual development, and has been published in the U.S. and India. She is co-founder, along with Dr. Grahn, of Serpentina, Women-Centered Research For Everybody (www.serpentina.com), which sponsors women’s cutting edge research. Deborah Grenn, Ph.D., author of Lilith’s Fire, is founder-
director of The Lilith Institute (www.lilithinstitute.com), and founding priestess of Mishkan Shekhinah, a sanctuary honoring the Sacred Feminine. Dr. Grenn’s dissertation was on South African Lemba and North American Jewish women’s religious identities and ritual practices. She recently published *Talking To Goddess* (2007), a collection of blessings and invocations by 28 women.

(Media Announcement produced by the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology WSMA program office—distributed online and to WSMA alumni email mailing lists in Feb, 2008)
Appendix C
Women’s Spirituality Master’s Open House
Institute of Transpersonal Psychology’s Campus in the Admissions Office
Saturday, July 16, 2011
11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

The Master’s in Women’s Spirituality is a graduate-level program for women who find themselves at a pivotal "crossroads" where they feel life should have more purpose and meaning.

The Program

Woman-Centered: The program explores and celebrates women’s history, feminist perspectives, spiritual practices, and women’s contributions to society, past and present.

Program Curriculum: Innovative curriculum integrates scholarly research, spirituality, embodiment, activism, ritual and the arts.

Acclaimed Faculty: Internationally-known leaders in the field of women's spiritual leadership work closely with students to prepare them for scholarly research and community leadership.

Cohort Learning: A collaborative educational model wherein a small number of graduate students share the same core classes throughout the program and build a supportive learning community.

Social Activism: A community practicum allows students to contribute to the community by bringing aspects of the Feminine Principle into a variety of organizations. We will help you articulate your life work and design a plan of action to begin applying your work in the world.

Low Residency: Designed for busy women, the program entails one or two weekends per month (usually only one for students at a distance) for two years, with no summer classes.

The Open House

Meet with Co-Director Judy Grahn, internationally-known poet, woman-centered cultural theorist, and author of Blood, Bread, and Roses <http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/wstudies/grahn/>

Get all of your application questions answered by Admissions Counselor and graduate of the Women’s Spirituality MA Program, No RSVP necessary, and feel free to bring a friend! Please get directions from our website, www.itp.edu <http://www.itp.edu>

(Event Announcement produced by the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology WSMA program office—distributed online and to WSMA alumni email mailing lists in July, 2011)