

# Goddess Puja in California: Embodying Contemplation Through Women's Spirituality Education

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Résumé de l'article

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# *Goddess Puja in California: Embodying Contemplation Through Women's Spirituality Education*

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NANÉ JORDAN

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## **Women's Spirituality Education**

This essay describes an embodied, relational ritual view of contemplative practice through story sharing of my experience of a "Goddess puja." I undertook this puja—a devotional ritual offering—with two other women in the context of exploring and documenting the experiences of seven faculty and student alumni, myself included, in a Women's Spirituality Master of Arts (WSMA) degree program located in the San Francisco Bay area. I briefly examine Women's Spirituality education as a graduate degree program that intersects spirituality and social justice concerns. I then explain how I was drawn to study in this emergent field from my background as a lay midwife. I am invested in social change processes that value women's embodiment, birth-giving, and life itself. I locate understandings of spirituality and contemplative practices as situated in the field of Women's Spirituality education. Introducing two of my study co-participants, Dianne Jenett and Judy Grahn, I offer the reader a context for understanding the Goddess puja practice. The culmination of this paper is a narrative of my lived experience of practicing Goddess puja. Through the descriptive qualities of life writing, I aim to bring the interested reader alongside me. My concluding remarks relate the value of this contemplative practice to my learning journey as a scholar and birth advocate. I thus consider the value of contemplative practices in education for both personal insight and social justice through the reflective lens of my own experience.

Originally located at New College of California, the WSMA program is now directed from Sophia University in Palo Alto, California. Women's Spirituality, as a graduate degree program, is a little known innovation in alternate education. Drawing from the North American grassroots movement of Women's Spirituality from the 1970s onwards (Budapest, 1986; Christ, 1982; 2004; Goldenburg, 1979; Spretnak, 1982;

Stone, 1976), this graduate course of study recognizes that achieving gender and eco-social justice includes, and is assisted by, the liberation of spiritual experience and expression for women, such that “the spiritual is political” (Jordan, 2006). The WSMA encourages students to self-locate and authorize, to discover, study, and live from deep life questions, within which contemplative practices assist and transform such journeys.

As a graduate of this program, and upon entering my doctoral studies education, it was apparent to me how pioneering and unique the WSMA is. Equally radical are my own views of what is possible in education in regards to *inspiring* the academy (Aoki, 2005; Jordan, 2011). To *inspire* is to *put life to, to encourage, and to animate*. I am committed to the potential for education to affect individual and collective quality of life. Through my doctoral research, I wanted to explore how the WSMA is an exemplar of educational programs that meld social justice, personal and collective transformation, and spirituality. Drawing from my own life in relation to educational experiences in the WSMA, my study documents women’s lived experiences of this program. I wanted to bridge understanding of women’s leadership in this field towards other fields of study. I also wanted to make more ‘space’ in the academy for inspired, body-mind-heart-spirit-art integrated research projects. My study and methodology is directed from my location as an artist-thinker, a birth and midwifery activist, a mother, and by my own spiritual inclinations and visions.

In the context of the WSMA, *spirituality* is not limited to the practices of institutional religions. It is more of a *verb* than noun, involving one’s life journey towards self and others, inter-connecting with other beings, the Earth and cosmos, and evolving over time as one lives and learns throughout life. Women’s Spirituality seeks to restore and re-story women’s experiences of such, cultivating interconnection between lived spirituality and education for social change. The word “spiritual” also describes experiences of the numinous or the divine, of mystical insight or wisdom. Spirituality can be restorative, transformative, healing—it has something to do with *love* itself.

The genius of the WSMA has been to create a transformative graduate education and research program from emergent bodies of feminist scholarship and grassroots spiritual practices—a women-centred curriculum. “Women-centred” does not mean that men are excluded, but that women are placed at the centre of study. What has been left out or ignored within religious traditions and practices over millennia, within a dominant Western and male-centred history-telling, is recuperated through the systematic study of where women have been, and what women and non-dominating peoples have been doing (e.g. Allione, 2000; Gimbutus, 2001; Gunn Allen, 1986; Jayakar, 1990; Noble, 2003; Reid-Bowen, 2007; Sered, 1994; Shaw, 1994; Tedlock, 2005; Teish, 1985). Study of the lives of women spiritual leaders, spiritual knowledge, and Goddess(es) is integrated throughout. Learning about and experiencing rituals and practices led by women that are inclusive of female symbolism and divinity creates a fuller picture of contemplative practices and how we define this term. The Goddess puja I experienced in my study is one example of a devotional, trans-cultural ritual, based in female and Earth-centred divinity.

