

## Introduction





### **Autobiographical Statement**

This project grows out of a personal journey to find my life's work through sinuous, labyrinthine rhythms of solitude or seclusion alternating with emergence and connection/community. The images that rise out of women's work, particularly needlework (weaving, tapestry, quilting) describe and help me make sense of the pieces of my life. I also find meaning-making and intelligence in circles, spirals, the mandala and the labyrinth.

I see my life as mandala (circular pattern), as labyrinth (a winding path on which the movement is always toward center though the center is not always apparent), and as metaform<sup>1</sup> (the menstrual pattern of separation and reconnection)—going in to center, skirting the edges, always contained in a sacred circle. When I fall out of the sacred circle, forgetting that's where I am, I fall into a kind of chaos, into disassociation from my true nature. My life and work is to remember my own place in the circle and to help create and facilitate other women's awakening to their own beauty and power and their joining in what I call the community of Women Making New the World.

I come to the study and practice of what we call women's spirituality as a white, European (Irish)-American woman, educated beyond most of the working people in my family of origin. Though this large Catholic family (like most of our modern day nuclear families) had its dysfunctions, the many daily and not-so-daily rituals and celebrations held us together like glue. Making sandwiches, making play-houses in the woods, pressing flowers; eating as a sacred act (though not named that); as well as gatherings for holidays were as vital and sustaining as the daily

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<sup>1</sup> Term used by Judy Grahn in her *Origin Story*, the theory which says that menstruation and menstrual rites created the world. See *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

#### *4 - Making Sacred Space: the Art of Women's Spirituality*

Mass and the religious beliefs and services.

My life has spiraled out from this clan through a religious life in a convent of women in the 1960s and out again into the "world" where the web of my sexuality, politics, feminism, and creativity has continued to spin itself. This path has wound through feminist and lesbian feminist community, where I have been attracted to and am helping in the reviving of *women's culture*. Bringing a feminist critical analysis to every aspect of life has been my journey over the past twenty-five years or so. I am dedicated to the empowerment of women and to the transformation of our culture wherein beauty and connection, passionate engagement and collaborative sharing of power and wisdom are re-placed into our world.

This is a story of women's empowerment and liberation, of coming to a spirituality which is women-centered. As I have pursued that which speaks most strongly to me, I found my way into feminism which helped me honor and develop my own intuitive skills, learning to trust that deep knowing. Several years ago I left what looked like a secure career and entered more deeply into a commitment to a life of inquiry. The creative process and the world views of astrology and feminist spirituality became central organizing themes of my life. I exchanged material security for the freedom to fully investigate what my work is and how this artist self is meant to be in the world. It has been a journey of toil, pain, exhilaration and cleansing.

I have spent years in search, study, reflection, examination, dissection and practice—practice in the sense of regular discipline as well as trying things out, preparation and doing. This practice and study has been in the creative and healing arts, divination techniques (astrology, tarot, dreams, pendulum), Buddhist meditation and other meditative and body-centered expressions. It

has taken me through a long course of psychotherapy and a process of healing from emotional scars, from spiritual starvation and from the cultural wounds of being a woman in our world. I have joined and left many kinds of groups, created groups of my own, taught classes, and read and studied feminism, women's spirituality, astrology, dance and writing. I have used ritual and taught others to use ritual throughout these explorations.

Working and playing in solitude and in groups, I have learned to love and be in this body and to be part of this earth. I have grown able to hear and speak in the voice that is not only mine but is that of all women, who I call the ansisters,<sup>2</sup> whose roots go back through my family of blood to a time before recorded history.

My work has developed into a healing practice that includes bodywork therapy, astrological counseling, rituals of celebration, consultation and women's spirituality. It is a priesthood<sup>3</sup> of women's spirituality, a name and identity that is still unfolding for me. This priesthood of women *making new the world* is about making or creating sacred space and making space sacred. Sacred, which to me means safe and sane and connected, also includes risk-taking, wildness and stepping far out. I take my place with those building community across differences to heal the splits. For me the personal *is* political. The work I do in developing compassion and connection in my daily relationships contributes to re-making the world *sacred space*. We re-member a world in which all truths are honored; where we learn to live and work with difference and

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<sup>2</sup> *Ansisters* is my term for ancestors. I may not have originated this word but it came through me and I use it playfully to emphasize our female history, to remember that women from the dawn of humans have been in central, primary, roles in the creation of human culture.

