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** Sylvia Wheeler is replacing
Helen Siders as Treasurer.*

*Sylvia held the Treasurer's job
just prior to Helen taking it in
February. ALL dues should be
sent to her!*

President's Column

Greetings! At this time, many of you are probably looking forward to our next Women's Conference. Little Rock is working hard at finalizing all the details for the conference, which is scheduled for Feb. 9-11, 2001. Mark your calendars! The theme is WOMEN IN THEIR NATURAL STATE. It will be held in natural surroundings! For more information, check out the links on <http://www.uuclr.org> or contact the Convener: Linda Van Blaricom at lvbuu@juno.com or by telephone at 501-225-8294.

The Kick-Off Meeting for the 2002 Women's Conference was held in Fort Worth on August 6th, with 18 women in attendance. Excitement is high, and 2002 promises to be wonderful - as have been previous conferences! Another meeting is scheduled for October 22.

ORGANIZATION OF SWUW

At last year's annual conference, it was evident that our current organizational make-up and purpose is no longer working for us as an organization. When I took office in February at the Dallas Women's Conference, I felt hopeful that the organization could move forward and gain some momentum. I'm not sure that has happened.

SWUW members have changed over the years since SWUW was born. SWUW originally served a disenfranchised group of women. But over the years, women have become an integral part of our district's leadership.

You could say that SWUW did its job. And we did! But SWUW has not outlived its usefulness in this district. Although over the last few years it has exhibited a sluggish and indifferent participation level, we still serve the women population of this district. It is my observation that SWUW needs a new purpose for existing.

We now exist to support the annual Women's Conference. We hold the mailing list and through the newsletter, we help promote the conference. We also hold the seed money.

But what else could we do? It has been suggested that we look into becoming a foundation, which would be a place for donating money toward helping fund "women" projects. It would also be a place where women who had "women-type projects" could apply for grants. This might include scholarships to the Women's Conference or it might not. These would be some of the defining parameters that a board would have to make.

In the past few years, our biggest stumbling blocks have been people taking jobs and not following through--some with good reason, others not so good. This and other organizations must have boards that work as a team or NOTHING happens, which is what has happened with SWUW. But no matter what we do with SWUW, it will need leadership and an entirely new board will need to be elected at Little Rock's Conference.

For example, without a working treasurer, the president can do nothing. Because newsletters cannot be mailed without the funds to both copy and mail. No one--not even the generous Connie Nolen--could be expected to single-handedly fund this activity for our entire organization. And speaking of the newsletter, I have temporarily taken
(See PRES., page2)

PRES. (continued)

over the job of putting together the newsletter, not because I want this job but because without a newsletter the organization has no communications. The SUMMER issue, as well as the FALL issue is included here. Again, without an active NEWSLETTER Publisher/Editor, the newsletter does not go out.

NEWSLETTER OFFER

Jackie Gibbons has offered to continue the NEWSLETTER as a GODDESS-focused publication devoted to publishing more articles and poetry similar to what is included in the FALL section of this newsletter, but she only wants to do this if the consensus of SWU UW agrees. We've also discussed that the SPRING issue would be devoted to "what happened at the conference" and WINTER issue would be devoted to "what the conference is about." So...please contact Jackie Gibbons at treejwg@hotmail.com, 940-382-3636 or by snail mail at 2015 Houston Pl., Denton, TX 76201, to tell her how you feel about the importance of the newsletter in this district and how you feel about this particular slant of the newsletter.

LEADERSHIP OF SWU UW

At our next Women's Conference in Little Rock, we will need to elect: President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. It's an entire new slate of officers! What are the perks of being an officer? Well, for one thing, SWU UW would like to send its new President to LEADERSHIP school. If you'd like to attend UU Leadership school, this is YOUR opportunity to serve SWU UW and feed your own growth. Being in a leadership position for SWU UW is a growing experience and allows you to make the most of whatever job you choose to take.

Other larger jobs include becoming a Conference Convener, which orchestrates one of our annual Women's Conferences. The conference for 2001 will be held in Little Rock; 2002 will be held in Fort Worth; 2003 will be held in Austin; and 2004 will be held in Oklahoma City. Would you like to be added to this schedule? Let me know.

BYLAWS CHANGE NEEDS VOTE

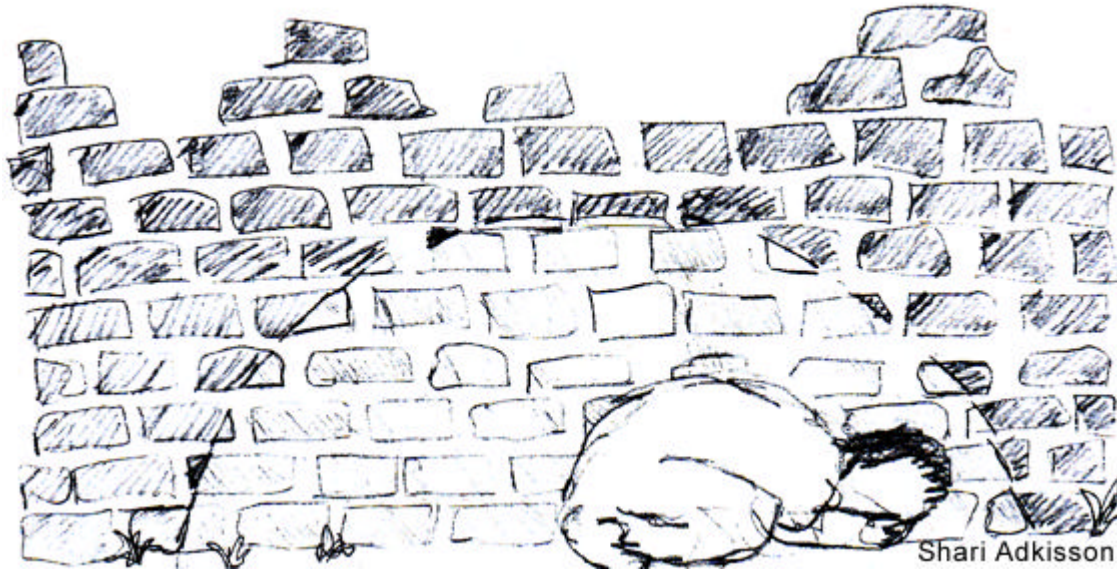
At our ANNUAL CONFERENCE in Little Rock, SWU UW will need to take a vote on a change of bylaws: **The NEW Section 1 PROPOSAL**. The elected officers shall be President, Vice President (President Elect), Past President, Secretary and Treasurer; they shall be known as the Executive Board. The President, Vice President and Past President TEAM would be the chief executive of SWU UW with the Vice President assisting the president the first year to learn the duties, then servicing one year as president and consulting as Past President the following year. Thus the office of Vice President (President Elect) would be refilled every year and would be a three-year commitment. The Board shall fill its own vacancies until the next election. The Executive Board shall transact the business of SWU UW between meetings. **AS IT READS NOW:** Section 1. The elected officers shall be President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer; they shall be known of the Executive Board. The Board shall fill its own vacancies until the next election. The Executive Board shall transact the business of SWU UW between meetings. To promote continuity and to enhance the experience and wisdom of the Board, the immediate past President shall be an ex-officio member of the Executive Board.

