

CREATING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

"I am a woman giving birth to myself."

How many times did I see those words, scrawled alongside a charcoal sketch of a woman, pelvis raised in birth position, during the raggedy early days of the women's consciousness raising and health movement? The image and words proclaimed the commencement of women's extraordinary journey of reclaiming themselves, body and soul, from five thousand years of patriarchal voices telling us who we were, to birth ourselves anew in a new millennium.

Where did we get the nerve? Would we have begun if we had known how treacherous and winding the road ahead would be? How could we have known then that we were creating something so new that this new breed of women would populate and possibly lead us into a still newer and even more unfamiliar world? Like any newborns, we emerged wet, sticky, and bewildered, eyes closed to the overwhelming magnificence of our surroundings, unsure of where and how to proceed. Like all new mothers and babies, sweaty and breathless from birthing, we could not have known how hard, but also how rewarding, our labor would be. We did it because there was no way back. Once begun, the process took on its own momentum. We could not have foreseen what or who our creations would become as they grew and took on a life of their own.

Who am I, then, this woman I have birthed into reality? I look in the mirror. The woman gazing back has full, shapely, sun-kissed hips, and breasts, shiny hair, muscular arms and legs, a world class smile, eyes that have cried plenty, yet remain full of sparkle, love, and laughter. Even with some wrinkles and sag, she looks pretty good. She is accomplished, independent, strong, vulnerable, savvy, courageous, compassionate, and authentic. I am

she. I am the new woman. This woman in the mirror would have been unimaginable and unrecognizable twenty five years ago.

In these years of labor, this new woman has been determinedly prodding and poking her way through the embryonic sac: crying and laughing, trying and failing, occasionally succeeding, loving and losing and loving again, thinking and feeling, marrying and divorcing, dieting and exercising, drinking all manner of herbal concoctions, reading, writing, traveling, dreaming, meditating, studying, working, untangling her childhood, and even walking on hot coals. I have done all of this and much, much more, in search of some mysterious transformation into a self I could only intuit. I have stripped myself down and taken myself apart again and again, to birth myself anew. I am not done yet. And I am not alone.

I am one of a new breed of woman, the generative woman. We range in age from twenty-somethings to a few I can name who are in their sixties and even their seventies. These are business-women and college professors, authors, scholars, designers, entrepreneurs, travelers, educators, mothers, free spirits, media producers, directors of non-profits, artists, healers, ministers, editors, software designers, consultants, activists. Some own their own companies, built from nothing. Some raised families single-handedly. Some still will, by choice or by circumstance. Others chose not to have families, in order to devote their lives to other things. Some broke glass ceilings and have the scars to show for it. All of us own and run our own lives. We are models for the twenty-first century woman.

This has never existed before. Never before have women had such choices about whether---and how---they will become pregnant, raise a family, have a mate, have sex,

love, work outside the home, manage and spend their earnings, create, and organize their daily lives. Never before have there been so many attractive, educated, competent, self-sufficient women past childbearing age. Nor have there ever been so many single women without the desperate need to find a mate for survival's sake, which has shaped women's past. For the first time in recorded history, women are independent of men for their livelihoods and their identities.

These new women can call a bank president, change a tire, read a prospectus, write a resume, and field a reference. They can choose a wine, make reservations, and find their way in a foreign place, including the Internet. They can earn, manage, and invest their own money. They are informed health care consumers, often choosing alternative and natural methods of healing against the advice of an authoritarian medical establishment. They are conscious, having trained themselves to reflect on and process inner feelings and unconscious beliefs. They are sensual, jubilant to share pleasure as and where they choose. They are caring as friends, parents, and sometimes as lovers or mates, but lovers and mates do not occupy the center of their lives. All in all, they can take care of themselves just fine, and their children and aging parents too, if need be.

When and how did this radical reinvention begin? It did not pop up like Athena, full-grown from Zeus's head. The new woman began like a small seed in her own belly. She unfolded. She grew from the inside out. This is what women tend to do, we work from the inside out. We create blind in the dark, by feel and by faith. We are only beginning to even know what we do. We are only now learning, only beginning to say to ourselves with delight and sometimes with horror, "Look, this is what we women do!" We did not know before. Our lives and ways had been so defined and circumscribed for so long by

fathers, husbands, and brothers, by institutions run by men, and even by mothers whose ideas had been defined and circumscribed by their own fathers, husbands, and brothers, that we could not know. We did not even know that we did not know. We could not even know how we came to know or not know what we knew or did not know. For we had no ear trained to our own voices. We had no language for our experience. Others had defined our selves and our experience so totally that we scarcely knew it was not our own, as if we were inhabiting another's dream.

