

# KEY PERSPECTIVES

*Rise Up* is multilayered both in content and presentation. The following areas of inquiry are explored in the DVD, the music on the CD and throughout the entire course. Here is a succinct discussion of these important foci. (For a fuller discussion, see Elizabeth Fisher's Introduction: Crystallizing the Vision which appears in both the Leader's Guide and the Sourcebook.)

## Part I – Symbols and Ethics

- What's So Important About Religious Imagery?
- Honoring the Female
- Awareness of Interconnection
- Past, Present and Future
- Shared Values
- Diversity and Individuality
- Process as Central

## Part II – Respect, Race, and Gender

- Cultural Appreciation
- Why Female-Centered Multicultural Exploration?
- Global Community and Local Diversity
- Multicultural America and Overcoming Racism
- Is Guilt the Answer?
- What about Europe?

## Part I – Symbols and Ethics

The topics in this section raise key questions and provide ideas about the benefit of exploring varied religious systems from a female-honoring perspective.

### WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT RELIGIOUS IMAGERY?

While *Rise Up* focuses on prominent goddesses from select areas of the globe we are visiting, what is being explored is far larger than the lore of

individual deities. Religious imagery often reflects the core social and ethical values of a culture. For this reason, approaching the study of a culture by learning something about its religious beliefs can be a very powerful and respectful way to undertake a multicultural education.

No matter how secular and atheistic a society becomes, the religious beliefs prominent in that society seem to still exert a great impact on the overall social outlook of all its members, whether or not they practice rituals or ascribe to religious systems. For example, if a dominant religious system acknowledges only one god who is male, this will affect the way all members of society are forced to interrelate. This is why expanding the knowledge concerning religious models to include female-honoring aspects is critical to social change. By considering the full range of religious thought and iconography, we are better equipped to find effective and appropriate ways to live in the global, human society in which we all find ourselves.

## **HONORING THE FEMALE**

Over the years, as I read in the field of world religions, occasionally I would see a mention of a goddess. However, these mentions were minimal at best. Yet, thousands of powerful female religious images have existed throughout time all over the globe, a startling fact for most people raised on the male-only imagery of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the three branches of western monotheistic religion. A dictionary published by Oxford University Press, covers 11,500 goddesses from locations all over the globe. According to the author, Martha Ann, who also contributed to *Rise Up*, this is just scratching the surface!

As I approached the task of crystallizing my vision of *Rise Up*, I discovered and uncovered a multitude of aspects of Earth-based spiritualities, past and present, which honor the female. While *Rise Up* focuses on prominent goddesses from select areas of the globe, what is being explored is far larger than the lore of individual deities. When goddesses are not only honored, but are seen as powerful, they provide modeling for a wider variety of female behavior. To become acquainted with the multicultural Female Divine as a positive and life enhancing force is to widen our individual pallets of spiritual possibilities.

In Western Monotheistic culture, when god is universally assigned a male pronoun through many centuries, what is female has been narrowly defined. The values that are encompassed by the female divine are much more

multifaceted. She is presented in *Rise Up* in many guises, ready to dialogue with each of us. She can be outraged at injustices as much as She can be understanding and forgiving. She may assist life's coming forward *and* She may be the force that brings death when a process has been properly completed. She is both demanding of integrity and amused by the child within all of us. She comforts us and guides us. This range of qualities creates a much richer array of behavior for women to emulate, and men to appreciate in women, and perhaps if they are able to overcome gender typing, in themselves.

## **AWARENESS OF INTERCONNECTION**

Spiritual journeys are about all kinds of webs—linkages between ideas, impressions, feelings, and beings. These webs are not linear but multidimensional and multidirectional. Providing ways to bring awareness of these interconnected webs, which are the processes of nature, into our contemporary spiritual life is a chief purpose of this journey. In their healthiest forms, natural systems are complex, subtle, diverse and inherently beautiful. To respect this beauty and to feel a part of it is to be Earth-based.

Many contemporary ethical thinkers are also realizing the profound connections between attitudes held toward the female and those toward the natural world. A positive attitude toward nature encourages a holistic vision that respects all humanity—regardless of gender and ethnicity—while also valuing the multitude of life forms in the web of existence.

Numerous spiritual traditions, past and present, around the globe build their beliefs on a respect for these natural processes which exhibit interdependence. An active concern for the well-being of all parts of the web of existence is a central precept of the religious practices explored in *Rise Up*.

So often we are lead to believe success in life is more about human society and construction and not primarily about the processes of nature and protecting diverse biological systems. Today we are learning the harsh lessons of ignoring the realities of the planet we are a part of. To be Earth-based is to come humbly to the truths of nature and to seek to understand and live according to their dictates which Earth-honoring spiritualities find positive and enriching, not obstacles to overcome or realities to dominate.

