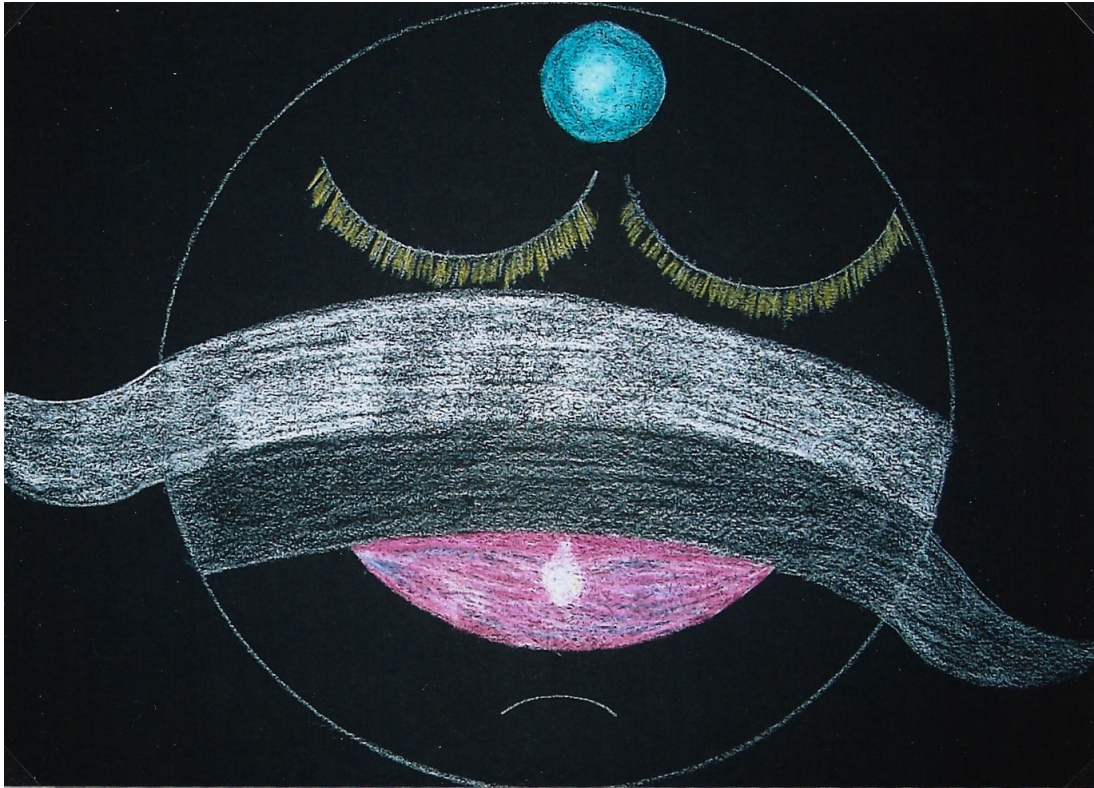


**Feminine Woundings and Voice**  
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## **Feminine Woundings and Voice**

I am Peggy, daughter of Esther, granddaughter of Sarah. All of us products of a patriarchal religion which taught that women must remain silent (I Corinthians 14:34). All of us creative women whose silence rendered us complicit in the clipping of our wings, and those of the girls coming after us.

**Peggy's Story:** When I was six years old, an accident required numerous stitches. My feet were tied to the stirrups of the doctor's examination table, my hips and shoulders were held immobile by nurses. My mother left the room before the inebriated doctor stitched me up without anything to dull the pain.

**Esther's Story:** When I saw the bloody damage done to my little daughter, I passed out, fainted. I woke up alone, in a dim room. Peggy was screaming. The door to the examination room was locked.

**Sarah's Story:** Esther knows little about me. . . only that I died when she was nineteen, and that I created beautiful flower gardens. She witnessed my husband – her father – trample those gardens when I displeased him. She often told me that she didn't want to sleep alone in her bedroom, didn't want to ride to school with her older brother. He was my husband's favorite child and no one had words for what he was doing to my daughter. Lots of boys did things to their sisters.