I can be reached through e-mail at: connie_dunn@hotmail.com , by telephone at 940-243-5125 and by fax at 940-380-1105 or by snail mail: PMB238, 1807 N. Elm St., Denton, TX 76201. If you just want to chit-chat about SWU UW or anything, I'm available! So call me, e-mail me...but keep up the communications--it's the heart of our organization!

Blessed Be! *Connie Dunn, president*

<p style="text-align: center;">NEWSLETTER VOTE</p> <p>If you would like to see the NEWSLETTER continue and are in favor of focusing the publication toward GODDESS-HONORING content, please contact Jackie Gibbons at treejwg@hotmail.com, 940-382-3636 or by snail mail at 2015 Houston Pl., Denton, TX 76201.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Vote your preferences on the importance of the newsletter in this district!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SWU UW</p> <p>NOTE: SWU UW will continue to support the annual women's conferences, because attendance and informal surveys have shown that it serves the women in this district.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Concerned about women activities at SWU USI, Spring and Fall Conferences?• Would you like for SWU UW to offer grants for women's projects and scholarships to UU events and Divinity school with some of our surplus funds?• Would you be willing to serve on a grant committee? <p>Contact Connie Dunn, connie_dunn@hotmail.com, 940-243-5125 or by snail mail at PMB238, 1807 N. Elm St., Denton, TX 76201.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Vote your preference on the direction of SWU UW!</p>
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SUMMER



My Dream Image

by Shari Adkisson

A small child is huddled against a stark, red brick wall. The child is cold, hungry, wet, and is whimpering. A large spotlight outlines the child, and it hunkers down lower against the bricks, seeking warmth and comfort the bricks do not give. This stark image has stayed with me for more than 30 years.

When my son was born I assumed that he was the child in the vision, and that I would do everything in my power to keep him dry, warm, well-fed and comfortable. During the last few years I have decided that the child is my child, me, you and all our children.

If we can keep the picture of the cold, wet hungry child in our thoughts, perhaps we can bring an end to childhood misery and keep each child safe.

HOW TO DETECT A 2-WAY MIRROR

When we visit toilets, bathrooms, hotel rooms, department store fitting rooms, etc., how many of you know for sure that the seemingly ordinary mirror hanging on the wall is a real mirror, or actually a 2-way mirror? (i.e., they can see you, but you can't see them) There have been many cases of people installing 2-way mirrors in female changing rooms. It is very difficult to positively identify the surface by just looking at it.

(See 2-Way, page 4)

Makeda, Queen of Sheba

by Shari Adkisson

I feel
Because of pain
Plucking at my being
With pain I live
In my own rooms
And from those rooms
I birthed
A golden girded woman

I rose
From the gray murky depths
Deep within my soul
Bringing miasma to light of moon
Goddesses to worship in the waning
From the heights above
To the dark abyss
Merging on the crystalline sky

While in the fractured darkness
I dreamed
Of long forgotten myths
Pathos: new grief
Birthed into the void
I raged
In my misery
Unable to comprehend
Actions taken, words spoken, emotions unleashed
Unable to bring them back
To gift Makeda, Queen of Sheba

2-Way (continued)

So, how do we determine with any amount of certainty what type of mirror we are looking at? Just conduct this simple test: Place the tip of your fingernail against the reflective surface and if there is a GAP between your fingernail and the image of the nail, then it is a GENUINE mirror. However, if your fingernail DIRECTLY TOUCHES the image of your nail, then BEWARE, FOR IT IS A 2-WAY MIRROR!

So remember, every time you see a mirror, do the "fingernail test." It doesn't cost you anything. It is simple to do, and it might save you from getting "visually raped!" REMEMBER: "NO SPACE, LEAVE THE PLACE!"

Ladies: Share this with your daughters, mothers, girlfriends...

A Tortured Optimist by Elizabeth Asnes

A high school drop-out
who feels at home in the academic world.

A Unitarian Universalist
who knows the limitations of the intellect.

A pick-up driving feminist
who enjoys country and western music.

A mother who believes
that her daughter has some of the answers.

Rawhide Love by Elizabeth Asnes

In the dentist's chair
fainted
after having a tooth pulled.

My mother called
worried
about missing her plane.

Living Along the Bell Curve

(or Learning Math Without Thinking Like a
Mathematician)

by Elizabeth Asnes

My first exposure to the bell curve came in a required statistics class while I was an older than average undergraduate studying Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin during the early 1980s. Many of my previous experiences in junior high and senior high school math and science classes left me feeling empty and frustrated, not to mention stupid, because I could never quite catch the magic of those elusive concepts. It seemed that just as I was on the edge of grasping some important piece, the teacher announced that it was time to move on to the next step. Since many of the concepts in math and science are built on previous knowledge, I was always behind and left in a fog of uncertainty. My report card, of course, reflected my confusion.