### **Following Midwifery and Birth-Based Inquiry**

I was drawn to study in the WSMA from an activist background in Canadian lay midwifery, focused on home birth practice. I wanted to explore the spirited interconnections I saw between the care for and the quality of women’s self-described birth-giving experiences, and ecofeminist, environmental justice (Jordan, 2002, 2004). Attending births over many years, I often observed the profound wellbeing of women and their families who had experienced “physiologic” (un-medicated, low-tech) birth processes, supported by caring midwives or attendants. Birth-giving is holistically supported by midwifery as a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual journey. I often felt an innate sense of spirituality in attending births through the energy emanating from the freely birthing woman and her baby. I myself experienced ecstatic energy in giving birth without medication or interventions—an intensity of surrender to a process larger than myself. Pain twins with pleasure in the grand release of the “love” hormone oxytocin. I felt an awe-inspiring sense of more-than-physical (meta-physical) relief and love at the moment that each of my daughters was born. Beyond women’s and midwives’ birth stories, such experiences are little understood nor found in mainstream social or religious discourses. These discourses tend to focus upon pain- and fear- centred elements of birth-giving as being in need of regulation and control. Birth-giving, women’s reproduction and choices, have been largely defined over the

centuries by patriarchal social institutions and family relations. The topic of women's power over their own bodies, and experiences of pleasure and spirituality in birth and motherhood, is now emerging (Gaskin, 2011; Jordan, 2009; Shroff, 1997).

From these experiences, I was yearning to pursue scholarly education of my whole person from female-centered views. In my midwifery work I co-created rites of passage ceremonies for mothers. I felt nourished and a greater sense of connection to my own spirituality in the women's circles and ritual work I was facilitating and attending. The teachings of women spiritual leaders in the field of Women's Spirituality rang true for me. Such teachings include knowing the body and its processes as sacred, and knowing that women have innate power from within their bodies. The Earth itself is understood to be an inspirited, alive, interconnected web of beings. The notion of "beings" includes humans, non-humans (such as rocks, plants, trees, insects and animals), and the other-than-human worlds of spirit and deity. Like midwifery, Women's Spirituality is women-centred and cherishes the gift of birth and life. I am inspired to hold care and love in my relationships with others, connect to female divinity, and take the time to celebrate and create meaningful rituals with other women (Birnbaum, 2005; Noble, 1991; Spretnak, 1982, 1991).

### Performing Contemplative Practices

The term "contemplative" was not commonly used during my studies in the Women's Spirituality MA program. This was not because practices now called contemplative were missing, but because they were understood in different terms. I first encountered the term "contemplative" as I was beginning my doctoral studies in education, surveying literature on spirituality, holistic and transformative learning that might inform my research into Women's Spirituality (Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, 2003; Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Kates, 2005; O'Sullivan, 1999). Contemplative practices can be a vehicle for spiritual experience as one works and lives towards "enlightenment." Enlightenment is often described as the process of stabilizing an ineffable, non-dual state of awareness. We move beyond ego to merge with a greater sense of the "all" in life, participating fully in the field of love. This state of consciousness is a topic of mystics and spiritual teachings (Hawkins, 2006). Through "contemplative practices" we can deepen our self-inquiry and awareness of others, leading to a sense of expansion and love, experiences of the divine, and an ecstatic remembering of our human being and purpose. While I appreciate the benefits of mindfulness meditation or quiet sitting as a popular contemplative practice (Lutz, Dunne, Davidson, & Thompson, 2007), I seek a holistic approach to contemplative education that engages our bodies, minds, emotions, and relationships with others such as I had experienced in midwifery. I aim for a fully mindful, holistic *way of life*. As an educator I inquire into and transform myself, others and society—in order for all beings to awaken towards happiness and wellbeing.

