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# KINDRED

# Spirit

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Katheryn Trenshaw



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# AFFIRMING THE FEMALE BODY

Imagine how your life would be different now if, from the time you were a small child, your body had been continuously affirmed by strong, confident, other women who saw you as powerful, sexual, and sacred. How would it be to answer your soul's instinctive longing to participate in a women's tribal circle? How would it be if we honoured each other's stories and took on their strengths, even as we offered the power of our own story? How would our daily lives be strengthened if together we reclaimed menstruation, sexuality, creativity? How would it be to raise inner-growth risk-taking to a high art, within the supportive holding of a circle of women? **Katheryn Trenshaw** helps us consider some of the answers to these questions.



## Ancient Futures

Watercolour 1995  
21x15" image  
(22x28" framed)

## Women's Bodies in the Modern World

**W**omen's bodies in the modern 'civilized' mainstream world have become objects, 'products' that need to meet certain consumer criteria.

Thin is good and fat is bad. Anorexic cover girls are the role models held up to us; obviously 'beautiful' people are happy and all wear a size ten. Attitudes that actually involve invalidation, shame, and severe distortion of body image are considered by our culture to be normal and acceptable and 'just the way things are'.

Women are being sold things to 'fix' their bodies and achieve this ideal look. The market looks bright because in the end women are essentially being sold their own insecurity and 'imperfection', along with the products that promise to change what they have and who they are.

The consequences are staggering: from the constant yearning to be other, to the diseases of anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and depression. There is no respite from this cultural onslaught, for even when the TV is off, the billboards are out of sight, and the magazines are folded away, the internal 'tapes' programmed in women's psyches carry on promoting the message at work, at rest, at play.

## Radiance doesn't come in a jar

When I look at the women that I consider to be strong and beautiful, they aren't magazine models. They are women who seem to exude a kind of inner radiance that resonates deeply within me. I remember once long ago going for a swim in the huge lake that gave my native Michigan its name. I stood observing a thirty-something woman who, by our cultural standards, would be considered 'fat'. I watched while she removed her clothing as gracefully as a dancer. She was totally comfortable in her own skin. She ran lightly into the water and played in the waves. Something about her energy intrigued and enchanted me. I was mesmerized. My cultural programming said that what I was seeing and feeling was not possible; but right on the heels of that thought was a sense of how much I would like to be as comfortable and free as that woman. I began to have a longing for her kind of beauty.

That longing was later enhanced at the Michigan Women's Music Festival. This is an annual women's camp, the largest in the US, with over 7,000 women camping together for a week, celebrating women's music, growth work and creative expression. It is clothing-optional, and when I first began attending it, I was amazed at the diversity of women's bodies:

the dozens of shades of skin color, the delightful collection of sizes and shapes of bodies, the variety of breasts (and the scars on some chests where breasts used to be). In the midst of all that genuine beauty I realized that 'beauty' was being redefined for me.

In experiences such as these, and especially in my coming to terms with my own body ('too tall', feet 'huge', breasts 'too big'), were planted the seeds of the work I now do in helping myself and other women become liberated from the harmful cultural stereotypes they've inherited. You can begin this work by simply asking yourself one question: how would it be if you really believed that from the untethered freedom of childhood play, through the awesome unfolding into sexual womanhood, to the strength and wisdom of maturity, a woman's body is magnificent!

## Remembering

*I remember a time when women met in circles  
Dancing naked on a beach, creating miracles.  
Now I've joyless eyes, I'm tired to death,  
Shown no gratitude for my life of selflessness.*

*Hold a shell to your ear:  
What does it sound like, what do you hear?  
Does she sing in your rememberings?  
Does she sigh for your tears?  
Does she cry in your anger?*

by Denise Dobson (song lyrics written after a 1996 'Affirming the Female Body' workshop)

None of what I've said so far is really new to you. You know it in your body, if not in your mind. That's because all of it is old, very old, and that's why it is so powerful.

Inside every woman there is a deep knowing, a remembering of a time when it was different from what our culture now tells us. As Elinor Gadon says in her book *The Once and Future Goddess*: 'Perhaps the most provocative discovery of recent archaeological research is that nowhere in Neolithic Goddess cultures is there any sign of warfare. There is no evidence of fortifications, of violent death, invasion or conquest. We can only conclude

## Wisdom Unmasked

Watercolour 1995  
image 20x18"  
(22x28" framed)



*Within every woman there is a wild and natural creature, a powerful force filled with good instincts, passionate creativity, and ageless knowing.*

by Clarissa Pinkola Estés,  
from *Women Who Run with the Wolves*

that there was some direct relation between Goddess religion and peaceful co-existence. Neolithic Goddess culture was woman-centred, peaceful, prosperous, and non-hierarchical.'

