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The Forgotten Amazons

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## Prologue

I was elated when I discovered the variety, complexity and depth of ancient Goddesses. These feminine archetypes from all cultures and eras validated my own opinion of women as free individuals not constrained by domesticity nor restricted to certain roles. Reverence for women encompassed not only the demure maiden and nurturing mother; it included Hecate, Kalo, Caillech. The Goddess was inventive, intellectual, courageous in the face of death and change. Reclaiming Her, I believed would emancipate women to be their own unique selves.

Perhaps I was wrong. The Goddess being reclaimed is chiefly invoked as nurturer: Demeter, Persephone, Hestia. She bears, in fact, an uncanny resemblance to the Virgin Mary, an insipid saint on a plaster plinth. Where are Athena, Pele, Cerridwen?

Sweet, sensual Aphrodite has no place, either, in myths of the nurturing Goddess. In fact the Goddess now being touted as Mother and Nurturer seems a striking examples of 'family values' beneath a pagan veil.

Ancient Goddesses reflected their societies' acceptance of life as a process neither gentle nor uniformly benign. Consider Spider Woman implacably weaving her web of fate. The Goddess was no domestic drudge.

*The Forgotten Amazons* analyzes women's current emphasis on nurturing and predicts some undesirable consequences.

## Modern Myths

The assumption that women are innately gentle, kind and nurturing has been used to promote their participation in all aspects of society on the basis that both the process and product of any group will be more benign under a female influence. Paradoxically, the same assumption is employed to justify restricting women's activities to the home on the grounds that their emotional, illogical natures are unsuited to commerce, politics and academe, and that, furthermore, their families have the only legitimate claim to their nurturing.

In a surprising reversal of the directions taken by the women's movement during the past twenty years, the maternal, nurturing functions have yet again, become the litmus test of a woman's worth. A woman receiving the Nobel prize for implementing world peace, discovering a cure for AIDS *and* saving all endangered species would not be astonished to hear a small, censorious voice demand, "But, when did you last bake cookies?"

A woman, especially a successful woman, who doesn't fit the nurturing mold is

condemned as deviant. An assertive, dynamic, analytical woman isn't expressing her own opinion; she's "acting like a man." Victorious female politicians are simultaneously chastised by men for not being true women and chided by feminists as "tools of the patriarchy."

Generally stereotypes make us uneasy: a claim that certain traits are inherent in a specific race or ethnic group is countered with howls of outrage. One is tempted to speculate that this one persists because a. it comforts women that, although they have little power, they do hold the moral high ground; and b. it provides men with a quasi-biological reason to restrict women's freedom. Whatever the subliminal benefits, asserting that all women are innately gentle nurturers and all men inherently brutal destroyers does a grave disservice to the individual natures of both women and men. It perpetuates the myth of women as passive, timorous, cowering victims, as malevolent a stereotype as any to which we've been subjected. Finally, it is an arrogant denial of our history.

## Our Amazon Heritage

Women's history (human history, really) is full of surprising contradictions to current theories of gender-based behaviour. Despite popular belief, women through the ages were not all loitering round the cave, well or market, conversing in dulcet tones, monitoring the children, planning the evening's repast. Some were polishing swords, testing chariot wheels, planning strategy. They were warriors.

The word *warrior* evokes diverse images. Until the advent of push-button warfare, warriors, whether heroes or villains, were perceived as having strength, courage and endurance. And testicles. *Warrior*, by definition, meant a man. Didn't it? Everyone knows women, those timid creatures, are incapable of acts requiring physical stamina.

