

GLORIOUS COLORS, SHAPES AND SOUNDS

Shirley Ranck

Do not box me in
in your narrow racial jackets
too tight to move in,
too thin to wear.

— Luisah Teish

Out of all the vivid and striking images I looked at when discussing the design of this new curriculum with Liz Fisher, two stand out for me. They speak to me across the boundaries of time and race and culture without even any need for explanation. One shows the terrible side of female history. The other envisions our hope.

At the foot of the steps of the Aztec temple in Mexico City there was found an oval stone eleven feet long, carved with the image of a dismembered goddess — Coyolxauhqui. We do not need to know her story in order to know her fate. There she lies, dismembered, for all the world to see. Is there a woman anywhere of any color or culture who does not understand and suffer with her? I believe that the message is clear and universal: with patriarchy comes the dismemberment of female power.

The other image comes from Africa — a vessel in the shape of a woman's head which has two faces. On one side a black woman's face, on the other side a white woman's face. The hair and headdresses blend into each other, telling us without words or story that we are one. I believe that such an image is the source of our hope.

I mention these two images and the meanings they hold for me because this new curriculum attempts to take us on a journey into the indigenous religions of many lands and peoples and that effort is a very risky enterprise. We Unitarian Universalists are after all predominantly white middle class Americans. How dare we claim these native religions as our own? As one Native American woman said, "I feel as if you are invading my religion just as you invaded my land."

I hope we do not come to this journey as invaders. The very language of invasion speaks to me of patriarchy, not of a woman's, or a man's, spiritual journey. It is that very mind-set of invasion and conquest that we would challenge and set aside. We come to this journey as learners, as women and men who affirm, intellectually and I hope passionately, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We come now to experience directly the diversity of that web. If we are to survive we must have the courage to find and celebrate the universals at the heart of all Earth-centered, woman-honoring religion.

We need to know the truth about female power and its dismemberment, and about the desacralization of the Earth under patriarchy because it is part of our history as human beings. And we need to envision and celebrate our oneness even as we learn to rejoice in our colorful diversity. We do not come to invade or colonize but to remember and to create together a new vision for the future.

In the process of writing *CAKES FOR THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN* I discovered some aspects of pre-patriarchal religion that I had not expected. Perhaps the most important was reverence for the Earth and the cycles of nature. As a thoroughly urban person, I was only minimally aware of the phases of the moon, the coming of an equinox or solstice. I had long been in love with the crashing waves and iridescent life of the oceans. I had stared in wonder at the beauty of the California redwoods. But I had related these feelings only peripherally to my religion. For the Old Religions, Earth was another name for the divine female creator. I learned to sing "We all come from the Goddess and to Her we shall return, like a drop of rain flowing to the ocean." I began to see the connection between the dishonoring of women and the exploitation of the Earth. *CAKES* was about women and their lives. While we meditated upon the phases of the moon and called for harmony with Earth's elements, we did not take up directly the relationship between the powerlessness of women and the ecological crisis of the Earth. It is exciting to me that this new curriculum makes central a new respect for the Earth and for women.

Another aspect was ritual. As a former Episcopalian, I had delighted in the relative absence of ritual in Unitarian Universalism. The rituals I had known earlier did not resonate with my life experience. They seemed like vain repetitions. But Sappho spoke of women dancing in the moonlight and the very title I chose for my curriculum came from the description of a ritual for baking. Everywhere I looked I found that ancient people created rituals. The rituals, however, were part of their everyday lives. I wanted *CAKES* to connect women's religious history with issues in women's lives. In trying to accomplish that goal I stumbled warily into the realm of ritual. Only a little bit of ritual — lighting a candle and reading a poem, passing a candle around the circle as each person spoke; closing each session with a poem or song. I didn't realize how starved we all were for meaningful ritual or how effective it was in touching our lives until I began to teach the course and then to hear about the rituals other women had added to the sessions. I am delighted that in this new curriculum ritual is lifted up and looked at more directly as a tool for you to use on your journey. It is a marvelous outlet for your creativity. Enjoy!

Another aspect of pre-patriarchal religion that I bumped into in writing *CAKES* was the notion that our ancestors are still part of the community. When I decided to open the first session by having a candle passed around and each woman asked to name her female ancestors I thought it was just a way to make us aware of how few names we knew and

how seldom we had an opportunity to value our mothers and grandmothers. Something else happened in the actual experience. Women spoke gently of the strengths of their mothers or the hard lives of their grandmothers. There were tears. There was laughter. Many said afterwards that they felt their mothers and grandmothers were really there with us. We had quite inadvertently called upon our ancestors, something so often done in pre-patriarchal indigenous religions that this new curriculum has taken its title, *RISE UP AND CALL HER NAME*, from a chant written by Carolyn McDade that is part of just such a ritual, one created by Reverend Adele Smith. In this new course, learning to honor our female ancestors is given its rightful emphasis and importance — another important tool for your journey.

Night and darkness also took on new meaning for me as I learned that ancient women gathered on hilltops in the light of the moon to celebrate their menses or the stages of their lives. No longer could light be all good and dark be all bad. It is no accident that in our own patriarchal times we have had to call special rallies and marches in our cities to “take back the night.” *CAKES* did not address this issue, and women of color rightly wondered where the goddesses of their cultures were in our very limited slice of women’s religious history. This new course intentionally explores the implications of our language and assumptions about light and dark as a necessary tool for this particular spiritual journey.

It is a great pleasure to me to see that these issues of respect for the Earth, of ritual, of ancestors and of darkness which were not addressed directly in *CAKES* will now be brought dramatically into our awareness.

The Great Goddess, that symbol of divine creativity within the world, emerges here in all her glorious colors and shapes and sounds and I would say with Luisah Teish:

I will not wear
your narrow racial jackets
as the blood of many nations
runs sweetly thru my veins.

Blessed be!

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

*Shirley Ranck is a Unitarian Universalist minister and a psychologist who is the author of the ground-breaking curriculum on feminist theology entitled *CAKES FOR THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN*. She has been active in the Women and Religion movement within the UU denomination since the 1970s. She retired in 1994 and is currently working on a book entitled *FEMINIST THEALOGY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*. She is a member of the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists.*