Three scenarios. Three reasons for the silence. My grandmother had no language for what she knew, on some level, was happening to my mother, her youngest child. My mother passed out, went unconscious, at a time when I needed an alert adult to stop further injury. Add into the mix the silence of the nurses; they knew full well that their

boss was drunk and that their patient needed some sort of anesthesia. They also knew who held the power over their paychecks.

No matter the reason for the silence, I was hurt. The psychological trauma was at least as bad as the physical injury.

And then I repeated the pattern of silence. Often for the same reasons. I went unconscious. I had no words, no language. Someone – an instructor, a boss, social norms – held formal authority over my future.

I had no voice.

Twenty years earlier, quite a different mother-daughter-grandmother story unfolded. A scout for the Australian government, hired to hunt down “half-caste” children, spotted Molly, age fourteen, and her eight-year-old sister Daisy.<sup>1</sup> Fathered by a white man, the girls lived with their mother and grandmother in a village of bush natives. The most sinister threat these people faced was the sudden appearance of the male official who took their children away by brute force.

When Molly and Daisy were ripped from the arms of their mother and grandmother, the women fought back physically and vocally. To no effect. Their protests fell on deaf ears, their punches were overpowered. They ran after the truck that confined the girls, then collapsed in the dirt keening. Instinctual actions failed, but it was not a silent failure. Mother and grandmother did not hand the girls over. Whatever wound developed in the girls, it was not from a mother-betrayal.

Fifteen hundred miles away, Molly watched for the right opportunity to escape the compound that held her and Daisy captive. It came within a few days. She grabbed Daisy’s hand and ran away. Animal-sense guided the sisters through nine weeks of

walking and numerous perils of recapture. Molly's instincts, however, teamed up with imagination and problem-solving. Collaboration between the instinctual and archetypal poles in the psyche unleashes a formidable energy, and the girls found their way home.

A primary symbol in this story of grandmother-mother-daughter reunion is a fence. Built to keep rabbits out of farmland, the fence spans the continent. It separates the natural from the cultivated. In the real-life story of Molly and Daisy, it also connected the orphaned, the lost, the abducted, with home.

Here's how it works. At one end of the fence, the mothers of the village build a fire next to the fence, and keep vigil. Placing their hands on the wire of the fence, they croon, chant, moan. Their physical voices move their spiritual/psychological energy through their bodies and into the wire.

At the other end of the fence, Molly and Daisy use the fence as a physical compass. Helped by shrewd strangers, hunted by authorities, counseled by astute observations of the natural world and by inner warnings, the girls trek back to their roots. Occasionally they too touch the wire of the fence. I have no doubt that the mother-energy permeated the wires of that fence, the ground in which it was anchored, and the very atmosphere along it.

Told in a 2002 movie called "The Rabbit-proof Fence," the story exudes the power of voice and instinct. Instinct is the ground out of which survival and creativity have a chance. It is raw and powerful. Etymologically, the word comes from Latin roots meaning "to prick toward." Instinct spurs behavior, as seen clearly in animal life and in people who live close to the earth. The abducted sisters verbalize their instinctual

yearning: “I want mama. I want to go home.” In their psyches, these expressions become translated into determination and action.

The mothers give tone and volume and sound to their grief, their loss and pain, and their hope. Their expressions signal to the village and to the government workers nearby that, for the mothers, the girls are still alive and so is the mother-love. Their voices call the girls across the desert miles, through the heat and into a bosom of hope.

Not all women acted out of instinct. There were women who betrayed the girls: the white women in the camp who enforced the rules, a bush woman who was the product of the propaganda camp and used them to protect herself instead of protecting them.

