

Letting Nature Take Its Course

Vicki Noble

SUMMARY. Through the use of ancient healing techniques, such as oracles, astrology, shamanism and collective ritual, contemporary therapists and counselors can enhance their work with women clients, whose natural condition may predispose them to “letting nature take its course.” Tapping into unseen, energetic and magical realms can be the source of deep healing and illumination in the therapeutic process. Using nonrational knowledge techniques takes the pressure off the individual therapist to figure everything out and relieves the client of helplessness and despair. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The focus of my healing work, whether individual or group work, has always involved an attempt to find and then follow the natural process that is trying to occur. Although that’s easy to say, in our maddeningly modern civilization, with all of its high-tech approaches to intervention and “crisis resolution,” it is much harder to do. I have only now and then

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met the rare person who, when faced with a health or healing crisis, can truly relax enough to let nature take its course. Our cultural style is to cut and paste anxiously, thinking we know the way things are supposed to be, and trying desperately to get nature to align with our picture of reality. Surgery, drugs, chemicals, and active physical interventions are the tools of our techno-culture, when frequently what heals the body, mind and spirit is to surrender to something beyond what the consciousness is capable of seeing in that moment.

I tend to believe that women are innately capable of the surrender and trust necessary for allowing a natural process to occur, and therefore make good candidates. I have written in *Shakti Woman* (Noble, 1991) and elsewhere since the late 1970s (e.g., *Shaman's Drum*, Noble, 1979) that women, because of our biological rhythms, are "naturally shamanistic." After all, in the past both menstruation and birthing were activities that required turning one's process over to nature (or the body) for resolution. Unfortunately in the last fifty years, women's natural biological processes have been compromised to the point where nowadays most women, instead of experiencing the bleeding time of every month as an opportunity for rest and renewal, actually experience some degree of the pathological symptoms that belong to the medical category of PMS. Very few American women give birth at home anymore (fewer than 1%), or even do it "naturally" in a hospital setting. We seem collectively to have bought into the drug-and-surgery interventions so beloved of our medical system, and most women in labor nowadays request an "epidural," for example, which then leads more often to a C-section.

I bring these obstetrical and gynecological issues into an article about therapy and women because I believe the cultural climate that has stolen natural birthing and enjoyment of our monthly cycles from us has also made it very difficult for us to leave anything at all to nature. We have learned to crave the quick fix, which makes us agree to using a fetal monitor instead of our own good sense, and makes us more likely to choose Prozac than natural process. We have come to value efficiency so much that we seem in danger of completely forgetting the sacred. As a shamanic healer, using processes that support the emergence of the sacred, this reliance on technology in place of bodily signals and subtle signs is very disheartening to me. In order for shamanism (or natural healing) to work, one must be willing to avoid surgical and chemical interventions long enough to see where the process wants to go by itself.

There are invisible and energetic interventions that can be made, of course, through ritual, dreams, oracles, hands-on healing, and other

forms of shamanistic technique that are applied in hopes of disrupting the entrenched pathological pattern and simultaneously stimulating a rebalancing to take place on its own. It is these subtle techniques and formulas that I utilize in my work with women clients in order to help them through their crises, transitions, illnesses, and personal evolution that I would like to discuss in this paper.

ORACLES

I entered into this work in 1976, when I was abruptly awakened and my shamanistic healing crisis catalyzed. I have written about this transformative process at length in other places, so I won't go into detail here (Noble, 1983; and Noble, 1991). Suffice it to say that the unexpected and spontaneous process itself was totally absorbing, the healing energies and helping forces most welcome, and the outcome, my self-healing plus the creation of the Motherpeace tarot cards and books I have subsequently written to accompany them, was extremely positive and life-changing. Since that time I have utterly relied on oracular guidance in my own evolution, as well as in my work with clients who come to me for help.

The Motherpeace oracle has established itself as a very friendly helping force for modern feminist women in the U.S. and around the world who need guidance in their daily lives. The 78 round Motherpeace tarot images deliberately broke the mold, featuring as they do not only numerous and various women, but people of color and tribal people from around the world. Since their first publication in 1981, the Motherpeace cards have been widely used in therapeutic settings as a kind of spiritual augmentation to the more secular psychotherapy process.