Celtic tribes and the Romans sent to subdue them would have snorted in derision at such presumption. Diodorus of Sicily wrote of the Celts who fought the Roman legions: "The women are nearly as tall as the men, whom they rival in courage."<sup>1</sup> Boudaccea, the most well-known Celtic woman warrior, led the Iceni against Romans who invaded her people's land, felled their sacred groves and raped her daughters. Celtic women were tribal chieftains, queens and battle leaders. Ireland had female soldiers until Christian legal reforms in the seventh century forbade women to bear arms. On February twenty-second, seventeen ninety-seven, Welsh women of Abergwan defeated an attempted French invasion. There were female captains and war-chieftains among the Vikings, women warriors in the pre-Aztec matriarchate. The amazons were no myth.<sup>2</sup>

Nor are they confined to past eras. During the Second World War almost a million women served in the Red Army as radio operators, scouts and tank

commanders. Over two hundred thousand were in the air defense forces; the Soviet Air Force had three women's squadrons.<sup>3</sup>

## Warriors: Then and Now

The term "warrior" has been so denigrated that most women are reluctant to claim their Amazon heritage. Understandably, women are reluctant to be associated, except as victims, with the pain and violence of battle. However, that reluctance means that vast sections of women's history, and the insights they offer, have been overlooked.

When we recall cultures in which women were equal, we think of pre-historic tribes or the civilizations of Crete and Malta. Even during patriarchal rule, though, societies in which women were warriors offered them other options. Norse women, for example, held honoured, responsible positions. And, being a Celtic wife and mother was no barrier to being also an educator, officer, horsewoman, trader or judge. "Women", writes Breton historian Jean Markale, "could become head of the family, rule, marry or remain virgin (which merely mean remaining unmarried.) They enjoyed sexual freedom. Celtic marriage was a free contract, divorce by mutual consent was legal, property was held jointly and divided equally upon divorce."<sup>4</sup> Inheritance, including tribal leadership, often passed through the female line. Celtic, or Breton, law prevailed in Ireland until the time of Queen Elizabeth the First when it was extinguished and replaced by British common law - to the chagrin of the Irish people.

Such societies admired artists as much as soldiers, and saw no contradiction in a brave warrior, male or female, being a poet or musician as well.

Cultures in which women were warriors, were, generally, economically and socially egalitarian. Must we, then, revert to a constant state of armed conflict with women combatants? Certainly not. But, we should be aware that the present state of female docility is an aberration; not long ago men followed women into battle, trusted their judgment in trade and law. The current division of power is not genetically ordained. Women, in many cultures and eras, were considered active, strong, capable of leading both mentally and physically.

Celtic women were lusty, proud of their strength and sexuality. For generations patriarchal edicts have denounced the body as evil. Women's bodies, especially, were declared objects of sin and temptation. Sex was for procreation, not pleasure. Today pleasure is expected. Women are becoming more aware of their bodies through aerobics, jogging, weight training. Strength and endurance, though, are still usually reserved for men. Few women know the exhilaration of relying on the ability of their bodies to ascend a mountain, ski challenging terrain or steady a canoe through rapids. They are strangers to the trust and respect among women and men who share such experiences. It is truly sad that

the camaraderies of the climbing rope and kayak is the secret of a few doughty outdoor women.

Finally, warrior women, unlike most women today, were taught to protect themselves.

Nature offers many examples of the earnest determination of a female to protect her young and her territory. No one who's met a mother bear defending her cubs or seen a hen partridge decoying danger from her chicks and, should that fail, standing fiercely to guard them, could believe that females are biologically programmed to be pleading supplicants or helpless victims.

Warriors need not be oppressors. Dr. Helen Caldicott is a warrior. Lois Gibb of Love Canal is a warrior. Women marching to take back the night are warriors. So is any women standing firm and resolute for justice. Names have power. "Rainbow Warrior," the name of the Greenpeace flagship, denotes unwavering defence of the Earth, not pillage and destruction.

## Nature? Or Culture?

We are woefully unaware of our antecedents. Helen Diner's accounts of cities founded by Amazons are not required reading in college history courses. Few aspiring law students ever hear of Breton law. But we *do* know that, for centuries, the institutions of religion, medicine and marriage forced women to adopt subservient behaviour. Rebellious females are labelled mad and severely punished. Under economic and physical constraints intelligent, assertive women held their unruly tongues. How ironic that the very strategies of compliance, self-sacrifice, and submission to another's will, which they feigned for simple survival, are now extolled by many women, and not a few men, as innate feminine virtues; thus ensuring womens' continued subordination.