Teachers at Austin Community College, many of whom were graduate students at UT, had the reputation of being extremely patient and were known to bend over backwards for their students. Hoping that this was true, I decided to take the dreaded statistics class there. All I had to get was a C or better and then I could transfer the credit to UT.

"A basic premise of the bell or normal curve," Mary Parker stated, "is that given a certain number of ginger bread men, most will concentrate around the middle of the bell – which we call the mean – while the rest would fall within one or two standard deviations of either side of the mean."

I smiled broadly and giggled under my breath. At last, I thought, someone who knows how to make math a part of the every day world. Mary, using keen insight, managed to make learning those elusive statistical concepts fun and informative. We took delight in the whimsical herds of pink giraffes and white elephants that became the units of measure in complicated statistical procedures.

With each successive exam I began to take pride and have a confidence that was previously unknown to me, at least in the field of math. By the end of the semester I had moved from being two standard deviations to the left of the mean, to being positioned firmly, two standard deviations to the right. No small wonder that I still remember Mary Parker – fifteen years after the fact.

by Sue Hibbetts

Her book of poetry is described at
<http://www.wordweb.org/persephone/index.html>.

THE MOUNTAIN OF TEARS

On a full moon night,
High upon a mountain top,
Women gathered into a circle.
They had suffered many hardships to make the
journey to the mountain.
From villages many miles away they came.
Each with her own gifts, each with her own stories
to tell.
Silently they came into the circle.
Coyotes on distant ridges sang to the moon.
The women began to chant with their cousins, the
coyotes.
Sounds of praise filled the night skies.
In time, the chanting lessened, and silence fell upon
the women.
Each woman had brought with her two tears.
A tear to cherish and a tear of learning.
One by one, the women brought their tears to the
center of the circle, where a
raging fire burned.
With joy and sorrow, the women told the stories of
their two tears, and then
threw the tears into the raging fire.
The fire transformed their tears, and returned to
them healing energy and
courage.
They became strong and wise.
Wise women, dancing in the circle, praising Mother
Earth, and communing with
one another.
That night they sang, danced, and feasted together,
calling upon Mother to
give them safe passage home.
As the smell of sweet sage and cedar filled the night
air, they lay down upon
the ground and slept.
With the dawn, they hugged each other, and started
their journey home.
But they shall return next year, as in the many years
past, to the Mountain of
Tears, to acknowledge their strength and their
power.

THE CAVE

A woman in pain,
Cloaked in darkness,
Sits alone in a cave - weeping.
She has walked in the dark cave many times before.
She has always known where to go to find renewal -
to be reborn.
Her weeping echoes off the walls of the cave.
In the distance, other women are weeping.
Echoes of weeping.
Many women come and sit beside her.
She is no longer alone.
Each woman brings a gift to comfort her.
An old woman brings a feather to wear in her hair.
The feather symbolizes the flight of the spirit.
Like an eagle soaring high above the earth, the spirit
can be given wings.
Another woman brings a candle to light the
woman's path in the darkness.
All through the night, women bring gifts.
A rock for strength,
A willow branch for the ability to bend in times of
stress.
A seashell to symbolize the womb and the returning
to the water to find the
comfort of Mother.
With each gift, a kiss is given to symbolize
connectedness.
The women weep together.
Weeping becomes wailing.
Wailing becomes chanting.
Echoes of chanting women.
Chanting becomes laughter.
Laughter becomes silence.
With silence, there is blessed peace.
From darkness, comes rebirth!
Woman walks from the cave.
She has renamed herself once again.

ECHOES

Logic told me to run away,
But the echoes from the past,
Drew me closer.
Echoes of passion,
Echoes of love found, lost, and found again,
Echoes of trust, betrayal, and trust again,
Echoes of tears, joy, and tears again.
From lives lived,
And many deaths.
Logic said to run away,
But you and I have danced together,
Many times.
And the echoes of those lives,
Drew me closer.
Now,
Our Love has come and gone,
And once again,
There is another echo!

Healing Waters

by Anita Louise

We are 28 clicks from Gallopoli, and on our right, the Mediterranean has just come into view. The incredible blue of the water shocks me out of my disturbing thoughts. I'm glad to shift my attention to this beautiful sea. Near the shore, it is a deep cerulean, then a ribbon of pale turquoise, and beyond that, a softer cerulean. Across the Saros Korfezi (bay), the mountains are shrouded in haze and the whole scene is mystical. Our van left Istanbul early this morning, five women on tour with two males, our guide and our driver. We crossed the Bosphorus to Turkey's European lands – a deep triangle that spreads out from Istanbul like the sculpted pelvis of the prehistoric Goddess. Following the northern coastline of the Sea of Marmara, we have reached a small peninsula that points southwest into the Mediterranean, it's southern coast separated from Turkey's Asian mainland by a narrow strait, the Dardanelles. We are driving along the narrowest stretch of this peninsula, with fields of sunflowers running along both sides of the highway, and beyond their tall golden-fringed discs, the marvelous blue waters: on our left, the straits, on our right, the Mediterranean.

We stop for lunch at a seaside restaurant in Gallopoli. The view from our beachside table takes my breath. Up close, the blue of the water is a shimmering ultramarine, startling in its intensity. Where have I read that blue is the color most sacred to the Goddess? I can't remember, but Mary comes to mind, standing in the crescent moon, Her blue gown scattered with stars. I imagine Her rising from this sea, bringing the blue of the water with Her, a holy mantle draped across Her shoulders, falling in loose ripples from Her arms as they slowly rise in blessing. Surely, it was on the shores of the Mediterranean that the color blue became Her sacred color. I feel certain of it.

