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**HOW WOMEN
WILL SAVE
THE WORLD**

**MIA FARROW
ON LIFE WITH
WOODY**

**ANDREW VACHSS:
CRIME CRUSADER**

**CONFESSIONS OF
DEBRA WINGER**

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REPORT PART 1

On a barren patch of ground in southern Kenya, women bend under the hot sun, planting trees – for firewood, for feeding their children, for saving native forests.

What men have cut down, women will make grow again, they say.

At the same time in Britain, a scientist appears before a government committee to make a stand against what she sees as a misuse of reproductive technologies. She is worried about embryos being used for experimentation.

On a hilltop in southern California, beneath a pale full moon, 13 women join hands in a circle to sing to the earth goddess Gaia. Their voices, timid at first, slowly gather and rise on the still evening air. "Where I sit is holy, holy is the ground ..."

In eastern Australia, housewives gather in a suburban living room to protest against a proposed toxic waste dump. "Put it in the mayor's backyard," they shout. "Why should our kids die?"

And during the past few years, Aboriginal women, many of whom believe they have a special relation-

ship with the earth and a sacred responsibility to protect it, have campaigned vigorously against mining on Queensland's Stradbroke Island and at Coronation Hill in the Northern Territory, and against the proposed Cape York space base. As one female elder put it: "It's time for us women to take the lead, not only to protect our communities and our families but the earth, too."

Welcome to the surprising, controversial, multifaceted "third wave of the feminist revolution", the place where ecology and women, earth and her daughters, intersect. Welcome to ecofeminism.

"Eco-what?" asks the woman at a barbecue in Brisbane. "Don't think much of that," she says.

"Why?" I ask.

"All that bra burning and stuff."

"But it isn't about bra burning. It's about saving the earth."

"Oh well, I'm all for that."

"And also about making life better for women."

"Mmm."

In the early part of this century, Western women fought for the right to vote, to divorce and have custody of their children. In the Sixties and

ECOFEMINISM IS THE THIRD WAVE OF THE FEMINIST REVOLUTION. IT SAYS THAT THE FEMININE VALUES OF NON-VIOLENCE, COOPERATION AND NURTURING WILL HELP TO CONNECT US WITH NATURE AND PREVENT "ECOTASTROPHE". VIRGINIA WESTBURY PRESENTS PART ONE OF A TWO-PART REPORT.



Seventies, they fought to have the same career and economic opportunities as men and eradicate sexual exploitation.

Today, the struggle has gone global and green. From as far afield as Africa, the Americas, Europe and Australasia, women are struggling to save not just themselves but the whole of nature as well.

In the process, some are questioning the cultural and religious foundations of the patriarchal system which has kept them and nature under the thumb for more than 4,000 years. They are looking beyond "god the father" and asking, "What happened to god the mother?" Ecofeminists are calling for the re-empowering of the "feminine".

This is not a simple or superficial movement, a case of "feminism gone green". Indeed, many see ecofeminism as part of a worldwide shift in beliefs and sensibilities which, taken in combination with the philosophies of holism, deep ecology and the "new physics", represents a movement perhaps as profound as that which preceded the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution.

In Australia, ecofeminism has been embraced by environmental and political organisations, including the Australian Democrats and various Rainforest Action Groups. Its ideas have influenced science, planning, the arts, academia and

religion. Several universities have featured courses on it and it was one of the major themes at the international Ecopolitics Conference in Sydney in April.

Dr Patsy Hallen, a senior lecturer in environmental philosophy at Perth's Murdoch University, has just received a \$100,000 grant to further its study. The money has enabled one of the world's leading ecofeminist scholars, Professor Carolyn Merchant of the University of California, Berkeley, to take up a teaching position at Murdoch University.