Are they innate? Analyst Phyllis Chesler disagrees. "Many intrinsically valuable female traits such as intuitiveness or compassion have probably developed through default or male-imposed necessity rather than through biological disposition or free choice ... It is illogical and dangerous to romanticize traits that one purchases with one's freedom and dignity - even if they are nice traits."5

The more fervently women insist that they possess some special insight, mode of action or nearness to nature, the more likely social change and environmental protection will become women's work, while men get on with practical matters - business and government. The nurturing myth can easily be turned against its proponents. Consider consensus decision-making, often touted as a kindly, feminine process. Nobody loses. Quite often, nobody wins, either, as participants in futile round tables and sustainable committees have painfully discovered. Common sense suggests that agreement on some topics is impossible. When it comes

to child abuse, discrimination and pollution, "No" means "No".

We are all individuals, not genetically ordered clones. A man may be tender and loving, a woman bold and resourceful, without either being diminished. Women differ markedly from one another. Kim Campbell, Sheila Copps, Deborah Gray, and Audrey McLaughlin represent a variety of Canadian political parties, because their party affiliations coincide with their personal economic and political philosophies. They are, nevertheless, all women. Obviously gender is not the only significant influence, race, class, family and personal inclination are powerful forces.

Resolving the complex ecological, peace and social problems on this beleaguered planet will take more than a team of nurturing mothers; it will require the skills, determination and participation of us all. The sooner we refrain from coercing one another to comply with a mythical cultural or biological norm, the sooner we can develop our own unique talents.

At a time when the Earth is suffering massive habitat destruction, species extinction, pollution and resource depletion, due to excessive human population, to insist that women's special talent is for domestic nurturing is folly. If biology is indeed destiny, then we are doomed.

It is odd that we so readily accept Nature's word on the relative social positions of women and men, when we accept it on little else. Early death, disease, poverty are not natural phenomena but obstacles to overcome. "How", muses Phyllis Chesler, "shall we come to terms with our bodies and with the natural universe? If 'male' violence and 'female' domesticity is, indeed 'natural', then, it is in humanity's interests to channel or banish these predispositions."6

The nature or culture debate won't be settled any time soon. But the history of our warrior ancestresses should remind us that, in other eras, "Both women and men were respected for their wisdom, courage and physical skill. There was a harmony between the roles of women that was not dependent upon the superiority of one sex over the other, but on an equality in which each should feel comfortable." (Jean Markale)7

## Epilogue

We cannot return to the societies in which early Goddesses flourished. The Earth-based, Goddess-revering spirituality now evolving must be appropriate for our time.

"From the moment an ancient myth is reborn and is charged with new significance, it begins to evolve again..." writes Ginette Paris.8 As we invoke the ancient archetypes, feel them as numinous presences in our lives and commu-

nities, we must embrace them in all their guises, Athena and Artemis as well as Demeter. Otherwise, we will, still, not have the complete feminine; the wise women, the wild woman, will be subjugated to the domestic woman. It is difficult to see how this differs from patriarchal religions.

Paris continues "...it is essential to the ecology of human and spiritual values that we-re-discover the meaning of an intact femineity and that we multiply at the same time, the natural reserves of prairie, virgin forests and spring waters. Let those wild women also be multiplied who know the art of preserving within themselves a force that is intact, inviolable and radically feminine. ... they are precious for humanity because they guard and protect an endangered species, the girl, the virgin, the Amazon, the archer - untameable and undomesticable primitive feminity."<sup>9</sup>

Else we may find, to our amazement, that we have merely forged our own chains, and, in the words of the song "...stronger than before!"

Blessed Be.

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