Across the Dardanelles, the mountains dream. We all sit quietly, trance-like, waiting for our meal. The sight and aroma of the food as it arrives pulls me back to the present moment, and delights my senses. Bright red tomatoes sliced beside crisp greens, broiled fish fillet, browned and crunchy on the edges, and a bowl of eggplant, kale, potatoes and tomatoes cooked to perfection and delicately seasoned. Vegetables in Turkey are organic and garden-ripened. I can think of nothing except how wonderful everything tastes. Not until the dessert of fresh melons is finished off, and the pretty fluted glasses of hot apple tea served, can I turn my thoughts to the thing that has been grieving at the edge of my mind all morning.

Salih, our Turkish guide, had called it “the most sentimental thing of all.” We had visited the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque yesterday morning. Then, passing the devout worshippers who washed their feet in the basins along the side wall before entering the mosque, we had walked through the Topkapi Palace gardens to an obelisk that rose from a wrought iron enclosure. Three serpents spiraled up the column, but at the top, where their heads should have been, there were only jagged edges. Salih had explained, “the Christians knocked the heads off the snakes to symbolize the striking down of the Old Religion.” The sadness in his voice had hung like a cloud above us, and no one had spoken.

I sip my tea and gaze at the mountains soft with mist across the straits, and suddenly my mind feels as clear as the startling blue water. I think of how we had stood silently looking up at the top of the column where the serpent heads should have been. We had stood for long moments, our heads raised, staring at what was not there. We seemed unable or unwilling to turn our eyes from the place where the serpent heads should have been keeping watch and symbolizing for all who looked upon them: regeneration and renewal, the cycles of living things, the ever-returning seasons of the Earth, the sacredness of life. It was not an institution that was struck down, I think, but the valuing of these important things. And it was grief for this loss that had settled over us as we stood in our small circle around the ancient snake column. And it was this grief that was traveling with us now, looking back at me from the eyes of each woman in our group.

But the Goddess is not an institution, not a construct. She does not “stand for” or symbolize, She *is*. She is regeneration and renewal; She is the earth, the cosmos, the cycles and seasons; She is the sacredness of life. Though She be ignored, denied and legislated against, She cannot be destroyed. Even if humankind does it's worst and destroys every living thing on earth, She will continue Her regenerative work, and thousands of millennia in the future, life will burst forth and blossom once more. Twenty-five years ago, I believed that the human race was heading toward such destruction, but I no longer feel that. Instead, I feel Her presence, and I am aware of so many others who also feel Her presence. Perhaps, as some believe, She has been in Her waning and Dark Moon phase for the last 4 or 5 thousand years, and is now reawakening and entering the waxing phase. For whatever reason, She is re-entering the consciousness of the world, and I feel we are heading for a time of fullness. It is time to seek out those who never forgot Her, to seek their wisdom, and to share what we learn. The Mother is returning, so dry your tears, I tell myself, let your grief be healed. The Goddess calls.

FALL

INTRODUCTION

The Southwest is growing faster than most sections of the country, and Unitarian Universalism is growing faster than most mainline denominations in the Protestant tradition. During the next two decades, we can expect to see many more opportunities for the birth and growth of women's groups in our district.

In taking on the responsibility for this SWIIRL issue, the women's group in Denton, Texas, has chosen to share our brief history in the hope that our experience may help other groups, particularly those that are new or relatively new, to make appropriate choices among the many paths that a women's group can take. We are all different, of course, but we have enough in common that perhaps the choices and meanderings of the Denton Women's Group will clarify your situation.

Membership in the Denton UU Fellowship is about 100, which by some official estimates is fairly typical. Our women's group emerged in 1987 with a handful of women, and now has a mailing list of 35, with attendance usually between ten and twenty. Perhaps that is typical, too. In any case, we hope that our reflections will be of value to your group in some way.

--Jackie Wollan Gibbons

WHAT KIND OF WOMEN'S GROUP ARE WE?

It's hard to classify UU women's groups: we tend to be eclectic. But our women's group does come close to functioning as **A SPIRITUALITY GROUP**, as defined in *Sacred Circles: A Guide to Creating Your Own Women's Spirituality Group* by Robin Deen Carnes & Sally Craig:

"A spirituality group is a self-selected gathering of people who want to explore, express, and develop their experience and understanding of spirituality. . . Spirituality groups, while intensely personal, don't dwell on personalities but instead explore the archetypal, even heroic, patterns and journeys of people's lives."

As it has evolved, our women's group does indeed share the characteristics of spirituality groups described in *Sacred Circles*:

1. **"We Are a Movement of Celebration."**

We celebrate ourselves, one another, our ancestors, our sisters around the world, heroines, goddesses, etc. In particular, we have used or created several curricula: Bolen's *Goddesses in Everywoman*, *The Chalice and the Blade*, *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, *Rise Up and Call Her Name* (twice), *Women and Wisdom* (an exploration of Hochma/Sophia). Every couple of years, like this one, we "go eclectic" and choose not to do a curriculum.

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2. **"Our Practice Is Rooted in Real-Life Experience."** We regularly share our experiences, not as a 70's style consciousness-raising support group, but as a spirituality group.
 3. **"We Share a Reverence for the Earth."** We call the directions at each meeting, we honor the solar cycle with solstice and equinox celebrations, we bring the outside inside, and we enjoy natural settings.
 4. **"We Value the Beauty and Wisdom of Our Bodies."** Much of the work in our curriculums helps us to listen to and value our bodies.
 5. **"We Create Our Own Rituals."** Even our simplest meetings contain ritual, and we consider it our responsibility to help new members learn to create or lead ritual.
 6. **"Our Ways Are Egalitarian."** We rotate leadership of our meetings, though we've been experimenting recently with a loose form of leadership for improved communication and continuity of the organization as a whole.

Our **DEPARTURES FROM "SPIRITUALITY GROUP"** by the Carnes/Craig definition are probably characteristic of other UU women's groups as well.

--**We are not self-selected**, in the strictest sense of the word. We are an open group, and we welcome any woman who wishes to attend. Because of our style, some women feel comfortable or inspired and stay, while others leave and rarely or never come back. It's a matter of personal preference. It's an ongoing task to assess the current needs and desires of the women in the congregation and to choose a focus that will be of real service to a significant number.