For these reasons, "practice" became a category of its own in my study of the WSMA. I undertook a narrative, story-based inquiry into my co-participants' experiences of the WSMA as an educational process—an inquiry that included writing my own story. But I also wanted to engage lived experience in the fieldwork for my research. The "practice" with each co-participant was based from their particular life worlds and spirited pathways. My six co-participants represented a variety of scholarship, practice and activist concerns in Women's Spirituality. These include Dianne Jenett, who researches the Goddess Bhagavati and women's rituals in Kerala, South India (1999, 2005a), and Judy Grahn, a renowned activist poet of American feminist, lesbian, gay, and queer communities (1970, 1971, 1974, 2008, 2009), who pioneers metaformic theory (1993). Judy co-researches with Dianne in South India, and they co-directed the WSMA. My study also included working with WSMA student alumna Anya de Marie, who is a dancer and menstrual health activist. We co-created a dance performance of a menarche (first menstruation) ceremony for a women's health conference. I undertook a Tibetan Dakini mandala making practice with Women's Spirituality grassroots leader and teacher Vicki Noble. With alumna and prison activist Aikya Param, I experienced a Religious Science visioning process. With poet, singer and non-violence "activist" (art + activism) MamaCoatl, I experienced a limpias—an indigenous Mexican-Aztec clearing and healing practice.

As a research method, "practicing" with each co-participant was my way to art-fully and care-fully express embodied aspects of the WSMA. My co-participants' practices represent discoveries of learning supported by their education that they continue to engage in daily life. Along with developing students' ability

for critical analysis of women's lives, the WSMA incorporates deeply aesthetic and kinesthetic awareness through the use of art making and ritual in the classroom. *Embody* means to clothe the spirit with the body, to express an idea, or make it concrete by actions or gestures. Embodied practices involve the body through movement, dance, gestures, music, sound, speaking and relating to others through ritual or artistic creation. *Ritual*, as embodied practice, connects mind, body, emotion, spirit, and art. Ritual is a physical and metaphysical expression of connection between the human and more-than-human worlds. Through ritual, people seek communication or communion with these worlds, establishing reciprocity. Rituals also express and maintain the social or spiritual values of a culture or community through specific symbols, images, gestures, and materials.

In the case of Women's Spirituality education, rituals holistically value the female body, and put women at the centre. An embodied focus in education enhances holistic, whole-bodied and experiential learning that is missing from forms of formal education that require our bodies to be quiet and still for learning. Within Women's Spirituality, embodied ritual contemplation has the power to interrupt dominant societal messages, such as the hyper-consumer focus on the female body, women's socialized bodily shame, and the absence or invisibility of female spiritual leadership and divinity. An embodied focus brings *life* and lived experience into the classroom, allowing students to encounter themselves and others in new ways.

Rituals such as the Goddess puja are important to Women's Spirituality education for being trans-cultural exemplars of women-centred, community-based practices. As a relational contemplative practice rooted in ancient, devotional—emotive, love-centred—wisdom, the rich aesthetics of the Goddess puja incorporates generative, life-valuing qualities. By experiencing such rituals, women who study in the WSMA, such as myself, can draw from the vitality of female spiritual lineages and authority. We are encouraged to further incorporate women-centred practices into our lives. Such rituals support women's wellbeing by easing life's travails, enhancing inner awareness and the capacity for joy, and increasing one's capabilities to act as vital agents of social change.

### **Dianne, Judy and Goddess Puja**

Dianne Jenett and Judy Grahn are teachers and mentors of my scholarly development. Dianne Jenett was my MA thesis advisor. After completing my MA, I continued to work with Judy Grahn on her metaformic theory. I developed a metaformic analysis of the over-use of cesarean section in birth (Jordan, 2007). We thus share a base of knowledge and lived experience in an evolving student-teacher relationship. Through my doctoral study of the WSMA, I took on a new role as a "researcher" in relation to their lives and my own. Based in their lives, the Goddess puja practice is a modified, trans-cultural form that Jenett and Grahn developed after participation in Goddess-centred pujas and ceremonies in Kerala, India, during many years of their research there.

Dianne Jenett is a feminist of Euro-American decent who sought connection to the female and feminine divine. Travelling to Kerala, South India, during her graduate studies, she was struck by the deeply rooted, living Goddess and matrilineal traditions (mother-centred kinship) there. Public devotion to Amma (Mother Goddess) is combined with this Indian State's progressive gender politics in the high status and literacy of women. Jenett considered the potent connections between the two, and centred her research on Goddess(es) and women's rituals in Kerala (Jenett, 1999, 2005a, 2005b). She regularly returns there, and facilitates groups of graduate students to experience the life, arts, and rituals of living Goddess traditions in Kerala—transformative cross-cultural journeys through contemplative arts.