Viewed through a psychological lens, the story portrays the milieu in which Western women find themselves. Patriarchal schools and religions indoctrinate us early into separation from ourselves, our mothers and other women. Since this has been going on for centuries, our own mothers hand us over through their silence. Where is the rabbit-proof fence that connects the mother-line with the daughter? Is there a vibration that calls the daughter home?

A simple dream invited me into home on an archetypal level. In the dream,

*As I walk barefoot through a hilly pasture, the sound of singing voices wafts to me on the breeze. I seek them out, and find brown-skinned girls, seven to eight years old, sitting on the ground. They form a several rowed semi-circle before a dark woman who teaches them creation songs and body movements that go with the songs. When the girls see me, they smile and shift so that I can sit among them and learn the songs. I am white, older and bigger, but that doesn't matter. My joining the group*

*doesn't interrupt the cadence or flow of the songs. The girls keep looking at me and grinning; they seem excited to have me learn the songs with them.*

The dream indicates the connection between the Creatrix – the stories of the creative and creating Goddess – and Voice. How can women access their creativity if a male god created, alone and by himself, All That Is? Women cannot find their voice through a male god or through an inner masculine energy or an outer man. Our voices lie gestating in the stories and songs and movements of the archetypal feminine.

As I write this, the pomegranate candle I lit to invoke the presence of the Goddess is about to drown in its own wax. I move it into a container that's more shallow and bigger around. The spark flares up...steadies as the wax pool expands and the flame draws on a larger store of oxygen. The Goddess needs room in our consciousness, wants to breathe within our psyches. Some cultures sanction that feminine presence within their females and even support a woman maturing into the fullness of the feminine through sacred formalities.

Sometime after menarche, a Mescalero Apache girl ceremonially embodies the first woman, called White Painted Woman. This happens at a time of her choosing, when she feels ready to receive the rites with an appropriate attitude. The ritual performance is not an initiation into womanhood; the girl is already a woman. Rather, the occasion is about magnifying the status, role and responsibility of being an Apache woman.<sup>2</sup>

As the featured participant, the woman receives the services of all members of her tribe. Men erect a holy lodge for the private aspects of her ceremony. They build the arena for public events. Boys gather branches for various resting or seating places. A

holy man, called a Singer for his recounting of tribal stories and history, is assigned to her and takes her as his daughter for the rest of her life. Clowns and a set of trained male dancers (impersonating the Mountain Gods) enact the societal structure of her people through dance and music. Her personal father provides gifts for visitors, the dancers, clowns and Singer.

Mother, grandmothers, aunts, sisters and female cousins dance behind the woman in sets of quiet but rigorous performances. A Godmother goes before her. The Godmother also interprets the Singer's recitations into meaningful applications for womanly conduct in the community. Women of the village wash, massage, bejewel, dress and undress the girl-woman throughout her four days of ritual activities.

Being the embodiment of White Painted Woman, the novice is the most holy person in a drama that celebrates womanhood, reenacts creation and ensures the perpetuation of the tribe. Her activities involve strenuous dancing and running, listening and learning, and the blessing of individuals who kneel before her. She demonstrates her stamina and an ability to sacrifice herself for the greater good.

The honoree enters the consecrated period as a woman responsible for her own behavior but on whom no one depends. She emerges from the sacrament as a woman on whom the whole cosmos depends, aware of the enormous power she controls through the proper use of her body.<sup>3</sup> Songs and dances and her own ritual responsibilities have shown her her relationship to the first woman, whose role has been sanctified through time. By extension, the gravitas/dignity of the young woman's personal role is publicly acknowledged. She has obtained a moral reason to be a brave and generous person.

In that culture, my grandmother may have been a Godmother for a peer-participant sharing my ceremony. She would have had the role of making/transmitting meaning instead of keeping herself out of harm's way through the protection of her husband's reputation and ego; an active, visible role effecting a strong member of the tribe rather than a self-effacing role protecting her husband from the discomfort and inconvenience of his own feelings; a role of truth-telling rather than one of covering up; a role of deliberate modeling, the purposeful shaping of a young woman rather than becoming a diminished version of what a woman can be.