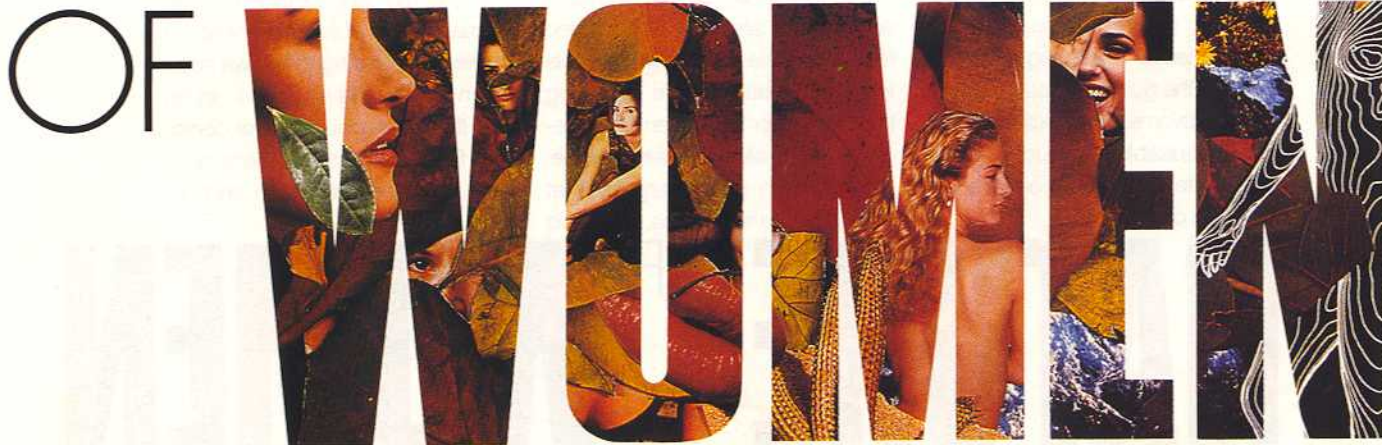
As a movement, ecofeminism appeared in 1974. Since then, a handful of books and papers have been published, including Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (Harper and Row, 1978) and Carolyn Merchant's *Death of Nature* (Harper and Row, 1980). A conference was held in Los Angeles in 1987 and networks and groups have mushroomed around the world, mostly in Britain and the United States.

The central thesis of ecofeminism is simple: exploitation of women and of nature go hand in hand and you can't solve one problem without solving the other. Until we do away with domination in *all* forms, we won't really make things better, either for ourselves or the planet. Essential to the process is adopting, in relation to nature and each other, more "feminine" values of non-violence, cooperation, nurturing.

In this, religion plays a key role. Christianity, Judaism and Islam reinforce patriarchal domination of women and nature as a "law of god", say some ecofeminists, so they advocate a return to the nature-based religion of the ancient earth goddess, Gaia, "god the mother".

While ecology is the scientific study of relations between species and the environment, deep ecology – the philosophy behind many green groups, including Greenpeace – maintains that humans have a spiritual connection with nature. Like deep ecology, ecofeminism argues that we need to form a new relationship with nature, one that emphasises connectedness. We need to see ourselves as part of nature's web. Ironically, this was exactly the view earlier societies held – and many traditional people still do. It only changed in the seventeenth century when the Scientific Revolution ushered in a new view of the cosmos as a machine to be controlled.

But while deep ecology ascribes the problem to human dilemma, ecofeminism sees the masculine impulse to dominate as culpable. As Sydney ecofeminist and academic Ariel Salleh puts it, change will not come until "men are brave enough to rediscover and love the woman inside themselves". Women also have to reconnect with their inner feminine impulses. >



This new wave of feminism is not without its critics, many of whom are women. There are concerns that the "women equals nature" aspect of ecofeminism will bring back the old "biology as destiny" argument, which limits women politically and personally. There are criticisms that this greening of feminism is "wishy-washy" on reform and issues of social justice, which are still areas of concern for women.

Some people are concerned that the movement is made up mainly of white intellectuals or middle-class spirituality seekers. And people such as former Senator Susan Ryan are concerned about the implications of turning ecology into a feminist issue. Ryan suggests that many of the goals advocated by the green movement – recycling, use of non-disposable products – are labour intensive and will come at the expense of women.

Perhaps the aspect of ecofeminism which has attracted the strongest criticism is its connection to the goddess. Some feminists argue that any movement which encourages women to be swept up in religious fervour is, once again, disempowering them.

Despite the many reservations voiced from various sectors about feminism's new wave, the future of the movement is undeniably strong.

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Its greatest strength lies in its very diversity, the quilt-like patchwork of beliefs and activities which make it up – everything from goddess worship to saving trees in India. Its greatest charm is its lack of dogma, a "one true path". The message is that, like life itself, diversity is enriching and powerful. Having many approaches does

not weaken, it broadens.

It's a hard message for us in the West to receive because we have long been taught to value centralised power. Change, we think, should come from above. If ecofeminism preaches anything, it is that there is no "ultimate truth", just a lot of little ones.