HOW TO USE MOTHERPEACE WITH CLIENTS

Simply keeping a deck in your office and allowing a client to choose a card from the deck during her session can be very helpful, pushing the talking process to a more subtle level that includes intuition and sense impressions. With the Motherpeace, more than many tarot decks, the images speak entirely for themselves, and there is no need for someone "reading" a card to know *anything* from the formal tradition. More like an inkblot or dream image, the card can simply be read by talking about the picture on it and then applying that as a metaphor to the client's life.

The client can do this herself or the therapist can engage in intuitively reading the card with her.

There are more formal levels of work that can be accomplished with the Motherpeace cards in a therapeutic session as well, for example, helping the client to establish her “life cards.” This simple technique involves a numerological calculation from the birthdate, leading to one or two Major Arcana cards that belong particularly to the client for life (her “soul” and “personality” cards), as well as one card for each year of her life in addition to the ones established by her birthdate. These powerful images, created in shamanistic trance for the purpose of healing, can then be used archetypally by the therapist and client together for further reference and discovery.

When you use the Motherpeace cards daily or weekly, you also learn to hone your intuition. You begin to be able to sort out your hopes and fears, learning the difference between the feeling of anxiety that accompanies your knee-jerk fears and the felt sense of a “message” from your higher self or the universe. When you practice navigating in this way over time, you eventually learn to recognize these signals without even necessarily using the cards. But in the beginning, the cards are an invaluable friend and guide, helping you to orient yourself from psychic confidence and self-empowerment, rather than from irrational and conditioned fear.

ASTROLOGY

More and more therapists are delving into astrology these days, and many astrologers are trying to learn therapeutic techniques in order to be more helpful to the clients who come to them for help. The two approaches are often quite compatible. For example, the Myers-Briggs test utilizes four functions that relate directly to the four elements used in astrology (Briggs-Myers, 1985). In a system conceived by Jonathan Tenney, MFCC (Noble and Tenney, 1987), the *thinking* function relates to activity common to the earth signs (Capricorn, Taurus, Virgo) whose step-by-step ability to solve problems through applied thinking is noteworthy. The *feeling* function corresponds to the element of water (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces) with its heightened psychic and emotional processes. The *intuitive* function relates to the fire signs (Aries, Leo, Sagittarius), whose instantaneous nonlinear apprehensions of reality cannot be explained through reason. And the *sensing* function corresponds to the air element (Libra, Aquarius, Gemini) with its subtle abil-

ity to register impressions on the nervous system, the air signs “sensing” what is taking place without necessarily knowing the details.

I have always used astrology with my students and private clients, as I discussed in *Shakti Woman* (Noble, 1991). For me astrology provides a consistent reminder that there is a deep structure underlying the currents and streams of our physical existence, and that the events in our lives are not random or meaningless, but actually choreographed by an unseen intelligence and supported by a loving universe of helping spirits. My private work with clients always begins with an astrological session in which I use the Motherpeace images to flesh out the otherwise rather sterile symbology. (See Noble and Tenney, *The Motherpeace Tarot Playbook*, 1987, for instructions on using astrology with Motherpeace cards.)

Every astrologer uses astrology in his or her own unique way, and individual astrology readings, while utilizing the same information and basically providing the same overall picture, are actually very different because of this coloring by the personality and path of the practitioner giving the reading. My astrology readings, like all my various techniques and approaches to the client, are a form of magical or shamanistic healing, and at some point during the transmission of astrological information from the chart to the client, a special altered state of consciousness emerges in which both the client and I are held. It is this sacred merged state of consciousness that allows the healing to take place, and oftentimes I will actually note the special moment by remarking to myself something like, “Ah, *this* is why she came!”

When I am involved in the actual astrology reading, I almost always feel myself going on a sacred or magical journey with the client, entering more and more deeply into the chart and proceeding as if on a road or path toward some unknown goal. I tend to be highly intuitive, without any particular methodology, usually, but not always, starting with the basics, the Sun, Moon, and Rising, and then including the North and South Nodes (destiny and karmic compulsions). I like to focus on actual visual structures in the chart that have arranged themselves through the various aspects made by the planets in the sky at the time of the person’s birth. There might be square, triangular, or other closed shapes created by the planetary aspects (sometimes even stars or hexagons), and these strike me as important, like facets in a crystal or constellations in the person’s psyche.

