

Bali

Searching for the Wisdom of the Deep Feminine

Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice,
him or her I shall follow,
as the water follows the moon, silently,
with fluid steps anywhere around the globe.
—Walt Whitman, “Vocalism”

As I came home and was able to grieve my mother, her presence flooded back into me, full of her loving encouragement but also the unresolved themes and questions from her life. I saw so clearly how her betrayal of her emotional intelligence, her artist’s intuition and imagination, and the values of her interior life precisely mirrored the universal loss of the feminine in our society. Returning to my mother’s house I came upon a great longing to return to my own feminine wisdom, to understand more fully my own allegiance to doing over being, head over heart and body, exterior values over interior attributes. Now I was especially fascinated to explore how my

personal journey was a reflection of the universal desire of women all over the world to take back the feminine.

Throughout the decade of the nineties I continued my empowerment work with David but I also began to work with women again, as I had done in the seventies. This time I worked with women in and from vastly different cultures. During this decade the cultures of four distinctly different countries—Bali, Russia, China, and Ireland—would teach me about the many faces of the divine feminine, helping me reclaim my own wisdom and understand my mother more fully.

In 1986, I discovered the magic of Bali during my work in Indonesia preparing for the First Earth Run. In 1991 I offered a trip for women to that isle of enchantment. I was pretty literal in my search for the feminine, and I called the trip “Bali: A Journey into the Deep Feminine.” The first paragraphs of my bright magenta brochure read like this:

On my first trip to Bali a special doorway to my deep feminine was opened. My senses became more awakened than ever before. I felt soft, open, and receptive. I lived from my heart not my head. My intuition was wild with vivid imagination. My dream state was highly animated and deep with symbolism. I was able to slow down, flow, and truly experience being. Quite simply, I was in a state of joy. On one of my later trips to Bali I had a dream in which I journeyed to Bali with a group of women. We visited temples, learned Balinese dance, swam in the sea, made rituals, and lived joyously in the realm of the deep feminine. I invite you to join me in Bali and be part of this dream come true.

The brochure went on to describe the itinerary, which would start with a journey to the mighty volcano Gunung

Agung, the navel of the world and Bali's mother mountain. We would attend a sacred ceremony at the majestic mother temple Pura Besakih, comprised of thirty separate temples in seven terraces built up the side of Gunung Agung. And at dawn on our final day we would climb into the massive outer crater of Mount Batur, Bali's father mountain.

The trip's cost, \$3,550 in 1991, was steep to say the least. I received an overwhelming response to the brochure. More than fifty women wanted to go, and some were willing to spend their life savings to reclaim their feminine wisdom. I could take only twenty. Seventeen years later I continue to get e-mails and letters from women who have the rumpled faded magenta brochure and want to know if I am still leading those deep feminine trips to Bali.

Reclaiming the feminine had struck a resounding chord in the hearts of the American, Canadian, and European women who traveled with me on the five trips to Bali over the next several years. In age we spanned the decades from twenty to seventy; we were single and with partners. One woman had nine grandchildren, and another had five daughters. There was a lesbian couple who had adopted a daughter from Vietnam, several of us who had chosen not to have children, and some who were still trying to figure out if they wanted a partner or children. We were a dynamic and diverse group including painters, opera singers, and writers along with corporate lawyers and vice presidents. There were AIDS activists, a doctor running a women's clinic in the inner city, and a woman who had started a shelter for battered women.

What became poignantly clear during these trips was that many women felt their feminine had been stolen away. Stolen away by rape, abuse, or incest. Stolen away by workaholism, lack of role models, allegiance to the idealized father, or a mother who betrayed her own essence. Stolen away by pressure to climb the corporate ladder like a man and pressure to

place logic over emotion, product over process. Nurtured by the splendor of Bali's landscape—rice paddies tripping down hillsides like giant steps, volcanoes soaring up through clouds, dense tropical jungles, clear mountain lakes, and most of all the healing waters of the Indian Ocean—we began to take back what had been stolen away from us.

All of us knew we spent too much time in our minds, and we came back into our bodies through daily romping in the sea, walking through rice fields, and lessons in Balinese dance. Our senses were reawakened by Bali's sensuous landscape; the constant visual feast of temple festivals and rituals, the haunting sounds of gamelan orchestras, and the pervasive scent of the temples' clove incense. As the days passed we started to slow down and experience what the Balinese called *jam karet*, or rubber time, indicating an expandable present. Now we could find the quiet open emptiness inside us. In the spaciousness of *jam karet* we could honor our emotions, the deep dark waters of the feminine where our anger, betrayal, denial, sadness, and loss resided.