As an American engaged in cross-cultural research, Jenett understands the gift of learning she receives through her fieldwork and friendships in Kerala. Jenett is mindful of the perils of "cultural appropriation," where a dominant cultural group adopts aspects of a minority cultural practice, with the potential to transgress the original meaning. Her research in India led her to co-develop a methodology called "Organic Inquiry" (Clements, Ettlting, Jenett, & Shields, 1998, 1999), an ethical, relational, feminist approach to qualitative research where the researcher's own story centres the work. Raising questions about the nature of research and power relations, such research, at home and abroad, can transform understandings of self, others and society, and educate across differences. From a feminist perspective, Jenett's teaching and research

illuminates what are little known or understood women's rituals outside of South India, centred upon female-based divinity and practices.

Judy Grahn is committed to a restorative unearthing of “women's hidden histories, mythologies, and spiritualities” (Grahn, 2008, p. 25). Grahn's oeuvre, in poetry and teaching, provokes the complex and never easy task of transforming sexual, gender and racial exclusion towards a more just society. Spirituality, as an “interrogated love” (Hogeland in Grahn, 2009, p. 3), is a constant thread of her word weavings. For Grahn, researching the Goddess in Kerala became an exemplar in the development of what she names “metaformic theory” (Grahn, 1993, 1999). Metaformia is the study of menarche and menstruation rituals across cultures. Grahn re-examines the evolution of human culture and consciousness through analysis of the material and ritualized interplay of female and male genders. Metaformia re-institutes the female as a source of life and culture.

The puja of my story herein is a form of worship that organically evolved from Jenett and Grahn's trans-cultural research connection to Goddess, through principles of her worship in Kerala. They do not practice this puja for public gain or view, but as a home-based practice. I knew about the puja ritual as reflective of their connection to South India, as well as their shared research, spaces, and lives, and was curious to experience it with them. The puja serves as a spiritual base, a ritual meditation practice in their lives amidst the business of their work as committed activist professors, educators, and family members. As research participants, they opened this practice to public view through my dissertation inquiry. Our prior relationship constituted a base of trust within which the practice unfolded. I was thus able to experience the depth and potential of puja as a contemplative art.

I prefer the term “trans-cultural” for this contemplative practice, rooted as it is in scholarly study, respect and reciprocity for the tradition from which it originates. This practice reflects Jenett and Grahn's years of absorption in cross-cultural research and lived experience in Goddess-centred, matriarchal (mother-centred) communities of Kerala. It transmutes to an American context as it crosses the Pacific Ocean to new locations and lifestyles. Though adapted to their lives, I posit that such spiritual practices have transpersonal qualities that can move across culture and place when the lineage is honoured and taught. There is the potential to transform the local culture towards new values. In this case, the Goddess puja re-vivifies Goddess-centred forms of spiritual devotion that are lacking in the West and North America. This practice leads to new insights and ways of being for women and men.

A “puja” is a ritual offering of goods, foods, prayers, and substances made to a deity in order to receive Her/His blessing. The blessing performs and generates reciprocal relationship between the deity and human through a relational ritual economy. In Kerala, this devotional practice takes place in women's homes, as well as in the context of Goddess temples. The deity may be represented through an icon or statue, but can equally present herself in the form of a sacred tree, or rock, rooted to the place itself—suggesting the immanent spirituality of nature, place, or home, as being worthy of worship and supplication as Goddess. Jenett and Grahn engage puja ceremonies in the backyard garden of their shared home, focusing the ritual on a large black stone that they have carefully placed under their apple tree. They practice puja for special celebratory occasions, such as Grahn and her wife's wedding ceremony. They also practiced a form of puja in the context of running a small mentoring circle for recent WSMA alumni.

My research method involved writing my experiences of the practice through the creative process of “life writing.” Life writing is an emerging educational research methodology (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Hasebe-Ludt & Jordan, 2010) that draws from hermeneutic traditions of auto/biographical, narrative, creative non-fiction, and poetic literary research (Leggo, 2008; Miller, 2005; Pinar, 2009; Pinar & Grumet, 1976). The researcher writes her “life” as a means to explore experience, with potentially evocative and provocative results for researcher and reader. I document material, aesthetic appearances, along with the subjective, inner nature of my experience of contemplation for others and myself to learn from. My story becomes a secondary “offering” of this ritual practice through life writing—*midwifing* experience as text. In this way, I am equally apprenticed in my research to the art (and Goddess) of writing. If I stay close to and savour life, I might transmit an energetic trace of this to the reader. I thus invite the reader to reflect on this Goddess puja as a shared experience of contemplation between my co-participants, myself, and the female, Earth-based deity embodied at the centre of this ritual practice through our careful, artful attention to her.