In all of our cells, in our deepest core, this memory lives on and tugs at us from time to time. One woman dreams of finding a cave where she is met by an old woman whom she doesn't recognise. The old woman leads her to a lake and leaves her alone and nervous in the moonlight. Then, magically, women emerge from the lake and next thing she is laughing as their many hands undress and bathe her. Later she is sitting in circle with her new women friends and someone is giving her instructions about how to get home. On waking she cannot remember the instructions but knows their vital importance to her life. Such archetypal images are common, often becoming more so when stimulated by being in circle with other women. The hunger to bring this feminine memory to clarity is very strong. The desire to share with other women in circles is fierce. The instinct to remember is even more powerful than society's hope that we'll forget.

I have explored the word 'remembering' a great deal, delving back into this cellular memory of my own. It is a powerful concept. In circles of women, we gather together to remember ancient teachings stored within the energy of circle, rekindling this knowledge in our cells. We begin to know women's wisdom, power and strength in new clear ways.

Julie tells her circle - the first time she has shared this information - that she was raped some years ago. The words are received with silence and then a slow crooning begins somewhere in the group. She is held in the circle for some time and it is possible to feel almost palpably each woman's heart open to share the pain. There is no need for words. It is as if each woman instinctively knows that the trauma of this event can best be healed by being received and transformed in the heart of each woman. The women sing to her, chant-like songs improvised from the heart. This is old woman-knowing. A ritual has happened spontaneously even though most of the women present are new even to the idea of ritual.

We also 're-member', as in gathering together the members of the tribe to which we once had a connection and from which we derived support. We remember that context in which we had a sense of continuity and the handing down of knowledge, ritual, traditions, songs and stories. And further, we 're-member' our bodies. We begin the process of connecting once again all the bits of ourselves that have been dissected by a culture that sees women as parts: breasts, legs, vulvas, hair, but rarely as a whole unified unit. In circle with others, each can begin reconnecting a whole woman and recognizing the strength and power of that woman unified. In circle with others, we face 'mirrors' of facets of ourselves, as we in turn mirror others to themselves; our teachers sit across the circle from us, as we sit across the circle from those who can learn from us.

Some of my most current remembering has been done in circle with uniquely wise and grounded 'others', the ancient stones and sacred sites of England. For the past three years I have spent time meditating in these places, seeking the ancient wisdom and teachings from the stones. Such wisdom sometimes comes to me as images of women

whose radiant life-force and connection to their intuitive centre is strong. It is this radiance that I record in my journals and sketchbooks, bringing back to my Devon studio these memories from the bones of the Earth's 'body', ancient rememberings to translate into my paintings and sculptures, and into my life as well.

Interestingly several of these circles take on feminine names - the Nine Maidens or Merry Maidens for example; and sometimes in the very pages of *Kindred Spirit* itself can be seen advertisements for Goddess tours, a kind of modern day women's pilgrimage to these sacred sites. A browse through the local folklore will frequently also associate stone circles with women's witchcraft. Not all standing stones or circles seem to hold these benign memories of matriarchal culture. Some, such as Stonehenge, certainly have a darker feel. So in choosing a circle to meditate in we must be guided by our instinctual remembering.

In a way that is difficult to describe in words, this art is my way of remembering the true female beauty, intuitiveness, wholeness, and health of the ancient times before they were forgotten. The wisdom that derives from these meditations has nothing to do with physical beauty, especially not what we have been taught is 'beauty'. It has to do with that quality of radiance that I recognised in the woman on the beach and in the diversity at the women's music festival. When I circle with stones, the feminine images that emerge are like archetypes, ancient role models of what women were and can be again, if we can just remember together.

*As I go into the earth, she pierces my heart.  
As I penetrate further she unveils me.  
When I have reached her centre, I am weeping openly. I have known her all my life, yet she reveals stories to me and these stories are revelations and I am transformed.*

By Susan Griffin, from  
*The Earth - What She Is To Me*

## Working together to reclaim body image

A simple starting point for reclaiming body image is to begin to look at and reclaim the various phases of being female: maiden, mother, and crone/wisdom keeper. As we recall or look forward to each phase, we can imagine and create rites of passage to affirm them. If we haven't had these initiations - and most haven't - we can do it now. Time is very malleable, and it is never too late. As a circle of women, we can offer a special space in which each woman can re-invent her life and heal into the past and the future.