In addition to the mythic and archetypal content that can be discerned in a birth chart, there is also a certain amount of psychological information that can be gleaned. Some astrologers are psychologists as well, allowing for a smooth facilitation of this material from the chart to the psychotherapeutic encounter. A very simple example of psychology at

work in this way might be the astrological understanding that the Moon in a natal chart relates not only to the unconscious and imaginative processes of the client, but also refers to and symbolizes the personal mother. Similarly the Sun, besides representing the identity and basic sense of self, refers to and symbolizes the personal father. The “aspect” or relationship between the Sun and Moon in an individual chart will often provide valuable information about the parents, their relationship, and the effects manifested within the psyche of the client. Every planet in the chart can be similarly interpreted as having psychological qualities and potentially relating to the client’s early childhood or relationships or some other specific aspect of life.

After spending time on the natal chart, I move on to a second chart where I have calculated the current “transits” from the positions of the planets in the sky at this moment and how those relate to the planets in the birth chart. This is magical and illuminating in itself for every client, since the transiting planets archetypally show the events that are taking place in the person’s life or have taken place in the past, when they started, how long they will last, and what in general the universe “has in mind” for the client. This is especially facilitated by using the Motherpeace images, since images can be so much more holistic than an intellectual discussion of the workings of the planets.

So for instance, like any astrologer would, I might talk to my client about her Pluto-Moon transit by discussing her relationship with her mother, her emotional life, the profound descent process she must be going through at this time, and so on. But when I show her an image to represent her Moon and then show her the Death card to represent the transiting activity of Pluto, her understanding through the visual apprehension is total and requires very little explanation. She *resonates* and thereby understands. The Death card shows the trees losing their leaves in the dormancy of winter, a skeleton drawn up into a fetal position, and a colorful snake shedding its old skin, all images demonstrating the finality of Death, as well as the implied rebirth and renewal that can be expected at the end of the Pluto transit.

TELLING THE FUTURE

Future events can be seen and to some extent predicted, as well, through the transiting planets, by simply providing dates of the coming transits and discussing the fundamental energies of that planet. Although I never know exactly what to expect, I can usually tell my client

the precise time period, then something about the archetypal nature of the transitting planet hitting her natal planet, and finally helping her to know more or less what to expect on certain dates that she can mark in her calendar. The transformative outer planets (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) are so potent and move so slowly, that their transits can be felt ahead of time by several years and afterwards as well. Still, I find that the date for when the transitting planet *literally* contacts the natal planet by exact degree and minute is always worthy of note. Something almost always happens and that culminating event shows, as in a magical display, what the transit is about. This is very helpful for self-awareness and can be used for months, even years, as material in a directed psychotherapeutic process. Even if a therapist knows absolutely nothing about astrology, she could still send a client to have a chart done and then work with that information in sessions.

The beauty of using astrology in psychological work is that the onus of the problem doesn't fall entirely on the individual or on her parents or upbringing, but actually expands to include the miraculous, magical, unseen and sacred forces as well. I have seen astrology lift suicidal feelings from a person, just because she can see from the transits that the situation she is in, is difficult, depressing, terrifying, or filled with despair, but not permanent. Each planetary encounter has a particular duration (a beginning, middle, and end), and for certain it will one day be over. She knows then that she will not feel this way or have this same experience forever. Many people take their own lives because of the overwhelming feeling that their particular state will never lift and their unbearable experience won't change.

TRANSFORMATIONAL HEALING

This understanding or actual experience of change is key to all the modalities of transformational healing, including ritual, bodywork, shamanistic trance journey, and various types of energy medicine. Westerners tend to get locked into rigid patterns of behavior and expectation, and these habitual tendencies block out our view of possibility. Our bodies get stuck (armored) and tight (painful), our emotions become predictable within a limited range of expression, and our ability to break free becomes restricted or simply unavailable. Hopelessness and/or cynicism become the norm, leading to use of addictive substances and repetitive behaviors that bring some temporary relief, but do not heal in

the long run. We tend to mistake novelty for change, and this keeps us on the negative cycle of going nowhere fast.