To that end, perhaps, many ecofeminists are wary of going too far with the "woman equals feminine" analysis. The last thing they want is for the movement to become anti-male or anti-masculine. Ecofeminism simply argues that male and female values, men and

women, have to come into balance.

Another strength lies in its grassroots, non-hierarchical approach. It demonstrates that community-based movements do work. Again, the force for change comes from below, where it counts. "Think globally, act locally" may become the motto for the twenty-first century.

And ecofeminism has the potential, along with philosophies such as deep ecology, to radically alter our relationship with nature. That relationship has undergone distinct shifts in the past few millennia, from fear and awe to fear and hatred, to fear and contempt and now an awful lot of guilt.

The World Watch Institute, a US-based independent watchdog which each year produces an analysis of economic, agricultural and environmental trends on a worldwide basis, has given us a mere 10 years to clean up our act. Beyond that, it says, we will have irreversible environmental damage and "ecotastrophe".

If the eighteenth century ushered in the Age of Reason, the twenty-first century may bring us the Age of Humility – an age which will bring us into a new and radically different relationship with nature and each other. What is required is not some generalised New Age notion of "all is one" but a calm, coherent philosophy of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

At the moment, there is hysteria on many sides of the green fence. If ecofeminists are right, that will settle down in time and we will all get on with the serious business of deciding, for the twenty-first century at least, where women, men and nature connect. >





GISELLE THOMAS

ecofeminist

US war machine he so vehemently opposes. Who is he to talk about violence and aggression? she asks.

The scene encapsulates precisely the struggle going on in the peace and environmental movements. It's about tactics, and ecofeminism is at the heart of the issue.

Many women, Thomas among them, say they are tired of macho "cowboy stunts", of warrior-like, high-level confrontations – shimmying up the sides of warships, surprise raids, punch ups with police or security guards. Most of all, they're annoyed about the way the movement has become dominated by men and male thinking.

"Women do much of the work in the environment movement but most of the paid jobs go to men," she says, adding that most major environment groups in Australia are headed by men: ACF, Greenpeace, Worldwide Fund for Nature.

Whenever she encounters heroic types – be they Greenpeace "cowboys" or members of the paper-waving brigade she calls "the rabid socialist mob of boys" – she wonders what they think they're working for, quickly adding that egotism, self-aggrandisement and the desire for rapid promotion up the ranks of the environmental/reform movements loom large in her suspicions. Women's motives are different, she thinks.

"A lot of them are like me and Lakshmi [her friend] ... we work for Gaia." An active member of the

New Left Party and Brisbane's Rainforest Action Group (RAG), 25-year-old Thomas is a firm believer in grassroots democracy and is sceptical of traditional left-wing rhetoric and tactics. Rainforest Action Groups boast non-hierarchical structures. There are no executives, meetings are not chaired, leadership roles are rotated and personal relationships are as important as the organisation's goals.

"That way, it's harder for individuals to go power-tripping. We try to show that everyone is important in our movement."

Unlike other green groups, RAG has "excellent police relations". Before the group embarks on a protest, members inform everyone: police, media, unions and the target of the protest itself. In a recent action against the importing of rainforest timbers, only a couple of police turned up, took a quick look and left again, says Thomas.

It was effective, too. The media covered it. And "one man who'd brought an order of timber from Sarawak took it back to exchange it for slash pine," she says.

Thomas is currently working on a campaign to save bush blocks in the Brisbane area by getting local neighbourhoods to adopt them, take over their care and keep an eye out for developers.

"Our victories are small and few and far between, but we're not just looking for a change in the way people vote. We want a change in consciousness. All this is much bigger than any of us think. What's important is that we just do our bit, walking with Gaia every day." >

On a Wednesday night, at a pub in Brisbane's West End, about 150 people are gathered for "pub politics", a political talk fest and verbal free-for-all. The topic for discussion is strategies for peace, but all anyone seems to want to talk about is war.

Young men, their faces flushed with anger, argue passionately about which side is to blame for the Gulf War. Phrases such as "American imperialism", "domination" and "violence" float on the steamy, smoke-filled air. It's hard to hear above the shouting.

Giselle Thomas gets to her feet. "We're supposed to be talking about peace!" she reminds them. Then, imitating one activist's rather comic gestures and bellicose manner, she proceeds to tell him exactly how his tactics are the same as the

THE NATURE OF WOMEN

DAVID SUZUKI

environmentalist

David Suzuki tries not to be one of those with an "apocalyptic mind set", but he can't help agreeing that we have only 10 years to get our environmental act together.