We sat in a circle on the soft sand under the trees, always near the comforting sound of waves, always the intoxicating scent of frangipani thick in the air. We told our stories and dedicated our time in Bali to reclaiming some aspect of our female wisdom. I told the women in the circle, "This trip is for my mother and her unlived dreams. It's to honor the feminine she both embodied and abandoned. She died nearly twenty years ago, but I have only just recently reconnected with her. She is my silent companion on this trip. I so wish she could really be here with me." The women listened quietly.

Floating on our backs in the warm salty Indian Ocean, which we had fondly dubbed the Great Mother's Womb, we talked for hours about the questions floating in our hearts. Do we want it all—partnership, family, and successful careers? Does having it all in our fast-paced Western world mean

that we risk losing our feminine, with her slower, more instinctual ancient rhythms? Many of our mothers and grandmothers had abandoned their true professional dreams to stay home and raise us, or work in jobs just to bring an income, or both. Now that we had the choice of family and careers that we really wanted, we felt that we had to take both or we might betray the progress that women had made. The more we drifted in the aqua sea, the more we realized that every choice had both joy and sorrow. Buoyed by the Great Mother I saw clearly that neither Mom nor I “had it all.” But what I had in my generation, and she didn’t have in hers, was genuine choice. Is this choice then the greatest gift of the Goddess? Thousands of our sisters, in too many parts of the globe, would remind us that this is indeed the highest blessing of all. They would implore us to take this gift of choice and use it wisely and responsibly, both as tribute to our own mothers and as a sign of hope to them.

Overlooking river gorges and palm forests, our bamboo Balinese houses were called *Cahaya de Wata*, meeting place of the gods. In the cool evenings the jubilant sounds of the village gamelan orchestras would drift across the gorge tempting us into wild dancing, spinning like dervishes across the wide porch floor. Cocooned in mosquito nets and entranced by the tropical night sounds, we slept naked and let our dreams run wild. Each morning we held a dream circle, honoring the potent realm of the unconscious, that place where the irrational ruled like a regal queen. One morning I shared a powerful dream with the women in my circle:

I come to a round black and white door designed like the yin and yang symbol. The door opens at the curved line that separates the yin and the yang. Through this door I am following my female lineage where I can see the faces of my mother and grandmothers, and women

ancestors going way back. We enter a stone chamber where there is a large yin and yang symbol on the floor. The yang half is very dominant and the yin takes a much smaller space. My grandmothers are trying to bring the pattern back into proper balance. Suddenly the dream switches to me as a young girl with Mom. Mom is handing me boxes filled with the gifts of her feminine, then she starts to dissolve. But before she disappears I can just hear her say to me, "Help us balance the pattern."

I awoke from the dream weeping. Though Mom had abandoned her authentic self later in life, we had enough years up to my early adolescence where I had fully imbibed her essence. It was inside me; all I had to do was remember it and take it back. And in this dream, in Bali where her true self would have felt so at home, my mother was inviting me to take back what she had lost. Not just for myself and for her, she was telling me to do this for so many of our sisters around the world.

The time I most ached for my mother during these trips was in the experience of Bali's exuberant artistic expression. It brought me back to the days of my childhood, sewing circus outfits abundant with fake rhinestones or painting bright wild flowers on handmade jewelry, when Mom's generous imagination poured out effortlessly, nourishing me with its richness. Unlike the Western world's constant emphasis on the rational left brain, the Balinese culture was a celebration of the instinctual right brain. We were immersed in a vital process of dance, theater, music, painting, wood carving, and mask making, not just as art forms but also as interpretations of life. We learned that creativity is so natural and widespread in Bali that there is no actual word in their language for art or artist. Rather, creativity is the natural means of honor-

ing the gods and serving the community. Many women came home from Bali to take up forgotten passions of dance, piano, singing, painting, or poetry. I vowed to return to my love of writing.

Mom would have especially loved the seamless integration of art and spirituality. Every dance, shadow puppet, or theater performance was offered to one of the hundreds of Balinese gods and goddesses. Bali is the most diverse of all the Indonesian islands with Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islamism existing relatively well together. No one seemed to care whose god was being honored at any given event. One of my favorite enactments was the Barong dance in which a fantastic creature with bulging red eyes, giant fangs, and a massive black beard festooned with frangipani represents the eternal struggle between good and evil. The Barong creature is equally fierce and gentle, sad and joyful, and as his ancient tale unfolds I experience all the same contrasts within myself. In quintessential Balinese fashion neither side can win, because without a balance between good and evil the world would fall into chaos. This marvelous reconciliation of opposites was portrayed in every aspect of the island's culture, from its art to its agricultural methods—incorporating floods and drought as equal parts of the natural cycle—to its cuisine—adding both hot and cool spices to balance the lively flavors. It was as if at every turn we were reminded of the wisdom of the feminine, her invitation to embrace paradox rather than fight it, to find the partnership between opposites rather than pit them against each other.