--**"Spirituality" is an inadequate word** to describe our focus. It doesn't quite capture the strong emphasis on the body, on the earth, on matter, and it's a bit too theological in tone for some of our women. We often avoid using the term.

--**We periodically reflect on our relationship to the Fellowship as a whole.** Do we, for example, have a duty to serve our fellowship more tangibly and visibly, such as leading a service or providing babysitting or sponsoring a meal? We also stew about whether we should periodically or regularly be involved in an outside service project, such as supporting the nearby women's shelter. We're never comfortable with this omission, but we've felt a strong need to concentrate on personal transformation and group support. We regularly wonder whether we need to be more intellectual or more political or more educational or more. . .you-name-it.

In other words, a women's group in a church has a broader set of obligations or possibilities than an unaffiliated spirituality group. So we discuss these questions periodically, until we come to terms again with how we're going to be. For the past several years we've continued to focus strongly on goddess archetypal work, which is hard to find in Denton and which has complemented our fellowship's fairly strong intellectual tradition, and we have not organized around service projects. This focus, of course, could always change.

WHO CAN COME

Any woman who finds our work sympathetic is welcome to join us. Everyone is expected to help out in some way, though we recognize that there are times when someone can't do the work. We welcome nursing mothers, and for the past two years have provided babysitting on request. The group has been remarkably diverse, usually ranging from young college women to retired women in their 60's, usually with a couple of women from each decade. We've learned a lot from having three generations in one circle. We have not yet formally addressed the question of when a young person might start attending, but in the last year we welcomed a 12-year-old.

WHEN & HOW WE MEET

We meet on the first and third Sunday evenings. More often seems too much for busy women, and less often doesn't provide enough time to bond. The third Sunday falls close to the equinox and solstice celebrations that we do. We occasionally shift the date for a field trip or special event.

We meet between 7 and 9. Dusk has often been helpful in creating atmosphere: we remember many sunsets, moonrises, and star-filled skies. Conversation, announcements, and business are limited to 30 minutes max so that the heart of the evening has a full 90 minutes. Occasionally we run over, but we work hard not to. With busy lives and parenting responsibilities, we've found longer hours to be counterproductive. Most of us, however, hang out for conversation afterwards.

We normally don't provide refreshments, though food is sometimes introduced meaningfully as part of ritual during the course of the evening. At our solar celebrations, however, we celebrate with truly memorable salad and dessert potlucks.

INTIMACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

As an open group, we never reach the intimacy that some of us have found in other settings, nor is there the closeness of a closed covenant group. Still, those of us who have hung with the group over a longer period of time have found much treasured closeness and friendship, and with that, great support in times of joy and sorrow.

AND THE MEN?

We have never invited men to our group, and we have never shared in a cooperative effort with the men's group. Occasionally, there's been some light-hearted joshing back and forth, but in reality we have kept our distance. A strong core of women in our group has always preferred the special quality of Women Only, which is fairly rare these days, and we have honored their preference.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FELLOWSHIP AS A WHOLE

For several years, as we were moving through the goddess work and learning the power of ritual, we offered one Sunday service a year, in which people could experience or observe various kinds of ritual. We also provide regular articles of information to the monthly newsletter, not only to invite women to the group but also provide the fellowship with a sense of what we are doing. None of us has felt the need to proselytize our ways, though our experience has created, over the years, a number of women who prefer services with less intellect and more emotion, less mind and more body, less reason and more art, less talk and more meditation/prayer.

We do encourage women who attend only Women's Group to respond to the fellowship's annual canvass. Our group doesn't collect dues or offerings, but we do provide reminders about building costs and supplies. Every couple of years we reconsider the question of dues and offering baskets.

RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER WOMEN'S GROUPS

Except for the February conference, we have had little connection with other groups. We did make a field trip to the labyrinth at Oak Cliff/Dallas, and we once shared a labyrinth walk at the Church of Transfiguration/Dallas with a group of seminary women. Being small and finding the rewards of our curriculums to be great, we've always concentrated on our work here at home.

Nonetheless, our members have been active in SWUW. Sharon Sahn and Connie Dunn have served on the Board, others have helped out at SWUUSI, we've shared our Wisdom workshop, and the group was willing to help produce this issue of the SWUW newsletter.

SOURCES WE'VE FOUND USEFUL

Sacred Circles: A Guide to Creating your Own Women's Spirituality Group. Carnes & Craig.

Revitalizing UU Women's Groups: A How-to Manual. Assn. of Universalist Women.

Wisdom Circles: A Guide to Self-Discovery and Community Building in Small Groups.

Garfield, Spring & Cahill..

Peace & Power: Building Communities for the Future. Peggy L. Chinn. 4th ed

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR WOMEN'S GROUP: TESTIMONIES

A PLACE IN MY HEART

Sometimes an experience defies a person's ability to explain it. And so we say things like, "It was a special moment," or "You had to be there," or "I just can't tell you how much. . ."

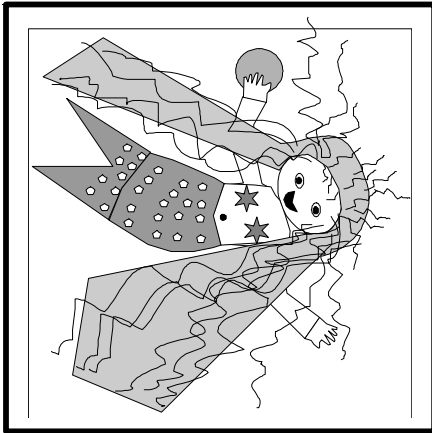
What I experienced as a member of the Women's Group of Denton UU is hard to put into words. I came to know so many intelligent and richly gifted women, women who supported me in my own search for a more personal set of spiritual standards. "We are sisters on a journey..." So much gained from that time -- friendship, laughter and joy, chances to learn about the history of our ancient sisters, freedom to dance and sing and meditate and create (and oh my goodness! the wonderful food at our autumn equinox celebrations!).