In Jungian thought, animus development in women evolves out of the surrounding culture.<sup>4</sup> The animus takes on the values and opinions of the collective in which a girl grows up and is socialized. Most North American women live with a hound of an animus. Fed by commercial distortion, religious devaluation and societal contempt of the feminine modus operandi, this animus undermines and criticizes a woman from the inside. Her mind judges her desires and ideas, belittles them. One of the most common animus-mantras is "Who do you think you are?"

The Second Wave of feminism has had an unfortunate influence on many of us in that it encouraged us to imitate men. The message was that in order to be "equal" to men, we had to do what they did, the way they did them. Even then, it became common knowledge that in order to prove our abilities to reason and achieve in the workplace, we had to do whatever we did twice as well as men did. What were we, as feminists, really trying to prove, and to whom?

In the process, we widened the chasm between our feminine ground and our stance in life. We developed an unnatural ambition, an inferior aggressiveness, a blind and



exhausting drivenness. This kills the creative spirit within a woman's psyche. It devours her womanhood, turning her into an affected/peculiar man, if you will.

Rather than take on the masculine tasks and qualities of men, we women need to relate to ourselves, and that inner disparaging voice, out of our own feeling values. We need to claim what is important to us, even if others (and perhaps we ourselves) do not understand why it's important to us. It is enough that something is important to us.

The guardianship of the value of feeling in our environment is, after all, the ancient responsibility of women. Making a house into a home involves feeling. Bringing a touch of eros into a situation involves feeling. Vitality in a relationship requires feeling/a valuing of connection. Women's way of knowing is different from men's, and it is crucial to a wholesome environment. When we diminish the value of feeling, we lose our voice.

In the Apache ceremony, men's duties demonstrate the place of the male in relation to Woman. The builders of the holy lodge and ceremonial arena show instrumental support. The dancers and clowns make the new women the focus of their performances. The Singer provides emotional and spiritual support while the fathers give in financial terms. Boys participate in small ways throughout the festivities, being both observers and helpers of the men who dedicate their energies and time to the new women.

How would my life, your life, be different if the men of our childhood and adolescence had treated the persons and work and creative expressions of our mothers with appreciation and even reverence?

Can you imagine an older woman monitoring your level of fatigue as the days of your adolescence unfolded, caring enough about you to take you out of the public eye,

take you to a resting place prepared for you? Can you imagine your grandmother explaining tribal songs and creation stories to another young woman, interpretations that do not blame the lineage of women but rather gives her something to live up to?

What would it have been like for our communities to throw a public celebration in honor of our budding womanhood? A celebration rooted in the timelessness of the Goddess, acknowledging our ancestors and leafing into our progeny?

Would we have a voice?

Would we experience our voice as good and holy and proper?

Would we know how to use it?

The elements of Nature play a huge role in the Australian and Apache stories above. The bush-girls depended on the natural world for food and water, for directional orientation and for visions that guided them. The Apache ceremony utilized sanctified space, pollen, feathers, seeds, tobacco and cowhides, among other things. If weather became inclement, ceremonial activities were postponed, but never cut short.

Like my dream of the creation songs, many women's dreams take place outside, in Nature. I have also noticed that most of the books or stories I read of women's awakening to their creative selves involves taking sanctuary in Nature. Our bodies, and therefore our psyches, are connected to the natural world. It seems, then, that healing and restoration requires a conscious connection to the natural world.

I remember traveling through some of the New England states with my husband over a decade ago. We stopped at a small-town celebration that included both white and First Nations cultures. My husband wanted to visit a display of antique cars and we set out on foot to find it. On the way, we passed a sign on which I glimpsed the word

“Seneca.” Some distance away, I saw a black-haired woman wearing a tasseled/ beaded dress of white, with turquoise jewelry. As we hurried past, I heard a full-bodied voice rise out of the earth, penetrate the skies and vibrate everything in between. I stopped in my tracks. My husband pulled me forward. I remember nothing more from that day except that my entire being wanted a voice like that.