The Balinese women offered us important lessons. They were stunning, delicate, and strong all at the same time. With honey-colored skin and ink-black hair down to their waists, they dressed in vibrant handmade batik wrapped tightly around their sensuous bodies. Though tiny and slender they carried teeming baskets of fruit or ceremonial offerings on their heads,

walking for many miles through mountain roads and rough terrain. They breast-fed their children and raised them communal style with the whole village taking part. We learned firsthand how physically strong the women were during our dance classes. Balinese dance is subtle and complex, demanding high levels of strength and flexibility as an expression of the Balinese belief that physical balance creates inner spiritual balance.

Toward the end of our trip our Balinese sisters took us to the market place and helped us pick out brightly patterned batik in royal purple, tangerine, and peacock blue. They taught us how to wrap our sarongs and tie our sashes for the temple festival that we would attend the following day. Then our dance teacher Made showed us how to make temple offerings, skillfully demonstrating the intricate cuts and folds in a palm leaf until it formed a tiny green cradle held together with bamboo splinters.

“Now we place several grains of rice and a single flower of frangipani as offerings to the gods. And then you add your prayer.” Her dazzling smile was her offering to us. It exuded grace and strength, the balance she had been teaching us all week in our dance lessons.

Sitting on the large porch of our bamboo house with the rushing sound of the river gorge below us, we silently followed Made's instructions as if we were already immersed in prayer. Soon we each held our temple offering. I felt I held all of Bali in that tiny green cradle; the seamless balance of the daily and the sacred, and the elegant synthesis of landscape, art, and spirituality all offered with heartfelt gratitude.

Elegantly wrapped in our sarongs and offerings in hand, we set out for the temple. For miles and miles the narrow dirt roads appeared as bright-colored streamers with each women's *banyar* (a village collective) in their particular sarong of turquoise, fuchsia, orange, chartreuse, or gold. Perched above the

colors were the pyramid-shaped temple offerings, intricately built out of papayas, mangoes, avocados, eggs, and coconuts, and decorated with bundles of magenta orchids and scarlet hibiscus. Carrying the heavily laden offerings high on their heads, the tiny Balinese women glided along like a procession of vibrantly colored birds. Watching them, I longed to be able to carry my responsibilities with such grace and ease as an offering to spirit.

Arriving at the magnificent mother temple Pura Besakih, Made helped us find a place to sit on the stone floor. The only white faces in the crowd of hundreds of Balinese, the Straub *banyar* drew lots of attention and friendly smiles. This was the festival of Kuningan, and it was said that all the gods come down to earth on this day. Soon enough we understood why a god would leave heaven for this celebration. We sat mesmerized for about an hour before we would go up to the smaller temple within the temple to leave our offerings. The gamelan orchestras were heating up into a frenzy, reminding me of the untamed improvisational jazz heard in small clubs in New Orleans. Representing different characters from the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, giant puppets on stilts walked among us. Clove incense was thick in the air, mixed with smell of human sweat and goats being slaughtered for temple offerings. Priests were praying in the complex Indonesian language, babies were crying, and all around people were talking and laughing. If it wasn't already abundantly clear that art, spirituality, and sensuality were intrinsically connected for the Balinese, then the temple festival proclaimed this one more time.

Later, Made helped us find our way to the inner temple, where we added our offerings dedicated to the sacred feminine to the heaping piles of those who had gone before us. We knew that after the gods have had their fill of the food's essence, the worshippers then take home the rest to their

families. In this intoxicating celebration of life, I feel certain that the Goddess had heard our prayers. If ever there was a perfect opposite to the ordered monotonous Catholic mass of my childhood, it would be the Balinese temple festival. Thoroughly enjoying this orgy of the senses, I couldn't help but wonder what Mom would be feeling.

In my mountain valley home, on the bluestone fireplace at the very center of my hearth, stands a hand-carved wooden statue of the Balinese rice goddess Sri Dewa. Her body is both soft and fierce, her strong hands full of the earth, her heart open to the world, her face an invitation into the imagination. And her voice speaks a prayer that we may all take back the wisdom of the feminine.