"I'm trying not to be pessimistic, but I think the picture's very bleak," says the charismatic professor of genetics from the University of British Columbia, author of *It's a Matter of Survival* and *Inventing the Future* (Allen and Unwin), and media star, the man who has perhaps done more than anyone else to bring the world environmental crisis to the attention of ordinary people.



David Suzuki argues not just for the introduction of a list of do-good environmental measures – such as banning polystyrene cups and advocating limitations on car use – but a change in real attitudes.

What he's worried about is whether 10 years will be enough time in which to avert the consequences of global warming, deforestation, holes in the ozone layer, the extinction of species and the catastrophic dumping of toxic wastes into the oceans.

He and ecofeminism are "completely in line", he says. It encompasses "everything that I express as the need in attitudinal change". Non-hierarchical, community-based politics and a spiritual link to nature are the best hopes for planetary survival, he says.

A more feminine orientation is critical: "Without it, we're done."

Women have to get involved and they must abandon traditional male methods, otherwise they will achieve little. As a good example he cites Canadian Audrey McLaughlan, the leader of the Social Democrats. Suzuki says he thinks she has made a significant difference in the way her party and politics in general operate.

"She doesn't just walk in and say, 'This is my agenda, this is what I want'. She says, 'Here are the issues' and proceeds to sit and listen. To me, hers is the only party which is making a difference."

As for Australia's Environment

Minister, Ros Kelly, "Her heart's in the right place, but it's clear she's very helpless, hemmed in by much bigger cabinet ministers."

Developing a spiritual relationship with the earth and each other is also "absolutely central". Suzuki says he has witnessed an increasing number of eminent scientists talk in these terms. Recently, ecologist Paul Ehrlich called for a "quasi-religious change" in human attitudes. And the famous Harvard biologist, E.O. Wilson, said of other species, "We have to come to know our kin, to love and cherish them."

Suzuki sees big government, big science and big money as the main threats to the environment. "I'm into bioregionalism. We've got to get back to decentralised, self-sufficient community organisations". He's all for grassroots actions. What we have to do most of all, he says, is say, "I'm staying". People nowadays move around too much and lose connection with their land.

"We've got to root ourselves in places and become committed to them so that when a company comes up with a 10-year plan we'll say, 'To hell, I want a 500-year plan'."

Right now, Suzuki is setting up a foundation which will look at strategies for making the kinds of radical transitions needed within the next 10 years or so. Half the board will be women.

Suzuki hopes that the economic recession currently striking all over the world will force people into smaller communities and help them to appreciate the joys of decentralised living.

Ten years is not really enough time, he says, and we've already wasted one of them. "We're fighting

over the last little bits of what this planet has left and the forces ranged against us (multinationals and the like) are very, very powerful." □

THE **NATURE** OF **WOMEN**

REPORT PART 2

Eve was framed

Whatever happened to God, the Mother?" This is what ecofeminists around the world are asking. Inherent to ecofeminism, the so-called "third wave of feminism" that argues that exploitation of women and nature go hand in hand, is a return to the nature-based religion of the earth goddess, God the Mother.

Archaeology has revealed that long before Christianity, Judaism or Islam, and perhaps tens of thousands of years before the advent of a male god, humans worshipped a robust, fertile earth goddess.

Later known under a variety of names – Ishtar, Isis, Erda, Kali, Ceridwen, Gaia, Kunapipi – she was worshipped from Australasia to the Siberian plains, from China to the Americas. In Europe, she was often represented in three aspects: maiden, mother and crone, corresponding to the three phases of human life (youth, middle and old age) and to the phases of the moon (waxing, full, waning) and the cycle of crops.

In the story of Adam and Eve, the snake tempts Eve, who in turn

tempts Adam and inherits, as many of us were instructed as children, the moniker "mother of original sin".

Religious scholars such as feminist theologian Mary Daly have pointed out that this famous biblical tale is really a political allegory for the ousting of the goddess. By blaming Eve for the "fall" of humanity, for the advent of death, patriarchy was trying to give us a good reason why the goddess had to go.

In other words, Eve was framed.

Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, a professor at the University of California in Los Angeles, has a theory as to why. She traces the ousting of the goddess in the Middle East to the arrival about 6,000 years ago of pale-skinned Indo-European invaders. These aggressive tribes had replaced their earth goddesses with a single warrior god whose home was the heavens or sky.

In order to assert their power, the invaders had to convince everyone that "Father Sky" was *the* god for the times. And thus, by liberal application of the sword, Mother Earth gave way to Father Sky, whose values were violence and domination rather than diversity, care and compassion. The conquest of the feminine, of women, was the first step toward the eventual conquest of the earth.

IN THE BEGINNING,
THERE WAS GOD
THE MOTHER.
WHEN SHE BECAME
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GODDESS. BY
VIRGINIA WESTBURY.



Hand in hand with the decline of the goddess went the political decline of women, claims Gimbutas. Matrilineal and matriarchal societies soon disappeared. Priestesses of the goddess religions were reviled and put to death, as were the witches of Europe in later Christian times.

Feminists argue that modern Christianity, Judaism and Islam are extensions of these earlier struggles, and that each embodies varying degrees of misogyny, from the exclusion of women from priesthoods to female genital mutilation. That is why many feminists now reject those religions and see a return to the goddess, Mother Earth, as their answer.

As one disillusioned woman puts it: "How can you believe in yourself as a female – believe in the values of nurturing and caring for people and the earth – when your religious tradition treats those things as secondary, even worthless?"

In the United States and Britain, there are literally thousands of these neo-pagan groups, ranging from simple "circles" of women to whole churches, devoted to the worship of the ancient spirits of the earth.

In Australia, there are as yet no collectives or schools devoted to teaching the religion of the god-

dess, but a casual survey reveals hundreds of small groups. Rituals, where they happen at all, are performed at a basic level – perhaps a gathering of women under a full moon to sing songs and pass blessings around a circle, or the sharing of bread in a sacred sense.

At Byron Bay on the New South Wales North Coast, a small group has been meeting regularly over the past two years to celebrate milestones: births, marriages, the arrival of puberty. Recently, a 15-year-old girl was the focus of what was called a "menstruation ritual". The women simply sat in a circle, sang songs, shared their own experiences and welcomed the girl into their society. Afterwards, they had a party.

Women's ritual is all about honouring the female body.

While very few Australians go so far as to call themselves witches or goddess worshippers, many see ritual as a vitally important part of the re-empowering process. As one

academic explains, "You can talk ideas till kingdom come, and the unconscious is not really listening, but sit in a cave in the moonlight and it's all attention."

Not everyone wants to abandon the church. Many remain and attempt to "subvert from within", as one woman laughingly puts it, incorporating feminine imagery and rituals, not always with the blessing

of their superiors. Catholic nuns have been particularly vigorous in this respect, both in Australia and the United States. Many advocate ordination for women and quietly honour the feminine in their liturgies, no longer deferring to God, the Father.

"What happened to God, the Mother?" may be a simple question,

but it is one packed with political dynamite. To make a new relationship with nature, we have to make a new relationship with the feminine, they say, and that involves bringing back good old Mother Isis, Gaia, Ishtar, Demeter, Kunapipi ... >

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THE
CONQUEST
OF THE
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OF THE EARTH.
”

COLLAGE BY JULIET COHEN



the search for wholeness

You get excited," says Maren, explaining why she is no longer a Christian. "You start to believe in yourself again. She gives me an image of myself as sacred."

Scattered around a neatly furnished unit are understated symbols of her new beliefs – pictures of women, books on the goddess and a charming antique iron cauldron. There are no crystals, beads or kerchiefs, no cats with dark, smouldering eyes lurking in corners.



PRUE RUSCOE

In her elegant cotton sundress and simple jewellery, Maren doesn't look anything like a heretic or a New Ager, but then you quickly learn that she would never think of herself in those terms anyway. An academic, who is married with two sons, she abandoned Christianity three years ago in a move she describes as

akin to "getting out of jail".

"It simply became irrelevant to me," she says matter-of-factly while sipping her coffee. "I'm not angry at the church. It just didn't make sense any more."

It was a major step for someone who had grown up Catholic and spent several years in a convent. She had read Mary Daly and other feminist theologians and was appalled at how all feminine influences had been driven out of the church. The turning point came while she was in London.

"I just couldn't handle another Christmas. I found the whole thing nauseating, knowing what I did by then about the way Christianity had appropriated the old religion." So she went to a ceremony to celebrate the pagan festival of the winter solstice instead. "It was wonderful," she says. "For the first time, I felt connected to myself and to the earth."