A few years later, desperate for meaning and purpose in a life too good to feel so empty, I stumbled across the Seneca healing quest, which is for women (while the vision quest is for men).<sup>5</sup> I undertook the quest, which involved going into solitude for four days, every four weeks, for a year. It was a dangerous and lonely endeavor and I probably should not have done it alone. I have often wondered what it would have been like to do such a quest within the context of a people whose very bones understand the need for it and the power of it. Whose men support it in attitude and action, whose women substantiate it through their own experiences.

Despite the lack of cultural underpinnings for such a thing, my healing quest worked its work on me. I discovered my mute self during those solitudes. I also received the task of teaching her to speak.

I had no idea where to start. How was I—who did not have a voice – how was I to teach my mute self to speak? To express herself?

I have come to understand that a woman’s particular wounding can lead her to her work and yes, into her voice. Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, is an activist for women’s rights and for the natural world. She starts her memoir *In the Body of the World* with these words:

A mother's body against a child's body makes a place. It says you are here. Without this body against your body there is no place. I envy people who miss their mother...The absence of a body against my body created a gap, a hole, a hunger. This hunger determined my life.<sup>6</sup>

The journey to one's work and one's voice is a dangerous endeavor, requiring a descent into the depths of the wound. Without such a regression and examination into the injury, the affliction keeps multiplying itself.

Descent into the personal seeks individual meaning. It connects the dots among personal and family history, beliefs, individual choices, hangups, and the patterns that perpetuate the dysfunction. This regression opens the door to personal understanding, and to compassion for oneself.

A deeper drop seeks greater/timeless meaning, one anchored in time, in history/herstory, in humanity/ancestors at large. Accessing the archetypal realm of the feminine permits a woman's feet to find their earth, her voice to find its source. This territory is the (birthplace) birthing ground of the voice-through-presence of the Mescalero woman, the full-bodied voice of the Seneca woman, the voice vibrating along the wire of the rabbit-proof fence. It is the primordial matrix, and is available to every woman.

Hard to grasp as concepts – such as the goddess or the feminine – our minds latch onto places or aspects of nature to represent the essence typifying an archetype. We associate caves, water and plants with the mysterious, flowing and fertile facets of the feminine. Social roles and developmental stages feature aspects of the feminine: girl-child/maiden, wife/lover/mother, elder/crone. Characteristics fundamental to the

feminine principle include the vulnerability and innocence of maidenhood, the relatedness-through-emotion (eros) of wife/lover/mother, and the gnosis and wisdom of the crone.

Throughout the ages, symbolic meaning has also been attributed to body parts. The physical vulva, when imbued with the potency of the feminine archetype, becomes the yoni. Based on attitudes and practices rooted in antiquity, Jung assigns the qualities of fertility and fruitfulness, “the creative mana, the power of healing...the extraordinarily potent...” to the yoni.<sup>7</sup>

Yet war crimes against women, religious oppression of women, medicalized treatment of the female body and sexist political propaganda desecrate women’s reproductive organs and rights. From rape to polygamy to “the husband stitch” to lack of birth control – to name a few transgressions against women – the vulva is directly and indirectly attacked and devalued.<sup>8</sup> Enantiodromia to this desecration occurs through the sexualizing and idealizing of the female body in the media and in the socialization of boys and girls.

How are we North American women to develop a healthy connection to the instinctual wisdom housed within our bodies? How are we to reach that creative matrix vital to Voice?

It is my experience that we have to look beyond our own culture and time. We have to find the old stories and understand them anew.

To that end, I offer a few yoni-stories. Here is the effect/influence/potency that, by virtue of having a vulva, a female can possess through connection with the energy of the natural/primordial/undiluted feminine.