I remember one evening in particular, when our group was focused on one of the stories told by Clara Pinkola Estes in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. We had each taken a part in presenting the stories and shaping our own curriculum, including opportunities for discussion, creative work, and guided imagery. During one of those private meditations, I had a personal revelation that I hold today as one of the most important moments of my life.

Sharing the significance of a personal experience is not what matters as much as tucking it away in our own hearts and keeping it there to remember. I am so thankful that I had a place and a group of sisters who helped to make it possible.

--Eileen Theiss

LEARNING THE GODDESS TRADITION



Like many women I know, I started out with traditional Christian beliefs from being raised Methodist. Rejecting the teachings of a lifetime did not happen at my first encounter with the Goddess, however. It took time to assimilate Her into my life and theology.

The Goddess brought a totally different perspective into my life, because I suddenly had a role model. She was a feminist Deity that embraced me in all ways. The "should nots" vanished into "honoring" the Mother. It was a choice rather than a condemnation. It was matriarchal instead of patriarchal.

The Goddess first spoke to me through an African statue that I rescued. I somehow knew Her to be a Goddess, but in discovering her name, I was driven to learn her story. The Goddess was Yemaya, Yomonja or Imanja, the mermaid

Goddess of the Yoruban culture in Africa.

She haunted my dreams and forced me to learn more and more about Her. She was large with bountiful breasts. She clearly was my mother -- at least, my spiritual mother. But she was also a dark, golden-skinned mermaid. I did not conjure her from folktales of my youth or life experiences.

I am so white that I often refer to my skin as transparent. Therefore, when Yemaya came to me, it was not through my heritage. I had lots to learn and was worried that crossing this culture barrier might cause rejection due to my own skin color and the history of the white race. After all, Whites had enslaved the African people and performed a host of afflictions to other darker-skinned people.

What I found was that no matter what the obstacles were, Yemaya pushed me past them. She had a place in my soul and she wasn't going to budge! According to Luisah Teish, this is typical of Yemaya.

While I could not experience being a person of "color," Yemaya made me more aware by bringing me friends and even a young grandson with a beautiful tan skin. And She has continued to pull me into Her service.

But Yemaya has not been my only Goddess teacher. Spider Woman, the powerful matriarchal creator of Native American tradition, taught me to allow my creativity to soar. Destroyer/Creator Goddesses, Hecate and Pele, helped me kill aspects of my life so that others might live and prosper.

By learning about Goddesses and their traditions, I have learned about myself, found new ways to pray, and understood more about indigenous peoples and their customs. The storyteller in me also has learned more stories.

But I think what I have learned most from studying Goddesses is how much all religious traditions have similar qualities. We use vastly disparate words to describe similar inner or soul emotions. Our paths may be different, but we end at the same place.

--Connie Dunn

THE ONLY MAIDEN

To be the only maiden in an ALL WOMEN'S GROUP is special because I get to learn about who I am. I feel connected to the women in my group because I get to learn from them. It's as if about fifteen mothers are raising me.

I have helped lead a couple of sessions for the women's group along with my mom (Connie Dunn) and Jackie Gibbons. I like to help with the Women's Group. I especially like the rituals that I have helped put on, but I like all the rituals.

I have made friends with many of the women. For example, Rachel Key is more like a sister than a mother, perhaps because she is younger than my older sister. I also think of her as a mentor. She listens to my problems and tells me how I can fix them. She also tells me her problems. Sarah Oglesby is also like a sister, a mother and a best friend all at the same time. We talk about life.

Barb Rodman is another mother for me. She looks out for me and tells me important things. Jackie Gibbons is also another mother. She taught me how to sing and play the piano. And she helped me learn to run a Women's Group session.

Wendy Leung is not only a mother but a best friend. She makes me laugh, and smile. When my mom and I get together with her, there is no telling what kind of mischievous fun we can get into!

But there are others in this group -- some new and some old -- and I feel connected to them in a special way that is not possible with adults in other situations. Although I am a maiden, the women in this group treat me as an equal.

Peace be with you, and Blessed be!

--Erin J. Dunn (age 12)

OUR BEGINNING: From the Founder

"It was not an easy thing, trying to establish a women's group at a UU Fellowship in the late 1980's. The heydays of consciousness-raising groups were over, and women were less united behind a common agenda. The stay-at-home mothers felt defensive about their life choices. The women who had aggressively pursued careers inspired by the promises of the Feminist Movement of the 1970's--that they could and should "have it all" a career, children, marriage--were becoming increasingly exhausted and under stress. Younger women who had come of age during the previous decade took many things for granted with which older women were still coming to terms. UU women are as diverse as any group of women, and their needs and interests and desires for "a women's group" were widely varied. Gender alone was no longer common ground.

In addition, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Denton shared a characteristic common to many small congregations at the time---a resistance to small groups. Now small groups are all the rage, but then such "women only" or "men only" groups were considered potentially divisive. When I took the cue from women in the congregation and offered to help start a women's group, there was some resistance from both women and men at the Fellowship who thought such a group would take away from the goal of "one big happy family."

I had many ideas of what a women's group should do and be, and for a year or so the Denton group limped along under my leadership trying various formats and models. There was a loyal core group of women, but nothing really "clicked." When I was called to another church in 1988, I assumed that the women's group would fizzle out. Not so! In fact, the group thrived and survived. Without my vision of what they ought to be imposed on them, the group developed internal leadership and a strong direction. Thank goodness I left in time!

--Rev. Suzanne Meyer

OUR BEGINNINGS: Other Voices

The role of the founder(s) in the evolution of any group or institution needs constant evaluation: they can enhance or impede progress. Suzanne made it easy for us by leaving! But when we thank her, it's not just for founding our group. According to those who were there, she steered us toward our ongoing emphasis on radical openness, nonjudgmental listening, and shared leadership.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL ACTION AND RITUAL

Some of first moments of healing that I have experienced began in the context of the planned rituals of our women's group. We call in the directions to create a safe and sacred space. We light candles for the directions, and we make an altar/centerpiece in the middle honoring the seasons and the themes we intend to base our ritual on. We sometimes name ourselves through our mothers: "I am Sarah, daughter of Barbara, daughter of Marjorie, daughter of Frances, daughter of Barbara." We often pour libations or cleanse the participants with incense or salt water. We pass a talking stick during time to share, and we close or re-open our circle with chants. We have times of meditation and times of story telling. These elements, in and of themselves, are healing.