We began from the inside out. We spoke ourselves into existence as women, the first step in claiming ourselves. We were women, we said. We were not girls, not chicks, not ladies, no, women, yes, even if we did not yet know what that meant. We would find out, we would invent it. We would invent it differently from our mothers and our grandmothers, who could only react to the ways in which they had been invented by others.

We claimed the power to name ourselves. But before we could do that, we had to shut out the noise. Then we had to purge ourselves of its poison. We discovered that all of our language, all of our categories, had been handed to us by husbands, fathers, and brothers, by male-run institutions, and by mothers who themselves had been given their categories by their own husbands, fathers, and brothers. Where could we begin?

We began with the experience of our bodies and the bodies of our experience. We distrusted abstractions and categories. We spoke out of our direct experience. Women shared secrets never shared before in the history of civilization, while the men alternately laughed in ridicule and quivered in fear. We combed our stories for common threads, timidly at first, then fascinated, aghast, and enthralled by the discovery that in spite of all

that separated us, there was something in our experience that united us. Small indignities suffered alone and in silence became the basis for common ground. Small victories became our battle cry. We broke the silence of five thousand years. "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The whole world would split open" (Robin Morgan, "Monster"). The world split wide, and out we came, hatchlings from Humpty Dumpty's shattering.

We began from the inside out. We began with our bodies. We had no place else to begin but the sure flesh beneath our unsure, groping hands. We did not know, even, what we looked like in our nether regions, those places and parts that gave us identity as women. It was as if our bodies, our most private inner worlds, did not belong to us. Did we really smell like fish? What depths lay hidden between our secret, moist folds? Sitting on the floor with mirrors and plastic speculums, feeling foolish and brave, we viewed parts of our bodies long hidden from us, defined by others as vile, shameful, pornographic. We peered and probed deep inside our sex, to find lost and forgotten selves. We took back our bodies, took photos of our genitals, made art and sculpture to celebrate them. We looked at ourselves, and dared to claim our bodies as our own. We even dared to discover our own pleasure. We created a movement for women's health, and women's clinics run by women. We educated ourselves and argued with our doctors. Then we became doctors in record numbers.

Slowly, piece by piece, year by year, we took ourselves apart. We came apart before we could come together. Sometimes other things came apart with us, leaving broken pieces of lives like shards in our wake, cutting us open.

After our bodies, we took control of our minds. Our mouths formed unspeakable questions like screams long caught in our throat. We dove deep into our psyches to purge ourselves of the poison we had swallowed. We questioned everything: the organization of domestic labor, anti-abortion laws, "women's" jobs, women's economic status, the image of the "well adjusted" woman, the institution of monogamous marriage, patriarchal names. We questioned the purpose and direction of our lives. Our lives were not, we said, just for serving men and raising children. Our lives were for something else, something more. What were our lives for?

Perhaps our lives were for this, the very moment we are living now.

Look around. Women are emerging everywhere, asking new questions, creating new ways of looking at things. Look at all the things that did not exist a mere quarter century ago: books and classes for women investing their own money, women's psychology, magazines for working women, women's studies, archeological evidence of woman-centered prehistoric civilizations, women's spirituality groups, lost and reclaimed women in history, studies on gender and language, women executives of major corporations, even a women's television network. While there is still a way to go to achieve gender equity, we have taken some big steps down a road that did not exist until we began traveling it. This emergence of women is not only historic; it is mythic. Today's women are the new heroines. Or perhaps we should say "Today's women are the new *heras*, " after the ancient, powerful goddess, Hera, whom most of us remember only as Zeus's frustrated, shrewish wife.

This, then, is the Hera's Journey. It is my journey, and maybe it is yours. The Hera's journey is not one of conquest, but of creation and transformation, not made alone, but

always and only in relationship with others. It is a woman's journey. It is a journey of many levels, non-linear, like women's lives, all merging in multiple layers, only now, in the telling, beginning to form a coherent pattern. I tell the story as it unfolds, like a collage, pasting together personal stories and letters, images and myths, history and theory, until, like a life made up of many parts, a journey with many twists and turns, it comes into focus, a single lens, a sharp point of miraculous convergence.