Transformational healing is energetic and catalytic, often instantaneous. An intervention of some kind is made, usually through a transmission process (bodywork, massage, trance, hypnotherapy) which supports relaxation of the muscular structure while inducing an altered state of consciousness. Any form that utilizes touch is also nurturing, by definition, since so often a client's negative state (dis-ease) includes the profound absence of loving touch and a deep resulting state of emotional deprivation. I know many therapists who are not bodyworkers, but who have learned to utilize deliberate simple touch—the forehead, the back of the neck, a hand, in order to break through more directly to a client struggling with psychological problems.

The bodywork I do happens on a floormat and doesn't require a client to disrobe. I use my hands to transmit vibrational healing energies which catalyze a process within my client's organism. I try to remember that I am not in control of this process. Some clients relax at the presence of touch and enter a deeper, more profound state of consciousness akin to sleeping and become quiet and receptive. The releases that happen for them can be felt or perceived in the body, as they shake things off or jerk in involuntary movements while apparently sleeping. Other clients might get images or strong feelings that they wish to process through talking, crying, or some other form of expression. Sometimes the release of strong emotion leads to an altered state in which the client is then able to attain a deep and spontaneous experience of serenity before coming out of the session.

The transmission of subtle energies through the body, from bodyworker to client, is enough to awaken sleeping energies and move things in a person's life in surprising and often unpredictable ways. Like jump-starting a car, sometimes in only one session a client experiences a spontaneous healing, often including powerful sensations and bodily experiences, even *kundalini* or "snake-power" arising. Other clients take longer and go more slowly in their process, perhaps noticing only small sensations at the time or breaking patterns in small steps in the weeks following their session. Over a period of time, blockages are melted and new channels formed in the body, creating a new circuitry for the electro-magnetic impulses to run through. This is very much like "re-wiring" the whole system, and changes the nature of the client's reality. I always ask my clients to pay attention to their dreams and thoughts during the next 24 hours after a session and to drink lots of

pure water for the cleansing and clearing that normally follows a session in which a strong transmission of energy has occurred.

HOW DEEP IS DEEP?

One very interesting thing about using transformative methods in therapeutic work is that the therapist or counselor has an opportunity to observe and transform her own behavior over time. All the self-awareness methods and spiritual practices we use for our own growth and evolution pay off in client work by allowing our clients to go deeper than they would be able to go without our help. The more grounded we are, the more safe it makes the situation for our clients, encouraging them to surrender and trust the process. Although I don't believe people in the helping professions have to wait until we have reached perfection in order to be of use, I do see that with each step in our own process of healing and centering, our clients benefit.

When I started my work with clients, I did an intuitive form of hands-on work that I taught myself after my own powerful healing energies had spontaneously awakened. I had a lot of heat coming from my hands, and I felt like sharing my gift. I had even heard a mantra inside my head: "In healing you, I heal myself," so I knew I didn't have to wait in order to be of service to others. In the beginning, although my friends, neighbors, family, and clients reported that they felt much better after our sessions, I myself felt quite drained and tired after only one or two hours of working with people. I enrolled in the Rosen Institute for bodywork, spending six months practicing the concepts and methods developed by Marion Rosen (Rosen and Brenner, 1991), until something shifted within my own structure allowing my energies to become more fully grounded. Once this happened and the energy flowed through me without a blockage, I was never again tired from doing bodywork.

Over the years, I have seen in my own process of growth and development, that as I deepen in my own self-awareness, wisdom, experience, and understanding through my energetic and spiritual practices—bodywork, yoga, shamanistic trance, dreamwork, and art—my ability to really "be with" my clients has increased exponentially. In shamanism, it seems to take a certain number of years before a person arrives at the point where they are consistent and stable in their healing form. Shamanistic apprenticeships in tribal cultures, like that of the Huichols in Mexico for example, generally take something like ten years for "completion." My own process took exactly that long from opening to an-

choring, and I didn't call myself a "shaman" healer until that definite sensation of anchoring happened for me in my late thirties.