Sheila-na-gig holds her vulva wide open, legs spread, eyes bulging and mouth grimacing in a most fright-inducing way. A middle-eastern goddess, she guards the doorways to sacred places. Psychologically, she demonstrates the feminine ability to render untouchable a creative seed gestating in the undifferentiated/nourishing waters of conception. Outwardly, a woman may appear, and even feel, menacing in her stubborn stance: her refusal to disclose, her insistence on quality time with herself, her aloofness from societal expectations as wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend. Only someone with a religious attitude recognizes and understands her actions for what they are: a container that keeps her creative work inviolate and her creative voice genuine.

A strange and mostly forgotten Greek goddess, Baubo induces holy laughter. She sees through her nipples and speaks through her vulva, telling indecent tales. Healing comes through her unexpected appearance. It is hard to hand oneself over to Baubo for she is counter-cultural; an appreciation for vulgar jokes is not lady-like. Yet Baubo can give us a feminine-specific language. For example, a few friends and I coined the term “clitzpah.” We found ourselves cringing when we said something like, “I wish I had the balls to do such-and-such.” Of course we don’t have “the balls” for we are not men! But we might have the clitzpah, a female-style of courage and audacity. This is important because gendered words assert identity and encourage us toward male or female attitudes and behaviors.

Long before Eve plucked an apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and reaped the scorn of patriarchy, a Sumerian goddess named Inanna leaned back against an apple tree, lifted her skirts and sang an ode to her vulva. The tree supported her as she took a moment to name the essence/nature of the archetypal yoni: receptive,

enfolding, veiling a cosmic generativity. From there, Inanna traveled to her father's kingdom. During her stay, she kept her head while her father lost his in drink. She came away with what she wanted: authority over the foundations of civilization, including justice, ethics, laws and record keeping. Then she proceeded to add practices that balanced the collective life of her domain, such as music, poetry, the art of beauty.

Apples symbolize the fructifying and fortifying aspect/quality of the feminine principle. In Christian mythology, Eve's taste of the apple brought shame and punishment. Inanna's association with the apple bequeathed a feminine consciousness of right timing and organic expansion. In concrete life, slicing an apple crosswise reveals seeds clustered inside a yonic design. A common piece of wisdom declares that "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." Psychologically the adage advises regular partaking of feminine sensibilities, which involve relatedness to the moment, proper timing and moral ethics. These qualities contribute to authenticity in a woman's Voice. They tell her when to speak up and why, fashioning her message to a particular point in time.

Western women's failures to use our voices have arisen out of physical torture and death for acting according to Woman's nature (think witch hunts), devaluation and deprivation of female roles in society (women once carried authority in public rituals), and the twisting of story into patriarchal tales that pitch goddesses as dependent on or malicious toward men and competitive among themselves. Civilization was not always like that.

In this paper, I am trying to remind us of a neglected legacy – one of instinctual knowledge – that contains a taproot for re-visioning women's voices. A taproot grows

vertically downward, forming a center from which subsidiary rootlets spring. These smaller roots serve to help, or supplement, the core root from which they branch. Speaking up and speaking out, each in our individual way and from our particular passion, nourishes the feminine principle into visibility in a culture gone mad without her.

The yoni represents the psychological authority and creative potency of the feminine principle. On the physical level, that organ of the human body is known as the vulva. When related to through an attitude of reverence for the sensibilities embodied by the goddess, a woman's sexuality communicates self-respect and self-containment. Creative expression is an aspect of her sexuality, articulating her essence and convictions as well as her personality and preferences.

Fundamentally, the yoni embodies the elements of the birth-life-death-rebirth cycle. It is the entryway to all beginnings and endings. As Maiden, it plumps up for pleasure, issuing its own mating call. In its maternal aspect, it is an entryway for fertilization, a protector of gestation, an exit for birth. Participating as Death-crone, it releases the satisfied yearning, tucking itself into a spent shape; it also liberates the monthly nutrient-filled blood that is no longer needed.