Women have few models for their journey of reinvention. There are no models and no map for a journey that has not been made before. I have had only myself and my sisters, my faith, my friends, and a few historical and biographical references, as companions for my odyssey. After all, until the present moment women like us were exceptions, not the rule. Nonetheless, I have taken heart from finding here and there a woman from the ancient or recent past who might be looked upon as a role model. These women were powerful, sensual, spirited, and accomplished in their own right. They set their own terms. Lauren Bacall is one. So were Katherine Hepburn, Colette, Elizabeth the First, Cleopatra, and, of course, Simone de Beauvoir. We can go all the way back to the world's first known poet, the priestess, Enheduanna, spiritual and religious leader of ancient Sumer, and even further back, to mythic icons from recently recovered civilizations, in which women seem to have held sacred power. I called on Hypatia, the librarian tortured and killed defending the great library of the ancient world, turn of the century anarchist feminist and free-love advocate, Emma Goldman, and the courageous British suffragists, Emmaline, Cristobel, and Sylvia Pankhurst, for inspiration.

But the demands of their times were different, and their struggles and opportunities were not ours. While the figures of the past can inspire us, they cannot show us the way. The

future unfolds as we live it. As beacon guiding our journey, there is only an elusive vision held out before us, a sense in our hearts and minds that something more is possible, that some new destiny awaits us. It is up to us to cut the path. Sometimes we are not certain whether what we see before us is a mirage or the promised land. Some flag, some fall away. This is not a journey free of risks. Some are swept away forever by the rapids, or dashed against the rocks. Yet some manage to ford the stream they feared too deep or swift to cross, and walk on.

As guides in my process of self-transformation, I have had the wisdom of my body, my heart's urgings, and my spirit's indomitable vision, as well as modern technology and ancient literature. I have had my trained, critical mind as well as my strong intuition for choosing, culling, and evaluating. I am writing this as I write my life, holographically, doggedly, piece by piece, by feel and by faith. It is a mystery. The process of writing it is alchemical, evolutionary, just as the process of reinventing her is alchemical and evolutionary. First build the container, then combine the ingredients. The process is as ancient and precise as magic. I am turning straw into gold.

In evolution, as in alchemy, information and experience do not occur in a linear progression. Evolution at every level is punctuated and convergent, occurring in violent upheavals and wild leaps. Countless numbers of seemingly unrelated events and ideas suddenly come together from all directions, dynamic, discontinuous, and chaotic. I dance among them, orchestrating them into coherent movement through my body. It is a dance, a trance, a weaving together of formation and transformation. While old forms decompose, others form themselves in readiness. I weave together disparate strands in shapes to form designs until a pattern emerges. It does not emerge in straight lines, any

more than life does. It is discontinuous, synchronistic, and guided. It grows, convergently, organically, dynamically.

I am not in control of this process, yet I am responsible for it. I am charting my own evolution and further affecting the evolution of thousands of other women, in the very act of writing this book. There are no models or maps for such an odyssey. I am one model.

My life is one map. I listen to the urgings of my heart. I discount the inherited monologues of my mind. I look for landmarks. I see signs and omens. I take the coaching. I think hard about everything. Nothing escapes my mind's harsh scrutiny, however much it squirms. I make "wrong" turns, and still I find my way back to the place where the path will be cut. My own feet beat out a path through brambles, stumbling on and clearing rocks. With each foot on what was not a path before, I am making a mythic journey into an historic future.

I have a vision. I am disembarking from a train at the bottom of a hill where no path is visible. I begin a long trek up the hillside, where sheep are grazing. I do not know where I am going, only that I am on a quest, and that I am called by something greater, to go there. After many hours, tired and dusty, I see a castle atop a hill overlooking a steep cliff. A thick wall surrounds it. I screw up my courage and knock at the heavy gate. The coarse featured guard who opens it challenges me gruffly. "What do YOU want?" he asks. I reach into my bosom and pull out the large square cut emerald I had forgotten was there. "I have come," I reply, "to bring the jewel to the lady."

Could the jewel be the leadership of this brave new world, and the stewardship of the earth? Could women like us be models and pioneers of a new era, which will expand the human spirit beyond mere survival and procreation? Could we be the new feminine, the

generative women of the new millennium, self-defined and self actualized, ready to take on the leadership of the world, unfolding, reinventing, evolving and living this new model of womanhood?

Today's woman is mutating into something altogether new, something never seen before. In violent upheavals and chaos, our old lives are being torn asunder. In wild leaps we are reinventing ourselves and taking our power. Women need a touchstone for their reinvention. There is no easy answer, no formula, no quick fix, or simple step-by-step guide that can guarantee success in leaping across an abyss into the unknown. After all the training and practice, the doubts and the prayers, one simply leaps. The jump is discontinuous and inevitably risky.

I hope to inspire and encourage the new generative woman, who is in mid-air, reinventing herself in the new millennium. You know her. You may be her. Look. She is everywhere. She is leaping. We are reinventing her now. Wet and sticky she is being born. I am a woman giving birth to myself.