<sup>3</sup> I deliberately choose to claim the word "priest" rather than use "priestess" because, for me, adding the "ess" to words to denote female is still a way of making less in our language.

*6 - Making Sacred Space: the Art of Women's Spirituality*

disagreement; we share resources and know there is enough; and we live and love, create and celebrate from our fullness as women.

In being/doing this work of making new the world, we reinvent, welcome ourselves and all women in all aspects of ourselves back into that sacred circle, into center stage. We learn that *all* the roles—not just those traditionally assigned to or defaulted to women—are open to us. We begin to include *all* beings in our definition of community, we examine centuries of hierarchy and separation, dualism, sexism, racism, classism, and many other isms, and we attempt to honor and celebrate our differences as sources of creativity.

I have found a daily ritual of drawing a mandala to be sustenance as well as an avenue into the world and back in to center. This circle drawing which issues from the meditative state is a kind of visual scripture (after the tradition of Tibetan mandalas) of my beliefs; it is healing and reconnects me to community, to my place in the great web of life.

When community is circle or mandala, we are in equal view of each other and though we take different roles, there is possibility for power-with rather than power-over. We can make room for our efforts toward restoring balance. In our practice we are breaking bounds that have developed over millennia, reclaiming a past, inventing a future, healing splits and making efforts to move out of hierarchic, dualistic language and thinking. In a circle we may look to each other for direction and in-formation, education, enlightenment and endarkenment, inspiration. It is here that the daily mandala becomes the circle of community and communion.

## The Thesis

I am interested in the daily practices—the arts—that other women use to re-place themselves in the web of life or the universe or that which is, to connect to she who creates, she who invents and weaves and destroys when necessary. This project is a limited, but hopefully significant and useful view of how some contemporary women are practicing women's spirituality. Others may perhaps see this work as resource in finding ways to bring this work/practice into their own lives.

For me, women's spirituality is feminist consciousness<sup>4</sup> and it has to do with liberation. It is not another religion, is not about creating another institution with externally imposed or locked in beliefs. It is about bringing a critical eye, a questioning voice to all our beliefs, and bringing back the values, insights, and wisdom that have been split off and called less, into the paradigm that holds and creates our world, i.e., our world view. Like other liberation movements, feminist consciousness or women's spirituality is about freedom and empowerment and about restoring balance in a world gone askew in so many ways.

When I say a world safe for all women is a world safe for all beings, I mean the effort we bring must include the liberation of all women, all classes, all races and all beings. It is about ending the *system* of domination and hierarchy in all areas. Women are not free if they only take a place among the dominators and do not see the disempowerment of other beings as their own disempowerment. If all women are truly free and safe and living in sacred space, then so too are all beings. Our spirituality and our politics must take into account all the circles, the great web

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<sup>4</sup> I first was given this in a conversation with Ani Mander. Not all feminists would agree with this definition of feminist consciousness as women's spirituality. However, it is my practice of

8 - *Making Sacred Space: the Art of Women's Spirituality*

of being. I am not separate from the rest of the world. When I take time to pay attention or to make something beautiful or to heal my relationships, there is a shift in the whole planet. This is not unlike the Butterfly Effect, named in 1963 by Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist at MIT, that notes how a small change, like the flutter of a butterfly's wings, in one part of the world can accumulate into a large change, such as a hurricane, in another part of the world.

The liberation is not just about training the mind or doing good for our sisters and all beings or loving the earth or honoring the body and the sensual, although it is all of that. It is about resting in a matrix that holds us as women, that is sustaining not just for women but for the world, for all beings.

I have asked what it is that keeps one in this matrix. Why a daily practice? What is unique about women's daily practice? What are the communal spaces and who is family? As this translates into sustainable livelihood, what is the spiritual framework and practice that brings a new or reclaimed paradigm that includes the welfare of all into being? Finally, how do these circles of individual, community and wise livelihood contribute to, inform and feed each other?

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feminism and spirituality, the sense of liberation and freedom and participating in the world view informed by women's inclusion.

*Helen Horigan WSE, MA*

## Structure

The thesis is divided into three sections.