The root chakra abides there, concerning itself with grounding, physical survival, origins. Cultures who acknowledge the yoni attribute fragrance, beauty and power to it.<sup>9</sup>

No woman's creative work can be carried to fruition, in a feminine way, without connection to the mythological yoni. The seed for the pregnant endeavor enters there, and the fully-formed being/entity issues forth into the world from there. It carries a sacred power, a holy humor, a sanctified wisdom and a terrible/terrifying truth-telling. We need to listen to it, for the sake of our Voices.



I have an academic voice, which gets me educational degrees and professional status. When writing to individuals whom I know well and care about deeply, my heart-voice chooses my words. My belly-voice comes from my creative womb-space and often surprises me with its comprehension of a matter. I wonder if the world is ready for my vulva-voice with its raw, honest, instinctual speech.

Years ago, a First Nations client of mine who had endured horrific losses told me that she felt it would help if she could just scream and scream and scream. Calgary being only an hour and a half from the Rocky Mountains, I asked her if she could go into the mountains some weekday and do just that. She shook her head and I expected her to say that she couldn't leave the kids alone or that she didn't have a car. Instead, she said, in a whisper, "My grief would turn the mountains to dust."

Her answer reminds me of Muriel Rukeyser words: "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps voice is hard for a woman to come by because we don't apprehend its strength. Perhaps we have bought into the collective fear of its persuasiveness and efficacy.

It feels like a big thing for me to write this article and submit it. Writing my story to stay within the family would be more acceptable. That is my "place" as a woman. Offering it to the larger world feels presumptuous. Over my lifetime, I've been told by many people in many positions that it is wrong for me to share my understanding of things outside the home.

However, more and more women are opening up and coming out. Through education, public roles and works of art, women's ways of being and expressing are

gaining visibility. I want to be part of that expansion of collective consciousness. And so I take the risk of writing my way, of writing out of my feminine sensibilities. This means that what I submit cannot be easily categorized as theoretical or clinical or academic or personal. My hope is to facilitate a compassionate awareness of women's instinctual and bodily woundings as they relate to our creative voices.

Carrying the vagaries and miracles of life in our bodies bestows on women a primal connection to life. This stamps our stories and perceivings and experiences – our Voice – with a lived substance. When our bodies are mistreated or our psyches are stifled, we give voice to that, whether in the form of blank journals, as Terry Tempest Williams's mother did, or flower beds coaxed back to life from intentional destruction as my grandmother did, or tending a fire and keening just inside a fence as Australia's women of the Jigalong Mob did. Women's creativity pours into mothering, into activism, into hospitality, friendship, healing of the soul and body, into the transition of physical death. We are there, exercising our ability to make something out of nothing, to coax something new out of something old. Often we don't recognize what we do because it comes naturally to us. And also because it is not named by our culture.

I am Peggy, daughter of Esther, granddaughter of Sarah.

Peggy's Voice: I come late to my voice. My initiation into being female was a disastrous encounter with the patriarchy: painful, abusive and unconscious. It carried no meaning until I began to uncover ancient rituals and tales. My voice spins off from that ancestral taproot, attempting to enliven old stories with new meaning that is relevant to modern people and times.

Esther's Gift: My dying process took Peggy deep into the archetypal world. In my vulnerability and dependence, I became Child; she became Crone. I failed to protect her, as a child, in the doctor's office and she was hurt unnecessarily. In the end, her helplessness to protect me from the hardships of death delivered her into her voice and its task in the collective world.

Sarah's Legacy: Stitched by my own hands, a quilt made in the double-wedding-ring design lies in Esther's cedar chest in Peggy's house. It bears the colors of my flowerbeds. I dyed flour sacks yellow for the background, and lavender to fill in the oval spaces between overlapping circles. Tiny scraps of fabric left over from clothing that I sewed for my husband and children make colorful rings. This is my voice vibrating along the wire rabbit-proof fence, calling my woman-girls home to the natural/instinctual feminine.

## Endnotes

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