## **PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

The new paradigm of interrelatedness has two faces, one that turns backward toward history, and one that looks forward to a fresh mode of living. For thousands of years, people the world over held a common belief: the Universe was alive. For this reason, continuity with the past is part of the new pattern. Earth-based spiritualities often reach back into history to a time when change was a part of the understanding of how the world works. We respect organic change when we speak the name of goddesses who embody natural processes. Honoring these goddesses also reclaims a sense of continuity upon which to base a future vision.

## **SHARED VALUES**

When exploring religions with different symbol systems, we must be willing to recognize similarities as well as differences, especially in the important psychological and spiritual category of shared values. Affirming similarities as well as honoring differences creates the possibility of drawing people out of the continuing isolation of closed systems. When creating this course, I came to believe it is far more important to judge a person by their ethical intent than the particulars of their personal belief concerning supernatural forces or deities.

Cross-cultural dialogue with ethnic groups that embrace Christianity, but who still have ancestral roots in Earth-honoring traditions, is especially explored in the African American and Central American sections. Animists and monotheists who conceptualize the existence of spirit differently can still interrelate to the benefit of both. All that is needed is the ability to tolerate, even appreciate, a position that varies from their own, provided both support the values of fairness, equality and mutual respect. When an ethical atheist feels its ok for another woman to honor religious imagery, the two can often form strong and lasting bonds around shared social values.

## **DIVERSITY AND INDIVIDUALITY**

Individuality is a highly prized value in our society. No one wants to be treated as a representative of a group just because they are a particular color, ethnicity, or sex. But what makes up our individuality, in some part, has to do with our roots and how we express and utilize the gifts of our cultural heritage as well as move past any prejudices or beliefs from them which we do not embrace.

One challenge we face as North Americans is reconciling an appreciation for our roots while developing our own unique individuality that is not bound or determined by our ancestry. Finding ways to enhance our individuality often surface when we have contact with others who may spring from very different roots. By becoming aware of aspects of the ancestry of others, we open ourselves to that opportunity.

How do we begin to enact our desire to accept and value a wide variety of roots as positive influences, while learning to interrelate for our individual and mutual benefit? In this regard, *Rise Up* will give you food for thought and present possibilities for emotional transformation.

## **PROCESS AS CENTRAL**

These cultures, which honor goddesses and respect the processes of nature as valuable teachers, venerate both continuity and change. They accept the primary process of nature which is birth, life, decay, gestation, rebirth and remember that new life grows from the spent energy of previous effort.

I have found that goddesses are close by for those that recognize them, rarely transcending the planet on which we live. Rather, they live *with* us, advising, not dictating—drawing us into an understanding when we are ready, showing compassion when all seems lost. They are fierce defenders of their people and powerful role models. They are not in contrast to gods but live among them. They are collaborators who need humans to work with them. In these times of trouble globally, goddesses are offering us wisdom. In the words of the Japanese American artist Mayumi Oda, *Goddess is Coming to You; Can You Come to Her?*

## **Part II – Respect, Race and Gender**

Because of historical realities regarding gender and race as well as contemporary prejudices, cross-cultural exploration is often a difficult area to explore, yet crucial in today's globally connected world. The topics in this section suggests points-of-view that may help us move toward more peaceful and spiritually satisfying contemporary societies.

## **CULTURAL APPRECIATION**

The ability to dialogue with an emotionally open attitude that supports interconnectedness, while honoring maximum diversity, is crucial. By becoming more aware of the contributions of a variety of cultural traditions and racial groups that share Planet Earth, diversity can begin to take on its proper identity as a gift rather than a problem to be solved.

As we experience aspects of traditions that have honored the Earth as a teacher for centuries, we begin a profound dialogue with ways, people, and practices we may never have heard of before. This is a beginning—the first sentences in a continuing conversation with those whose cultures, practices, contemporary artists and thinkers have something quite valuable to say about how they experience themselves on the Earth.

The expansion of appreciation and respect accorded Earth-based spiritual traditions as well as the Earth-honoring aspects of several well-known religious belief systems does not foster appropriation. Rather, this exchange opens the heart, mind and spirit, helping us birth more inclusive attitudes and communities.

## **WHY FEMALE-CENTERED MULTICULTURAL EXPLORATION?**

In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, multiculturalism has taken on new meaning. Over the past 40 years the world had gone through changing attitudes which has led to more multicultural exchanges in art, history, philosophy and religion. However, often these efforts are weak in presenting woman-honoring attitudes, highlighting women's participation and including female representations of divine essences. For this reason, focusing on the importance of embracing spiritual and ethical perspectives that include the honoring of the female divine and consciously valuing women's contributions to all aspects of social life is more important now than ever.

Misinformation about religions, spiritual practices and history has often lead to improperly devaluing women's religious perspectives and contributions.