### Section I: Setting the Context

*Chapter One. Labyrinth and Mandala: Sacred Path, Sacred Circle.* Calling the women we create the container—labyrinth, mandala and metaform—and set the context for this journey the feminist consciousness of women's spirituality. We talk about making sacred space—practice, why women do it, how it is rooted and grounded in deep history and in the organized feminist movement from its beginnings in the 18th and 19th centuries, through the resurgence of feminism in 1970s and into the present day 1990s. Women have been practicing making sacred space for millenia. There have been women in leadership roles from paleolithic (ice age) times and throughout history until the present. We look at what brings us to practice in the three interweaving circles we have outlined and why the field of Women's Spirituality is needed now, still.

### Section II: Food and Creativity

This section looks at the contributions that women are bringing back, restoring, honoring and celebrating. We name these qualities that are part of women's lives—though not unique to women they are what women have caretaken—as ways that we nourish and create sacred space. I discuss how I have experienced *sacred food* and creativity in my life and how I see these areas as major contributions brought by women into the realm of spirituality and named as practice.

*Chapter Two. Peach Pie, Women in the Kitchen.* Food and feeding, women in the kitchen research, and the space that is created with and through food and meals, is essential to

the world-view we are describing. Sacred food, our practices that inspire, nourish and feed the whole being, are the *daily bread* that maintain our place in the circle.

*Chapter Three. Art and Creativity, Playing and Praying.* Likewise, art and creativity, named as sacred, are not peripheral, not some pretty package or a diversion, but express and feed the deep places in us, the sacred. Feminist artists are responsible for the vision, the shape, the language of this re-born and re-created cultural mythology. Playing and praying—taking time to create, to play—we contribute to and participate with the creation and re-creation of our world as sacred space.

### Section III: Sacred Space-Making in Three Interweaving Circles of Practice

This section focuses on (adjusts the lens, achieves clarity about) each of the three interweaving circles of practice that I have named as a lens through which to experience the art of women's spirituality. It circles in closely on the interview material, the nourishing, centering, healing practices of these particular women.

*Chapter Four. A Circle Within a Circle: Individual Practice.* Starting with my own daily practice of mandala-drawing (one source of inspiration for this thesis) I discuss the individual practices, sometimes solitary, that sustain us as women.

*Chapter Five. Sustaining Community: Who is Our Blood Family?* The second circle of community, family, our circles of support—looks at how we are sustained in these ways and includes how we name, who we name as our community or family.

*Chapter Six. Women Making New the World: The Transformational Work.* The third circle of practice is our work, our wise livelihood (though it may not yet be how we make

money). It is the way we go out to do this work of participating in the world healing itself. How are women bringing the principles of feminism and creative/spiritual practice into our work lives?

Thus, the sacred circle, the labyrinthine path, winds and weaves and unfolds in the lives of women from the daily ritual to community to work and back again, and we move toward a world that is truly *sacred space*.

### **Methodological Statement**

The research of women's spirituality looks with a feminist perspective into the deep past, through archeological evidence and interpretation, looks at non-Western, indigenous cultures through anthropological interpretation, and uses poetry, fiction and other creative arts, theory and re-membering. We learn that women have been central to creation of culture and that female images have from earliest memory been symbols of divinity and focus of world views. Remnants of this memory seep into our present beliefs and practices, distorted, not central, but there. We look deep within in meditation, prayer and divination, imagining and envisioning what is possible. We bring ourselves to our research. We bring who we are and what we want and where we have come from.

What I know comes from direct experience. While reading or otherwise interacting, while seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, I note how it sits in the body. I consider the experience of others, including so-called expert information, and evaluate it against my own experience to see if it fits. Does it test out to be true? It sounds good, how does it feel? I might talk with those I trust, with whom I have some common beliefs and whose experience resonates with mine. Again, I ask how does it feel? Do I agree with you? How I know if I agree or disagree really comes down to bodily sensation, physical/psychic vibration. I know this to be

## 12 - *Making Sacred Space: the Art of Women's Spirituality*

true because I have experienced it. I know this to be true because it sits in my body/mind/being well; I have an *aha* experience. It is physical, emotional, and sometimes but not always logical.

Ultimately, it is mystical, direct experience. Inner authority. I was not raised with this; my training was to look to outer authority. Sometimes, I still take things on faith but only until I can check them out with my own experience. I trust your experience but do not take it as mine unless I can feel it, taste it, touch it, smell it, know it experientially. I like the invitation of the visionary activist astrologer Caroline Casey who enjoins us to "believe nothing, entertain possibilities," and the wise counsel of the Buddha who advises the seeker not to believe his teaching but rather to check it out for oneself.