Before leaving Britain, she attended a workshop on the goddess. With 29 other women, most of whom, to her astonishment, called themselves witches or priestesses, she found herself chanting, singing and taking part in group trance sessions. It was a watershed in her life.

"I feel much more vibrant, alive, powerful – more in charge of my life, as I've been handed back control over my body, my spirituality," she says. "What it makes you see is that your experiences are valid, that your hopes and dreams aren't just the product of a crazy, pre-menstrual female mind."

Far from alienating her from her husband or sons, it has deepened her relationship with them. "I have a tremendous sense of responsibility, to myself and others now. With no-one telling me how to behave, what to think, I feel as if I've grown up a lot. I'm no longer a child," she explains.

"I know the women's movement is supposed to

do these things but, for me, it didn't happen until I encountered the spiritual dimension."

She has begun to devise her own rituals. Recently, she blessed herself and her new home in a simple ceremony using family objects and photographs. A Catholic clergyman participated, but it was Maren who led, much to the confusion of her younger son. Pointing to the priest, he asked: "Isn't *he* supposed to be the holy one, Mum?"

the goddess of freedom

All over Australia, women who have found their careers empty, their relationships sour and their hopes dead are turning to ecofeminist-style therapies as a way to liberate themselves from pain and anger, to break addictions and transform their lives.

According to many ecofeminists, if patriarchy imposes limits on women, brutalises and uses us, crimps our hopes and shackles our dreams, it is nothing compared to the death-dealing rage and self-hatred we carry inside ourselves.

The crippling of the female soul, they say, is the real legacy of centuries of domination and until we find a way to deal with that, we haven't a hope of saving anything – neither the earth *nor* ourselves.

The real goal of ecofeminist spirituality, whether it is practised in a sacred or secular context, is about healing the pain of living, or reaffirming the power of the feminine. It is about finding the goddess, not as some external beneficent mother figure, but within.

Left: Jungian therapist Elena Burton uses the notion of the goddess to heal patients. Right: Pat Nolan believes that women have to be reunited with their bodies.



New York therapist and author Sylvia Brinton Perera uses the myth of the descent of the goddess into the underworld as a metaphor for women's often painful search for themselves. Just as Persephone went down into Hades, so many modern women have to "descend" into the very darkest parts of their psyches, into depression and even despair, before they can reintegrate and find out who they truly are, Perera says.

By her analysis, depression is an essential part of the process. What is needed are reliable guides to encourage women to make the descent and re-emerge on the other side: a kind of initiation process.

A Sydney-based Jungian therapist, Elena Burton, agrees. She sees many "daughters of the patriarchy" both in her private practice and in workshops she conducts, in which she uses the goddess as a way to explore inner processes – Athena for hard-driving intellectual types (animus-driven women, as Jungians term them), Demeter for issues of mothering, Persephone for those undergoing change or crisis.

Burton uses traditional native American methods to help both men and women make transformations. "The process is great for healing inner wounds, resolving anger and coming to forgiveness," she says. "You see sometimes the most dramatic changes at the end of it."

Most of the problems she sees centre around powerlessness, wounded femininity and rage at the patriarchy, most of it turned inwards. "Despite achievements, many women simply don't feel they are worth much." One of the biggest

problems is what she calls the "undifferentiated masculine" – women who adopt male values and methods, perhaps because they identify with their fathers. They are in a deep, black rage at patriarchy because of the loss of their feminine soul and because as hard as they try to compete on men's terms, they are still excluded.

"A lot of them are very powerful, gifted, highly intellectual, good at politics, at organising. But they are out of touch with their bodies and often they're prone to addiction. What drives them is their woundedness, their feeling of being unloved. They want respect, to find their mark, because they feel they're only valued for what they do, not who they are."

Above all, Burton encourages women to get in touch with their bodies, something patriarchal society teaches us to avoid. "Women have to gain the humility to learn from their bodies – I don't mean necessarily by giving birth, but to tune into their body's language and feel a sense of self-love."

Self-love is what Brisbane therapist Pat Nolan wants both women and men to achieve. Her own life has been an example of how the process works.

"I grew up on a farm, deeply in touch with the seasons and the cycles of the earth," she begins. But the idyll ends there.