## Renewal

Watercolour 1994  
image 10x16"  
(16x20" framed)

Here are some of the ways women have reclaimed the phases of themselves:

### The Maiden

Many of us were adults before we had a chance to be children. So one of the ways of reclaiming this youngest phase of womanhood is simply to play. Play. It is amazing what happens when women are given permission to tap into all-out 'kid energy' and play: they dance about in the garden with scarves streaming through the air; they delight in the simple physical joy of childhood games like tag or hopscotch, or stick-in-the-mud, or the shivery thrill of hiding in impregnable fortresses built out of blankets and clothesline ropes. Interacting with other women/girls, they regain a glimpse of the freedom and joy that emanates from such abandoned pleasure in movement. The hyper-responsible stiff adult melts into freedom, ease, sensuality, creativity. In the safe space of a circle of women, it is possible to reclaim aspects of our childhood that we have lost or never had the chance to have. One recent participant said: 'The beauty of this workshop is that it takes me away from concepts and words for a little while, and allows me to explore the creative expression I have, in singing, drawing, and dancing'. Such reclaiming of the maiden offers the healing from which the healthy mother-phase can evolve.

### The Mother

*No person, trying to take responsibility for her or his identity, should have to be so alone. There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as warriors.*

by Adrienne Rich

Just one example of circle work on this phase is a ritualising of the rite-of-passage of menstruation, which I prefer to call by a more ancient term, 'moontime'. Most women who grew up in the West either had a traumatic transition into womanhood or it was shamed or ignored altogether. In the course of a workshop, I often simply give women the opportunity to sit and breathe and remember their experience of the time the moon pulled the first drop of blood from their womb; and to remember what then transpired within and without. They review the experience as a kind of objective observer, perhaps for the first time since this potent event took place. Then they share with others the story of what happened.

The result is often overwhelmingly powerful and surprising. The commonalities among the sharing women are many, and this alone is comfort, creating a solidarity in what was, for most, a very isolated and isolating



experience. At a recent evening in London, the 50 women who attended were stunned at how much they had all longed for essentially the same things, but had never before shared their longings.

After the sharing, in longer workshop settings, there is an opportunity to re-invent the experience in a newly-affirming way. Jenny, for example, had her group of women carefully undress her, anoint her body with oils and then dress her again in wild and symbolic clothing. Then she had them join her in a wild, exotic flurry of dancing with silk scarves building up to a huge crescendo then dropping down to lie spreadeagled on the bare earth. One by one the women gathered round to daub her in red paint, finally crowning her and each one gifting her with a small stone which she put in her 'medicine bag'.

Women are encouraged to dream into an 'anything is/was possible' space and to design a ritual for coming into womanhood that they would have liked to have had. The basic

components that women would have liked (such as the presence of a circle of older women and/or slightly older peers; being held/massaged/anointed with oils, and pampered in some sensual way by other women; a celebration, often at night and often in a natural setting like a beach or a cave) are, once again, remarkably synchronous. Almost always an instinctive and spontaneous unfolding of ritual happens, impossible to predict or even to describe. Funny how, even though the guideline is that 'the sky is the limit' for possible scenarios, the 'perfect ritual' that emerges is usually completely within the realm of possibility.

The Mother aspect of woman is often stereotyped as fertile Goddess or Earth Mother and then left at that. It is also important to include the exploration of other equally important facets: the dark feminine, the sacred prostitute and female sexuality. When these aspects are undeveloped or not acknowledged, a woman has an 'undernourished' quality about

her. When she has not been initiated well into the full spectrum of emotions, especially her anger and passionate rage, the fullness of her feminine energy cannot flow. When her sensuous sexuality is impeded, she cannot expand into the fullness of her sacred spirituality, for the sexual and the spiritual are intimately connected.

**The Crone**

Crones are the women who have attained the years, the experience, and the wisdom to serve as visionaries and role models for us. They are the ones responsible for keeping the ancient knowledge alive and passing it on to the women who come after them. Crones are the ones who instinctively hold the energy of the sacred circle, listening with silence, naming the false, affirming Truth, honouring womanstory. In workshop settings, a woman who is of 'crone' age might plan and/or actually have a croning ritual. For a younger woman in the circle, contemplating the crone phase of womanhood means exploring what she would like some day to do for such a ritual. It means embracing now the 'wisdom keeper' side of herself that may never have been acknowledged. It may also mean tapping into crone energy by opening a dialogue with crone guides, those who can support and comfort her in her life's decisions, transitions, self-transformation.