In this work, the primary sources are contemporary women, including myself, who are committed, each in her own way, to the continuing creation of a world that is safe for women and therefore for all beings. I have interviewed a diverse group of women from my own extended communities in Northern California and New England. Our diversity includes but is not limited to differences in age, race and/or ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. These are women who have practices that tap and nourish the creative self in the ways women honor the artist—through visual art, dance, music, theatre and writing, as well as gardening, cooking, being with the rest of nature, and many other ways of creating sacred space; and they are women who are involved in transformational work that is bringing about social change.

Secondary sources are the literature of feminist scholarship, encompassing art and mysticism, literature (poetry, prose, film, journals), anthropology and archeology, health and healing, philosophy, psychology, astrology, mythology and feminist theory. I have used some limited material by men and bring to it the critical eye of feminist analysis.

Field Research (primary sources) has three components: my own personal experience, formal conversational interviews, and what I have termed Women in the Kitchen research.

A. Personal Experience. I begin with my own daily individual practice of mandala drawing, writing and meditation; the ways I have been held and nourished in community, including rituals and celebrations for the full moon, the seasons (solstices, equinoxes and the midpoints of these seasons—the roots and bases of most religious and secular holidays) and many other groups; and the ways I have helped create *sacred space* for women in my work as ritualist, healer and counselor. I will discuss how these three components of practice—individual, community and work—have created and sustained each other and me; the sources and resources that brought me to the mandala as daily practice and the mandala/labyrinth as a model, metaphor, for my life.

The actual creation and presentation of the thesis is meant to be ritual and mandala, labyrinthine in form. Throughout the writing I have begun and created in sacred space, using many different forms to help me stay present with the work and to allow it to be written: invoking helpers, placing myself in the present moment. For example, re-memembering the elements of fire, air, earth and water; invoking their energies; placing myself in space and time by naming the directions (north, south, east, west, center, above, below) and what they conjure up; naming all the parts that make up the whole of who I am and who this work is. I often invoke the women of the circle, the beings of past, present and future, the ansisters. I light candles and incense; check in with the network of sisters supporting this work; consult oracles. Eating well, walking, swimming, taking photographs of the incredible beauty around me. And of course, the daily mandala and meditation.

B. Interviews. I interviewed 19 women (16 interviews, one of which is with group of four). These women are, in accord with my definition of feminist, women who speak and act as

persons with authority in their own right; who believe in the "full humanity of women,"<sup>5</sup> and who are working to end the subordination of all women. They are women whose spirituality (sense that there is more than what meets the eye and what meets the eye is part of a larger picture, that there is a connection between and among, that there are many dimensions) and creative/artistic work and/or process (work that is fired by something unique and inside, some sense of imagination, skill, has to do with fire, inner awareness, intuition, self-direction and motivation, source) inform their life-work (the principal work of their lifetime, that which they feel fulfills what they are on the planet for, even if they have not fully clarified what that is and the various forms it might take). The work they do has a transformational quality to it, i.e., it is about helping women to inhabit the world in a fuller, more complete and healthy way, and it is (to a greater or lesser degree articulated) about ending domination in all its forms. By transformational work in this context I am referring to work that is geared toward restoring the balance, toward ending artificial divisions that have been constructed such as those between male/female, light/dark, mind/body, and earth/spirit. For most of these women, their life is their art, their work is their art, their work is their spirituality, their spirituality is their nurturance, their food is their life.

These are conversational, participatory interviews with the purpose of discovering together how women's spirituality—feminism, creativity and spirituality— informs our inner life, our community of support, and our work in the world. How are we fed by, and what is the interweaving of, individual spiritual/creative practice, the circles of community support, and the work of transforming the world? The interviews were audiotaped and lasted between one and two hours. Most were conducted either in the homes of the interviewees, in my home or on the

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<sup>5</sup> This is from Virginia Woolf's definition of feminist.

telephone. One took place in the interviewee's car and two were in the workplaces of the women. One woman chose to be anonymous.