Abandoned by her family at five and sent to an orphanage, she ran away, started work at 12, married at 16 and was widowed by the time

she was in her early twenties. After eight children and a series of unsatisfactory relationships, she hit rock bottom at age 40, in a crisis over identity. The descent began.

After three years in



MARK BURGIN

therapy, she re-emerged, coming to the conclusion that, "What was missing was my connection with my body". So she studied massage and Chinese medicine, did a masters program in Transpersonal Psychology, started a degree in religion (but didn't complete it) and launched into a career as a full-time "bodywork therapist".

Nowadays, Nolan uses touch, breathing, rhythm, posture and visualisation to help men and women integrate "material arising out of their unconscious".

This is not therapy in the traditional sense of all talk, no action. Everything is grounded in movement and the body.

"If they can feel it in their bodies, they understand it better and they can integrate it," she explains.

Nolan's goddess is Demeter, Mother Earth. She sees a lot of adults who have been abused as children, men and women who have had little or no mothering or what she describes as "mechanistic mothering".

Nolan believes that men are just as seriously damaged by patriarchy, and for them there are few "initiations" and little hope of reintegration. Ironically perhaps, "In my workshops a lot of women end up singing for the healing of their menfolk," she says. "It's not just women who need the goddess. Men need her, too."

>



REPORT

whatever happened to Sister Death?

Remember nuns? If you grew up Catholic, you could never forget. My own girlhood is haunted by them: pale women in dark robes with darker minds, giant rosary beads and crucifixes dangling from their belts, faces sweating beneath cruel starch – Sister Death, the “Inquisition in Skirts”, we called them.

In summer they would arch their necks like geese, skin instinctively yearning to be free of the monstrous headgear. I figured it was what made them mean, what caused them to bring a ruler slamming down on eight-year-old knuckles when the owner of those knuckles forgot a line or two of her catechism.

Barbara Reynolds Hutchinson does not look like any nun I remember. For a start, she isn't dressed for the part in her fashionable print ensemble, soft grey hair pulled back into ever-so-feminine chignon and intelligent grey eyes fixing me with a humorous stare. She is recounting her early days in the convent.

“I guess I was a crypto free thinker,” she says without a hint of shame, and laughs. The nuns I knew would never describe themselves as “crypto free thinkers”. The nuns I knew didn't use words like “crypto”, nor did they talk about “the goddess”, but that is exactly the topic Hutchinson brings up next.

“She is just one of the many images of holy mystery we call God. I suppose God is really beyond gender, and yet images are what we've got to work with. That's why it's important to reclaim the goddess as an aspect of the deity.” I wonder what Cardinal Ratzinger of the Vatican would say about that.

“Women have to find a new feminine heroic model for themselves, not the lone ranger type, but a



cooperative earth-restoring heroine, and we have to invest the old symbols, the old archetypes with new meaning,” she says.

Converted to Catholicism at 18, joining the Franciscan order 10 years later, Hutchinson grew up without religion at all. She always had a mystical leaning, she says. “I can remember as a child sitting on the back verandah. I guess I was only about four or five. A big storm came rolling in, and I remember feeling a tremendous connection with everything in nature.”

Her early days in religious life weren't easy. “I hated the voicelessness of women in the church. Nuns were expected to be quaint and slightly dumb.”

These days, Hutchinson is one of a growing number of Australian women in the church who are leading a quiet revolution away from patriarchy. “I have a restless relationship with the Church,” she confesses. “It is my spiritual home, but the mystic tradition and the search for meaning don't sit well with the structures of institutions.”

In essence, Christianity is not anti-feminine, she thinks. She is proud of her Franciscan heritage (St Francis was a true nature mystic, she reminds me) and wants the church to include women as it always should have. Ordination is not really the issue. “I'm for it in prin-

ciple, but not now. The danger is we might become co-opted. I would like to wait until the hierarchy crumbles more.” Why become priests and put themselves under the thumb of Rome, she wonders.

As director of the Franciscan Life Centre, a workshop and study centre in suburban Brisbane, Hutchinson has autonomy. Workshops

featuring goddess themes and women's spirituality regularly crop up in her class catalogues. She also likes to perform her own small rituals. “It delights me to stand in a circle under the full moon. It soothes the pain of continued striving.”

Her personal image of the goddess is Hecate – the crone, bringer of wisdom.