I love each element we develop as we meet together. I love our chanting together, the voices singing and the words losing themselves in the awesome connection we create as we hold hands and smile at each other. Once, we went to a labyrinth and walked it in candlelight. This was amazing—the ritual of walking the path was a way of waking my inner self and its connection to the all. This is how ritual can be healing—when it also opens us to possibility, to infinite connection, to an opportunity to transcend the here and now. I thrive in these moments, filled with a sense of belonging and connection, with a sense of wholeness.

About seven years ago, I got involved with a non-profit citizens' lobby called *RESULTS*. *RESULTS* is a network of concerned citizens, working as volunteer “lobbyists” to encourage government funding of programs that reduce hunger and poverty, such as Headstart, Foodstamps, and WIC, as well as micro-credit enterprise. These are issues relating to women and children, specifically the empowerment of women. Breaking the cycle of poverty for women and their families spoke to a place deep inside of me that cares deeply about the plight of women. I believe we can end hunger and poverty as social diseases in our lifetimes, and I believe the key to this is the empowerment of women.

Something I think all of us struggle with is feeling as if, in the face of deep social and political crisis, we don't and can't really make a difference. This is at the heart of our spiritual crises, as well. We struggle with prayer—does it really mean anything? Will it really make a difference? We struggle with social action—will I really see change? Will I leave any mark on the world for all of my efforts? Somehow, we're not sure we're “good enough” or that we've found “the right/righteous cause” and we're deeply afraid of venturing into actions that may seem nebulous and ineffective. These are certainly pieces of my spiritual struggle with my work for justice and transformation of our social realities.

What, then, is my connection between social action and ritual? For the same reason I lobby Congress, write the Editor and to the President, I also pray. My work with *RESULTS* has brought me into a loving family of other citizens who want to transform our world, and my prayer has brought me into a network of women who pray inside of ritual and who share their spiritual lives deeply. These are not separate pieces of my life. Each represents my underlying belief and faith that *I do make a difference* and that my life here has a purpose.

--Sarah Oglesby

A RETREAT, PLEASE! OUTDOORS, PLEASE!

[Many women's groups plan at least one retreat a year. For many women at the Horizon church in Carrollton TX, for example, the annual retreat is the highlight of the year. Our Fellowship has not done retreats, and our outdoor work has been limited to exercises in the beautiful setting of our building or at rural homes for our solar celebrations or at outdoor labyrinths in the area. But every group needs to reexamine its focus and habits, as Theresa's dream testifies.]

A retreat for DUUF women centering on outdoor activities has long been a dream of mine. And NO! this does not entail hiking 20 arduous miles and sleeping on the hard, cold ground at night. Rather I envision the retreat as walking one or two or more miles, as one chooses, but stopping impulsively to examine a colorful mushroom or simply to listen to birdsong. Biking or canoeing could just as easily be included. It has been my experience that walking together is an ideal way to get to know another person intimately. People tend to automatically fall into groups based on walking styles. Some walk fast while others walk more slowly. Either way is fine for developing rapport.

Walking in a wooded area away from the sights and sounds of modern life renews the spirit. As little as an hour or two can bring peace and healing. Gathering around a campfire in the evening to share the events of the day is as old as our knowledge of fire. Early people shared such rituals that have evolved into our present myths and religions. Shall we step back in time to join our sisters in this renewal of the spirit?

--Theresa Page

I NEVER LOOKED BACK

My friend Chris was attending DUUF. She had asked me if I wanted to attend, telling me how open-minded the people were, and I kept turning her down. I wasn't going to attend another church ever again. . .too sexist, racist, blah, blah. She mentioned that Suzanne was going to start up a Women's Group and my interest perked up. I said, “I'll attend the Women's Group but I'm not going to church.” Well, the first meeting changed my life and I've never looked back. To find someone who thought women were not only equal to men, but interesting and multidimensional in their own right. . .well, it felt like a light was shining in a place that was waiting in the shadows ready to bloom. . .

After that brilliant awakening, curriculums like Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, The Chalice and the Blade, and Women Who Run With the Wolves continued to open me to my femaleness, my womanhood, motherhood, sisterhood, the Goddess, sacredness, friendship with women, friendship with men. . .just a myriad of aspects and identities in myself and others, some that I didn't know existed, others that I had

sense were there but didn't know how to let out in the light!

I'll never forget attending my first SWUWC in Houston, watching in awe as women walked proudly around the hotel wearing beautiful Goddess jewelry and colorful clothes and just being women. It was amazing to me!

--Janet Acevedo

REMEMBERING

I always enjoyed being with women with different perspectives and of course women of various ages. I especially remember:

-- the Winter Solstice at Sharon's house. I can still feel the drums beating as we sat in the nest, and then went down the birthing canal. We got rid of "stuff" or fears in our lives.

--summer solstices at my mom's. We made a fire, chanted, and danced around the yard!

--the sweat, when Janet and a friend made the place to sweat in her yard out under the stars.

Definitely unique and energizing.

--Chris Marion

WHERE WOULD I BE WITHOUT...?

When our minister formed a Women's Group, I figured it was the last thing I'd ever do. I had always preferred the company of boys or men, and scoffed at girly things, never mind the word goddess! I don't even remember what got me in the door the first time, but there I was, with "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" going right to my innards.