The amazing thing that happens with the "anchoring" of the vibrational energies within a healer's system, and this must be true of a therapist's wisdom as well, is that you become able to handle anything that comes up for your client. Rather than having an edge against certain material or content because you yourself haven't gone there or handled that, you become spacious enough and able to relax deeply enough simply to be with anyone, through anything. This to me is the definition of true healing. I suppose some would call this "channeling" other energies or guidance and certainly at times it feels like that. But even if you are simply being yourself with your client, as long as you are able to breathe with her ("con-spire") no matter what comes up in her psyche, she can go deeply into her own material even if she is afraid of it because you are *holding space* for her. She can lean on or borrow your anchor during the process of the work, and then the transmission of that feeling-state in her body will stay with her afterwards when she is on her own.

RITUAL AS TRANSFORMATIONAL SPACE

Another subtle or invisible, but powerful, way of moving the energy in a therapeutic process is through ritual, done individually or in groups. Every therapist knows that there are points in the process where either you or your client get stuck or stalled and, at these times, ritual is the most amazing way to shake the process loose. Just pulling a Motherpeace card can be a ritual, of course, or throwing the I Ching or any other oracle. But there are rituals naturally waiting to happen in all of us that most of us have forgotten how to access in our contemporary Western civilization. Ancient people kept track of cycles and power points within the seasonal year and the lunar month and these they honored with rituals of celebration, propitiation, continuation, or transformation.

Just encouraging clients to pay attention to the New and Full Moons might be one simple way of helping them integrate ritual into modern life. Women's ritual circles, normalized in the last decades, thanks to Wicca and the Women's Spirituality movement with graduate programs in universities like CIIS and New College in San Francisco, are a great way for any individual woman to begin to tap into her ritual powers and get support. But in a larger sense, I've always encouraged my clients to recognize that ritual *happens*, and that creating the space for it

to happen is really all one has to do. It's not so much about the particular techniques or content of the rituals, but just that one opens oneself to being available in some way for ritual to happen. So on the New and Full Moons, you might ask your clients to take time to be quiet and feel the energies by making a sweet-smelling bath or taking a walk in nature. And on special seasonal power days, like the Solstices and Equinoxes or the cross-quarter days in between, they can pay special attention and notice what happens inside themselves as well as around them in the world.

CREATING RITUALS

Finding the right rituals for your clients can be very creative and intuitive. I often give my clients advice to perform some simple ritual as homework that comes into my mind as we are doing the astrology reading or bodywork session. In *Shakti Woman* (Noble, 1991) I wrote about many different rituals of shamanistic art, such as making a fetish doll for healing and creating a collage from magazine pictures on posterboard. These are ritual forms that I still use in my work with women either individually or in groups. They are deceptively simple, quite fun and totally transformative. Some of the most profound changes I have undergone in my own life have come about through the agency of these artistic rituals.

Ritual has a structure of some kind that holds us in a focused intention for long enough magically to move the energies in the direction of healing and positive transformation. We in the West are easily distracted and don't have a very good attention span, especially if we think we should do something, rather than doing it for fun and relaxation. Rituals have a goal and a method, such as cutting out pictures from magazines and arranging them on a posterboard, gluing them, and then interpreting or "reading" them, which takes time, engages the mind and allows for a change to take place in the energy field. If, in addition, you pray over your project or chant mantras and imagine yourself identifying with the image of your creation, then the magic is increased even more and the vibration is raised.

In energy medicine, it is acknowledged that vibration follows thought and, in this way, thoughts "create reality." Another way of thinking about it is as the Buddhists say, you create karma through your thoughts, your speech and your actions, whether you are aware of this activity or not. So in ritual art, such as the collage, you deliberately har-

ness the karma-making faculties into a positive activity of powerful visualization that has the ability to change your situation. You think it, see it, wish it, chant over it, and hang it up on your wall when it's finished so that you can continue to be inspired by it over the days, weeks or months ahead. In a process of holistic ritual identification, you become it. Besides, it's beautiful and the end-product is almost always so pleasing that you are already transformed by your unexpected capacity to create beauty through art.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE DAKINI