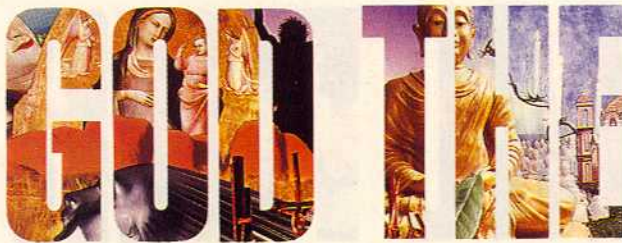
In groups, she uses psychodrama – perhaps re-enacting roles from the Trojan women – to help women get in touch with their powerlessness and turn it around. (“I choose Cassandra, who speaks the truth in spite of being ignored and put down.”) This might be followed by a “eucharistic” ceremony in which she passes around bread and wine.

“Into the bread we speak of our lives as women; the pain of growing. Into the wine we speak of our joy and hope for the future.”

This is what she means by reinvesting old symbols.

What does it do for her? “It gives me the strength to continue being Cassandra, to continue speaking the truth,” she says, tossing back an unruly strand of hair.

Left: Barbara Reynolds Hutchinson fears the ordination of women will only co-opt them to the Vatican patriarchy. Right: Starhawk believes that witchcraft has been slandered for political reasons.



a witch for our times

When asked about her religion, best-selling author Starhawk says, "I'm a witch". She says it without the bat of an eyelid, or the eyelid of bat for that matter. She feels not the slightest hesitation, she tells me, although there are times when the "devil worshipper" tag and "ugly witch" stereotype, not to mention those endless odious broomstick jokes, become too much to bear.

"To me, using the word is part of re-educating people – a way of bringing into focus the terrible persecutions of indigenous healers down the centuries and of reclaiming our power as women," says Starhawk, nee Miriam Simos, a woman who, with her rounded figure and playful, humorous face, has been described as looking "nothing like a witch", certainly not the caricature hags of Hollywood films.

To her followers, she is something of a cult figure, the "high priestess" of feminist religion.

Raised in New York and Jewish, she took up the "craft" when she was just 17, because it held both sex and nature to be sacred.

Inspired by a vision, she adopted the name Starhawk in her mid-twenties and published the best-selling *Spiral Dance, A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (Harper and Row) in 1979, followed by two other books. *Spiral Dance* has become a manual of rituals for both aspiring witches and those interested in honouring nature.

"Actually, the word witch originally meant 'healer'. It comes from the root (wicca) which means to bend or to shape – somebody who can bend or shape your fate." Healing the inner self is what it is all about.

Witchcraft has nothing to do with devil worship, she insists. That's just propaganda put about by churches to discourage men and women from branching out into a spiritual practice it cannot control. For Starhawk, it's exactly that freedom, the lack of patriarchal control and domination, which is so compelling.

Rituals, many of them based on old Celtic rites, focus on celebrating the seasons and "rites of passage", the transition through various stages of life – birth, puberty, marriage, old age, death. The cyclic nature of life is emphasised. Goddess worshippers say they come to appreciate death as part of that cycle, and so they don't fear it as much.

Starhawk, an ardent activist – she recently spent months campaigning against the Gulf War – has always stressed the virtue of working to change the world. She gets annoyed when people accuse feminist spirituality of making women passive.

She is wary of talking about "male and female energy" or overly identifying nature or women with the feminine. "It enforces stereotypes in our mind of what women and men are supposed to be," she says.

"To me, ecofeminism isn't about trying to bring more female energy into the world. It's about challenging the constructs of power and making links and connections between all forms of oppression. It's about looking at the different ways that living systems and the earth support, sustain and interconnect with each other."

One of the biggest forms of oppression has been religious. Accordingly, "we never proselytise or try to convert people," she adds. "If

people feel they need to relate to the goddess, I provide some information and tools, but a lot of people have a good relationship with the earth without putting religious terminology on it."

Nowadays, her time is divided between teaching courses on witchcraft and the goddess all over the world and working on another book, this time a novel.

Starhawk is not opposed to other religions. "You have to have respect for all traditions, because there's some truth in each. It's up to each individual to find the one that calls to them." She still likes to observe some Jewish festivals, but at the same time is aware of the need to



change the meaning of certain old religious symbols.

"If your idea of the sacred is a god who is removed from the world, then the world itself is devalued and we have licence to exploit it. But if we return the sacred to the world, our entire relationship with earth has to change and we have to start respecting life."

Respecting and loving life is what the goddess is all about. □