Within a couple months, even though I was ambivalent and clueless, I was leading a session on gnosticism. I still feel the power of that night. Something began to stir and hasn't yet stopped moving me. It's been a decade now, but I still have on the wall of my study the poster I made for that evening: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you." (The Gospel of Thomas)

Without the Women's Group, would I have explored as I have? Would I the non-artist have created masks, sculpture, paintings, collages? Would I have read the marvelous publications by women from the last few decades? Would I have learned to chant and write songs? Would I have danced creatively with other women? Told stories by the fire? Formed cones of power? Found my way into the earth? Loved Sophia? Exploded into writing poetry? Begun to listen openly, without commenting or judging? Learned to call these women my sisters? Found a path back to reclaim the faith I had rejected so long ago? I doubt it. I needed the Women's Group. It took many years in a trustworthy, intimate environment – a sacred circle of women. The work/play continues, and my heart overflows with thanks.

--Jackie Gibbons

A WORKSHOP ON RITUAL

by Gerry Veeder

When asked what they like most about our programs, women in our group say "The Ritual." Ritual is the way that we create a sacred space or, as the authors of *Sacred Circles* write, "Ritual is the act of consciously opening ourselves to the presence of Spirit." [94] Every program, whether it is part of a formal curriculum like *Rise Up and Call Her Name* or something generated by a member of the group, always includes three elements of ritual: a formal opening, the formation of a circle around an altar constructed by the women presenting the program, and a formal closing. Since these elements are so important to the group, our group now holds a "Ritual Workshop" at our first meeting in the fall. This is to explain the meaning of the rituals to new members and is designed to give them some experience in setting up an altar and calling the directions, if they have not done this before. For members who are familiar with our rituals, the workshop can be a renewing experience.

THE PARTS OF THE RITUAL

THE OPENING:

Our opening begins by a calling of the directions. This is part of the ritual to build a sacred space and to establish the energy and qualities that we want in that space. We characterize these energies & qualities as spirits & call on them to join us. East, South, West & North are more than compass points. Because this is an earth-based ritual, the directions have many meanings. The ones we use most are the passage of a day: Morning, Noon, Evening & Night; the seasons of the year: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter; the seasons of life: birth, growth, aging & death; the colors associated with those directions: blue for east, red for south, yellow for west and black for north. Many books have lists of qualities, goddess figures, colors, animals and objects associated with each direction. They also include their own version of calling the directions.

The women performing the ritual may want to select one of these or write their own. In case they don't, one of our members has prepared a standard version that is kept at the church so it is always available. She selected calls that she liked, then pasted the call for each direction on a piece of construction paper in a color that matched that direction. She also attached an appropriate picture cut from cards and calendars for each direction.

After the calling of the directions, we go around the circle to introduce ourselves. Often we give our first name followed by "daughter of" and the name of our mother, grandmother and as far back in our female line as we can do. This Calling of the Foremothers allows us to pay respect to those who have gone before us and evokes a sense of power as we envision that line of women standing behind us.

THE ALTAR:

The altar is the visual centerpiece of the group that incorporates both meaning and beauty in our sacred space. It can be constructed on a small table which sits in the center of our circle. Occasionally it has been placed against a wall, with the group forming a semi-circle around it. Sometimes the objects are placed on the bare wooden table, but most often it is covered with a cloth. Women bring pieces of cloth or scarves chosen for their color and/or a special meaning that this item has for them. (Since there is the possibility of candle wax dripping on it, we avoid heirlooms and irreplaceable material.) The subject of the program-Kawin Yin, Chinese goddess of Mercy-or the season of the year might suggest certain objects and colors. Once the theme is selected, one could select items that symbolize aspects of the goddess, elements of the natural world-- earth, air, fire & water--, candles , (for instance, 3 candles for the 3 stages of woman's life: maiden, mother, crone), flowers, crystals or rocks with special significance, images of goddesses or special women, salt for purification, etc. At the beginning of the program, the women who created the altar explain the significance of each item.

ALTAR BUILDING EXERCISE

After describing the elements of ritual, the general makeup of the altar, and some of the images associated with the directions, we divided into four groups. Each group was assigned a direction and given 15 minutes to construct an altar to that direction. While they were to work as a group, there was to be little, if any, talking. Four small tables were set out and materials were on a large table: potted plants, shells, candles, leaves, pieces of cloth, some small figures of goddesses, etc. The women worked quickly and quietly. Then we walked around as a group to look at the results, beginning with the East. Each altar reflected the spirit of that direction and was beautiful beyond anyone's expectations. It was a powerful spiritual experience. When we concluded the workshop, we were excited by the experience. If we could create something like this from the materials at hand and with no planning, think what we could do when we had time to reflect and gather special things from home! Throughout the year, women said that constructing the altar for the evening was one of the things they enjoyed most. It was equally special for members of the group as we listened to the person explain the significance of each object - the altar cloth was a scarf from a trip to Colombia, the crone figure was a gift from a dear friend, the pearly shell was a gift she'd bought for herself. It becomes a wonderful opportunity for creating and sharing spiritual beliefs and experiences.

CLOSING

We find that it is important to have a ritual closing at the end to move us from the sacred space back to the secular world. After using different closings from various sources, the one we have come to love is to join hands and sing "We are Sisters" from *the Rise Up and Call Her Name* curriculum. After singing it through three times, someone will say, "Merry meet and merry part, and merry meet again," and the whole group adds "Blessed be." It is a simple but effective closing.

These simple rituals have served us well in giving our group a structure and a continuity. For more ideas on rituals for women's groups, here are a few sources:

Budapest, Zsuzsanna. *The Grandmother of Time*. Harper & Row, 1989.
Carnes, Robin and Sally Craig. *Sacred Circles*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
Mountainwater, Shekhinah. *Ariadne's Thread*. The Crossing Press, 1991.
Stein, Diane. *The Woman's Spirituality Book*. Llewellyn Publications, 1987.
SageWoman magazine, \$21/year. Blessed Bee, Inc., P.O. Box 641, Point Arena CA 95468-9900. www.sagewoman.com

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Women in Their Natural State
2001 Southwest UU Women's
Retreat
February 9-11
Little Rock, AR



This conference will take place at the Arkansas 4-H Center, nestled in the foothills of the Quachita Mountains just 10 miles west of Little Rock.

Registration forms will be available in December, 2000.

For updates, check the retreat link on the UUCLR Website at <http://www.uclr.org>.

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