In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a female archetype called dakini, that represents a kind of goddess or fairy woman used in meditation images. The dakinis are understood to be real beings or energetic forces that can be invoked for help in our growth and evolution. They are also understood to be playful and tricksterish, disrupting the normal activities of our lives and surprising us, literally playing with our minds and often shocking us into much needed change. Dakinis are also known to take human form as women, and any woman in your life can be a dakini, including, most importantly, you yourself. In earlier times, before the solidification of Tibetan Buddhism, dakinis were real women practitioners, and powerful "dakini witches" or shaman priestesses of the Old Religion can be found in almost every ancient culture. In India the term "yogini" is still occasionally used to represent such spiritually empowered women.

The language of the dakini is the invisible, secret or symbolic language through which spiritual transmission is made. It is as if the old shaman priestesses have disappeared into "The Mists of Avalon" (Bradley, 1982), and we can still access their wisdom, knowledge and power through meditation and contemplation. Basically the language of the dakini is ritual, and the performance of "spells" or mantras in Tibetan Buddhist rituals practiced today is a remnant of a religion of ancient women whose spiritual leadership was manifested over many millenia and across vast geographical areas of the Eurasian continents.

I believe that when a woman therapist or healer works deeply with a woman client, the power of the language of the dakini is available as a transmission through the container created by their work together. Instead of the ideas of transference and counter-transference (which may also be operative), we might think of the transmission of energy, wisdom, experience, information and healing through the powerful invis-

ble contact of their expanded natural minds. I have so often felt during bodywork that the ordinary mind itself, that is, the brain consciousness or rational, daily mind, recedes into the background because it is temporarily not needed. What opens between the two people, the healer and client, is a soul-to-soul contact that communicates intuitively through the body-to-body conduit established through the hands-on healing process. This is surely the language of the dakini and belongs to the inherent process of the female shaman healer.

RELEARNING LOST FEMALE PROCESSES OF HEALING

How do we relocate these ancient ways of being, so long lost to the world? Western psychology after all is quite linear and intellectually demanding, psychotherapy a rigorous practice of unearthing mental obscurations and patterns hidden from the conscious mind. Perhaps alongside of these intense mental strivings, we can integrate shamanistic and tribal ways of knowing that have been not been utilized by those of European descent for at least the last five hundred years, since the time that so many female practitioners were burned at the stake as “witches” in Europe.

When I directed a school for female healers to learn shamanism (the Motherpeace School in Oakland, 1987 to 1991), it became apparent that our fears and anxieties toward unconscious, nonrational processes of knowledge could inhibit our learning. Often rather than being willing to try a practice or exercise in healing, the women would spend an inordinate amount of time questioning the practice in advance. “What if . . .” seemed to conjure up terrible, demonic visions for so many of us, no doubt conditioned by biblical views of shamanistic phenomena as being the “work of the devil,” along with whatever archetypal memories we might have of the “witch-burnings.” Because it is so important in natural healing to still the active mind, I tried to find ways or methods of shutting it up.

TRANSFORMATIONAL GROUP RITUAL

The most successful method I have developed is the transformational healing ritual. I created it because my second-year students needed something interesting in their more advanced curriculum and we were intrigued by reports of tribal healing that was always done ceremonially

in groups. We began experimentally to use drumming and chanting in our healing work and to practice hands-on healing on clients who came from the outside community by invitation to lie down in our circle of healers and receive healing for their life-threatening illnesses.

At first some of the women would always try to “process” the clients, wanting to talk about the root causes of their illness or other psychological features of the work. Although I agree that there is always interesting and useful psychological information behind our illnesses, I felt it was totally inappropriate in the shamanistic setting we were creating and that, in fact, using words and concepts during the healing circle was keeping us from going to a deeper place that was available if we would just shut up and stop thinking so much. I knew we were avoiding the deeper place because we weren’t familiar with it, and we were irrationally afraid of it. So I created a stronger ritual form, where the drumming is regular and unbroken, with a lead drummer that others have to follow and a simple healing chant that everyone is required to sing the whole time. This provided the magic we needed and the transformational healing ritual was officially born.