To expand the picture *Rise Up* takes us on a journey to parts of the globe, past and present, which exhibit respect for the female as divine and women's leadership and sometimes uniquely creative cultural practices.

## **GLOBAL COMMUNITY AND LOCAL DIVERSITY**

Even though *Rise Up* takes the form of an international journey, this material provides both an international and a North American encounter with a two-fold purpose. One is to enhance our feeling of connection to Earth-based cultures on all continents so we can become more sensitive to global realities. The other is to tap into the variety of ancestral roots that form the contemporary North American community.

## **MULTICULTURAL AMERICA and OVERCOMING RACISM**

As we look to the future, North America will become even more multicultural. In reality, America has been diverse since its very beginning and is becoming more so. According to scholar Ronald Takaki, the history of North America has actually always been about the challenges and gifts of cultural diversity. (Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*.)

Currently, more than one-third of the American people do not trace their origins to Europe. (These people are concentrated in major cities across the country—New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Los Angeles although other parts of the country are becoming increasingly diverse as well.) Indigenous people are a small part of the population but a group that is reasserting its claims to its own identity and land masses.

By 2056, demographers claim most Americans will trace their descent to almost anywhere but white Europe. Despite these statistics, I have to agree with African American author Toni Morrison when she asserts that the myth of "American" is defined as white and does not allow for the diversity "American" should represent. The only way to change this is to become more aware of the diversity that is America.

Yet, racism and ethnocentrism are two of the most difficult topics to confront in an increasingly multicultural North America. It is almost as if, as racial differences inform more and more of the interactions we daily are

asked to deal with, less and less of our feelings about race can be shared openly.

One of the goals of *Rise Up* is to challenge all of us to find ways to bridge differences and work to create a truly wholistic and inclusive American society. As ethical and spiritually motivated individuals and members of a society with so much diversity in its midst, we have a unique opportunity. Our values are what can save us. The voices featured in *Rise Up* support clarifying these values and inspire us to act in accordance with them.

## **IS GUILT THE ANSWER?**

The following excerpts from the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation's special publication *Racial Justice: For Such a Time as This*, published for General Assembly, 1993 presents an interesting perspective.

***No one is born a racist*** Racism is not a genetically transmitted disease. It is a systematically transmitted disease. Think about how that word is constructed "dis" and "ease." This disease is in our culture and we incorporate it just as unconsciously as we breathe in polluted air. Our move toward racial justice is a move toward wholeness, toward health, toward becoming at ease with one another.

***Don't confuse guilt with responsibility*** Responsibility is our responding ability; it is taking responsibility for the world as we would re-create it. Guilt, on the other hand, robs us of the strength to respond because guilt undermines our self-esteem. Guilt is the glue that holds our painful emotions together and causes us to face change with despair or denial. Our self-love is our strength—the very strength we need to be responsible. Blame is pointless, but understanding helps us find reasons for our actions in the contexts of the situations and allows us to choose differently.

Overcoming racism is not an easy undertaking but one worth the effort. Adding a woman-honoring imperative and an Earth-based perspective to this effort makes it all the more vital to us, society, and the planet. Taking the Journey of *Rise Up* provides a way to enter into the worlds and lives of so many other human beings we may never

have encountered personally but whom we impact daily through our global human society. By hearing these voices and partaking of these images and music we begin a dialogue that just might advance much needed efforts toward a more just and inclusive world.

## WHAT ABOUT EUROPE?

The pagan history and contemporary practices in Europe are not included in *Rise Up*, with some exceptions:

- the influences of Africa on Europe as evidenced in the Black Madonnas; (session *Ancient Africa* on the DVD.)
- two ancient Mediterranean goddesses—Lilith and Hekate—are touched upon in the sessions themselves presented in the *Leader's Guide* and in the one of the chants: Old Crone of Mystery

Since the 1970's, when I first became interested in Earth-centered spirituality, investigations into the Earth-honoring practices of ancient peoples in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean have been rich and inspiring. Having been aware of my own Celtic and Slavic ancestry from an early age, I immediately felt a connection to these Earth-based practices. I also felt an intuitive sense of the prolific presence of these perspectives around the globe, though I did not have access to many specifics about places other than Europe.

By the time I was developing *Rise Up* in the late 1980's and early 1990's there had indeed been an explosion of excellent artistic and scholarly offerings on Europe, which continues to this day. I felt the resources needed to explore the Earth honoring practices of civilizations in the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Western Continent, Eastern Europe, Turkey and the Mediterranean were readily available in a multitude of forms, and are even more plentiful today.

In contrast, resources about Earth-based spiritualities that are still practiced today in Africa, Asia and indigenous communities in the Americas were less well known and accessible. This is why I chose to focus on these areas of the globe in *Rise Up* and leave Europe and the Mediterranean to others to present.