In the sacred space of a sweatlodge, Corrin met her crone guide, an old, wrinkled, almost reptilian woman with deep blue eyes. She received a simple message: 'Learn to say no so that your yes really has meaning'. She stayed in the crone's embrace for a long time. She had found from deep within herself, the wisdom she needed for this phase of her life.

**Some tools of affirmation  
Circling**

*'We are part of a circle. When we paint, when we weave, when we write, when we give birth, when we organise, when we heal, when we run through the park, while the redwoods sweat mist, when we do what we were afraid to do, we are not separate. We are of the world and of each other, and the power within us is a great, if not invincible, power. Though we can be hurt, we can heal though each one of us can be destroyed, within us is the power of renewal.'*

by Starhawk from *The Spiral Dance*

That I believe circling to be essential to women should be clear by now. Circle is the ultimate feminine shape, the place where woman is held, described, embodied, reflected, taught, empowered, affirmed as uniquely herself, allowed and encouraged to ritualise her life.



**Where there is Woman...**

Watercolour 1995  
11x9" image  
(16x20" framed)

'In this circle I am seen, known, accepted, respected. This in itself is empowering, and heals the broken parts of my identity and soothes the loneliness and pain I have felt when I was unseen or not heard.'

Women have created ritual in circles for millennia, and the power of circle work has not been lessened by time. This way of coming together creates a physical 'container' in which to offer prayers around a shared intention. It is a clear and unmistakable example of the whole exceeding the sum of its parts. One circle in which I participated involved 450 women gathered for a full moon ritual and spiral dance in a Michigan meadow. The energy raised still lingers in my body memory and I am convinced it came from much further back than 'just' the actual ritual time. I remember equally powerful small gatherings of only five or ten women, a mixture of Native American and non-natives on sacred land, offering simple prayers in traditional ceremonies under a full moon round a blazing fire in the glow of crystal frozen nights of winter. In smaller, more casual or spontaneous gatherings, perhaps in someone's cosy suburban living room, the intimacy and energy feel different but no less ancient and powerful. The energy of even two people

gathering with intention is palpable. All circle work becomes an embodied exercise, expressing the archetypal roundness and cyclical nature of women's physical experience.

**Following Moon phases**

Simply noticing the phases of the moon is an excellent way to begin to understand the interconnection of all beings. Each one who gazes up at the moon sees the same moon as another, even many time-zones away. Further, this beautiful, changing satellite that orbits our planet pulls and pushes the tides of the world's oceans as well as the tides of each woman's body fluids. Beginning to chart how one's moontime flow coincides with the phases of this celestial body can further her perception of our sacred yet humble place in the solar system. If she notices when her sexual energy peaks and when she ovulates, and how that connects to the phases of the moon, her whole cycle becomes an experience of wonder and exploration and power instead of 'the curse'. Sensing our sacred connections, we are able to start untangling our Truth from what is presented as 'truth' in the culture.

We can feel excitement at our connection to all beings, and the inherent beauty of each, and especially our own, radiant beauty.

*Where there is woman, there is magic!*  
by Ntozake Shange

So - how would your life be different now if, from the time you were a small child, your body had been continuously affirmed by strong, confident, other women who saw you as powerful, sexual, and sacred? Beginning to explore this, and the other questions raised here, may be more transformative than we ever dared imagine. Circle and begin.

**MORE INFORMATION**

\*Katheryn Trenshaw is a fine artist of international repute, and a therapist specialising in healing through art, ritual, body awareness and creativity. Her contagious passion for life and personal growth, and her ability to encourage risk-taking within a safe setting are hallmarks of her workshops throughout the U.S. and Europe.  
\*Reader's may be interested in participating in an upcoming 'Affirming the Female Body' workshop (September 1-6, 1998, Monkton Wyld Court, Dorset), and/or the 'Drawing Down the Moon' a year-long group (beginning January 1999): three 3-day-long weekends culminating in a 5-day wild-woman retreat. Many more 'tools' of affirmation will be explored, including exercises based on ritual theatre; mask work; creativity in its many facets; and, of course, ritual itself: all the various ways of bringing sacredness into the whole of our lives.  
\*Contact Katheryn Trenshaw at PO Box 3, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5WJ. Tel: 01803 863552. email: katheryn@shines.swis.net