I have taken this healing ritual all over the world, bringing it to women in many different cultures. There are fascinating differences in the ways of approaching and participating in the healing ritual between women in Chile, for instance, and women in England; or women in Bali, and women in Scotland or Italy. But generally speaking, women everywhere have been able to experience a very powerful demonstration of ecstatic female ritual by participating in the transformational healing circle. Because the powerful vibratory experience is so direct, it supercedes our fears, anxieties, opinions and patterned thoughts, going right to the heart, where we are opened in spite of ourselves. Sometimes kundalini energy races through the group, opening people unexpectedly and in ways that aren’t usually shared in a group (shaking, trembling, sweating, weeping, tremendous heat throughout the body, ecstatic laughter, and so on).

The healing ritual is focused on people with life-threatening illness, and the powerful energies that are invoked and magnetized into the circle can be felt by everyone participating. As I tell my students whenever we begin the healing ritual, when we bring the high-voltage energies down from the higher altitudes (higher frequencies) or from the spiritual levels right down to the gross physical plane, to the body where the tumor or illness resides, the healing forces come down through all the planes of existence, healing everything on the way. That means specifically that we don’t need to focus on the mental or emotional levels and

still they will be cleansed and healed. The high-vibrational energies disrupt the pattern of illness in the organism, and the whole being returns to balance. It is a wonderful moment for all the bodies in the circle, healers and clients, and everyone goes away from the ritual feeling better. And we didn't have to figure anything out.

This is the potential in all group ritual and ceremony, and it is unfortunate that the dominant culture has all but given up the performance of ecstatic healing rituals (in exchange for the rather dry and stiff Sunday morning church services I recall from my youth). In past decades mainstream Western culture has become interested and benefited from the rituals and knowledge of shamanistic cultures such as the Native North and South American, African, East Indian, and Caribbean cultures, among others, and even the more energized organized religious forms of the people of color in our own society. But these days it seems, in my experience anyway, that people are pressed by hard economic realities that force us to spend more time working, trying to make ends meet, and less time in collective rituals for the New and Full Moons or the seasonal holidays. Just the cost of organizing a group transformational healing ritual is itself prohibitive when it should be a free community event with access for everyone. And it should happen on a regular basis, so that the healing power can do its good work and heal all kinds of cancer, lupus, chronic fatigue, and other threats to the immune system.

When women get together in a group to drum, chant and lay-on healing hands, something magical happens. Our being together lifts us up above our normal level of functioning and teaches us, as we participate in it, about our innate capacities for nonrational, ecstatic communion. For a period of time, usually no more than an hour and a half, we find ourselves filled with spirit, in a state of unconditional loving kindness, capable of subtle psychic perceptions, and unified in a way that is outside of our normal cultural experience. For a little while, we remember the Maenads, those tattooed priestesses of the ancient Greek world whose "orgiastic" rituals were legendary, and whose images are painted on hundreds of Greek vases from the Classical period. All across the Silk Road from Rome to China there is evidence that the ancient women, dakinis, yoginis, oracles, and shaman priestesses, were performing similar ecstatic healing rituals for their communities, from at least the Bronze Age (2000 B.C.E.) until quite recent times (Davis-Kimball, 1997/98).

My favorite venue for the transformational healing ritual has been at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, held each August near Hart, Michigan, and attended by between six and eight thousand women.

Master drummer Ubaka Hill spends five days teaching a drumming intensive, while I do the same with healers, and Kay Gardner does the same with sacred singers. On Sunday, the last day of the event, we put the whole thing together on one of the stages with more than a hundred drummers, about a hundred healers and chanters coming together to provide a positively ecstatic healing ritual for women who are suffering from serious and life-threatening illnesses. In the middle of such a ritual a few years ago, as waves of kundalini energy swept through my body, I heard a voice affirming: "Let the rhythm unlock the pattern." I knew that we were reinstating an ancient women's prerogative, the secret, sacred language of the dakinis, activated in the here-and-now to bring balance and renewal to our community through our delight in the powers of the physical body. We can get the over-active mind to silence itself and listen and learn from this profound natural process that lives in each one of us.

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