Demographic information either came up in the interviews or was known to me before hand. I did not ask the women about any of this information. Age: most of the women are (at the time of the interviews) between the ages of 40 and 66. One woman is in her twenties and one in her thirties. Sexual identity: eleven of the women identify as lesbian, two as bisexual, four as heterosexual, and two have not identified their sexuality to me. Race/ethnicity: the women are of several extractions: five have Latina heritage (Guatemalan, Puerto Rican American, and Mexican American) and two Jewish American (Russian), one Arabic (Lebanese American), one African American, one Hawaiian Chinese Anglo heritage, and Irish-, Greek-, English-, Scotch- and other unspecified European-American. All of the women are highly educated. All but one hold either Ph.D. or M.A. degrees or are candidates for one or the other. The one woman who has no academic degree is a self-educated, very articulate professional woman. The class background of the women was not directly discussed, but although all are now by education and experience and lifestyle probably middle to upper-middle class, they come from a range of backgrounds from working class to middle and upper-middle class.

The texts of the interviews are in the Appendix along with brief biographical statements taken from information in the interviews.

C. Women in the Kitchen Research. In gestating this work, I uncovered and claimed a part of my methodology that I have named Women in the Kitchen.<sup>6</sup> It is unplanned research that takes place in informal, spontaneous, intent conversation that may include humor, cynicism, and freely

expressed emotion, and often includes wonderful food and leads to clarification, awareness, new knowledge.

In frustration with what I thought was a process which was not linear enough, I went downstairs to the women in the kitchen, ostensibly for a cup of tea, a piece of pie and a letting out of steam to say "I don't get it." Through a long, non-linear chat I came to understand that trying to force my thinking into a linear pattern was the problem. This "interview" was not planned, was not undertaken as research in advance. But it is one important way women arrive at knowledge; it is feminist research. We meet over peach pie or breakfast or on the telephone and we bring light to our questions. This is a piece of the research of feminist spirituality and it is a way we make sacred space. I have included notes from this conversation in the Appendix.

There are several typefaces used in the text and I will do my best to explain them, though there will be some quirkiness to their use. *Italics* are used for the rituals and to indicate some meditative or poetic language of my own. They are also used for words of languages other than English and for other emphasis.

I have woven or quilted pieces of the interviews through and in and between the fabric of the thesis. Unless it is a brief sentence in the flow of the text, and therefore in quotations and the same font, these selections are in "this distinct typeface" and the speakers are identified by initials. The code for these initials is also found in the Appendix.

I have kept as much as possible the original language of the interviewed women. However, in selecting bits and pieces, I found that the way we speak with bodily gesture and

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<sup>6</sup> Kitchen Table research has become part of the language and methodology of feminist scholarship. I am not sure where and when the term originated.

insinuation of tone does not always translate to the written page. So, though I tried using ellipses and brackets to indicate what was omitted, this read quite awkwardly and I left those out. I trust that the voices of the women are still true. The reader can refer to the full text of the interviews for the original language.

Mandalas appear throughout, as inherent part of the text. They were chosen as they are created, in ritual space, selected from the six-year collection, either reflecting a theme in the writing or emerging in relationship to the writing in the daily practice. Some have text written out of them; some stand alone. They are meant as practice. They are a language themselves, created each day, speaking themselves. They are not meant to be analyzed or explicated. I have also interspersed other women's poetry or poetic writing that is in the same typeface as the interview material.

I sometimes use words like *re-search* or *in-spired* in the tradition of Mary Daly to expand and reclaim their meaning. I have decided to use lower case for *god* and *goddess* unless they are in direct quotations where I use what was printed.

As stated earlier, the whole work is ritual and mandala. The reader is summoned to enter this work as sacred space, a sacred container speaking for itself and being created with each reading as we engage together in communion, in community. The invitation is to let this be practice, honoring the moment and your true nature, bringing this breath—this spirit or in-spiration. Each chapter opens with a ritual. Read each page, each image with pause, with presence.

Let each circle be a grounding, each poem a coming home, each page an opportunity for engaging. We evoke, invoke, remember, recall all who brought us here: our mothers and grandmothers, our ansisters, all who have given us the very specific qualities that bring us here

18 - *Making Sacred Space: the Art of Women's Spirituality*

together in this collaboration. We call the fathers too, for they bring us here as well. And all those women and men who colluded and conspired in history, developing the great imbalance that makes it necessary to have this thing called women's spirituality. Let us pray that somehow in the spinning of this web, the spiraling of this labyrinth, the marking out of this mandala, we come to where it is just practice, it is just art, it is just "spirituality"—that the world we are creating and loving into being be a place that is safe for all women and yes, therefore, for all beings.

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### *The Larger Circle*

Judith Lennett

Ani Mander

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