## Goddess Puja in California

We begin by gathering ourselves from distractions and work activities to prepare the ritual space and implements. The puja will focus upon a special, large, black rock in the backyard that is honoured as being Goddess herself. We will wash, bath and adorn this rock, generating devotion and care. Dianne first polishes and washes a large, two-foot tall brass oil lamp in her kitchen sink. This lamp is from Kerala, India. Dianne tells me how it is always used within menarche (first menstruation) rituals. The lamp is considered to be the Goddess and is worshipped as such. She says there is an entire beautiful ritual to the lamp consisting of reciting the 1001 names of the Goddess, with offerings made after each invocation, with incense, foods, and especially flowers. Traditionally done at home as a family-based ritual, this ritual is now done by women together in mass public ceremonies in Kerala. Women celebrate through circle dances and singing around the lamp.

The lamp comes alive for me in Dianne's stories. She, the lamp, gleams with the polished satisfaction of our attention. We carry the lamp outside and place her near the two-foot tall black, sharp-edged, obsidian-like stone sitting at the edge of their backyard patio. This is in an area beneath an apple tree in their garden. The black stone will be the focus of our puja ceremony and devotion. Such veneration of stones reminds me of worldwide traditions of paying attention to rocks as being sacred, from the ancient presence of Neolithic megaliths, to the simple joy of collecting stones on the beach. Such forms of attention are reminders of our human interconnection with the Earth. Rocks shelter us as caves, tower over us as mountains, and hold the economic mysteries of the many minerals we seek, value and consume.

The tree that stands above this black rock in the garden has recently dropped some apples. They lay around her, a pre-echo of our own offerings to come. The sun is out, and it feels so warm and languid in this yard area as birds sing overhead. A soft trickle of water is heard from the fountain nearby. It runs a constant flow of water to which the small birds fly, rest and drink. All in all, it is an idyllic day for practicing devotion.

Dianne and I move to the front of the house to collect garden roses and other flowers from plantings on either side of the sidewalk. She tells me, to my great delight, that the rose bushes at the front of the house were specifically planted by Judy and herself as dedicated offerings to Goddess. She speaks of how the first blooms are "Hers." These blooms are offered to Goddess each year. Dianne lovingly clips flower heads into a bowl, saying how they just love to be used by us as offerings. This ongoing use regenerates the whole plant, so that more and more flowers appear on the bushes each year. As we clip, the rich, life-imbued blossoms fill the bowl with fragrant colours of white, soft violet, and lots of yellow, red, and bright fuchsia pinks. I almost sink my nose into the bowl until Dianne cautions me not to smell these flowers directly—the scent is offered for *Goddess'* enjoyment.

We walk around the house towards the backyard, stopping to cut more and more flowers from various locations. Blooms of many varieties and shapes continue to fill the bowl. After gathering, we place the bowl on the backyard table where Judy has laid out a jar of turmeric, a spray bottle of lavender, sticks of incense, a quart of milk, lemons, a lovely colourful tin full of threads and sewing materials, and a brass tray holding a variety of small brass ritual implements from India. This tray includes a small lamp, little bowls, and an incense holder. A large brass urn stands next to all these. The urn has an admirable, round female shape with a waist, standing ready to pour out our liquid libations.

We sit down together, each taking a needle and thread to sew the flowers onto lengths of string. Our task is to make long garlands of flowers, attaching them end to end to make one long length of beautiful-flower-glory. We will adorn the black stone with this sweet-scented necklace during the course of the puja. We begin to talk as we sit and sew. Dianne explains how in Kerala each flower is tied to the thread with tight threaded wrappings through a well-honed skill, so that the flowers become very closely knit together, and hold a beautiful rounded shape when finished. Ours are not so tightly knit. But we work as best we can to thread the blooms through the ends of each flower. Some hold better than others. They gather together on the thread, bunching up with beautiful colours and textures. It feels wonderful to work with the vitality of these blossoms so closely, to put my hand into this bowl of living colour, carefully threading each blossom in its delicate beauty.

As we work, I ask more about when and how often they might do a puja ceremony. Dianne answers

that *sometimes it's on the full moon, or for Judy's wedding, or for when my grandson got sick*. Dianne and Judy do this when they need to—*it's like a meditation*. Most often the whole family does it together. As we string and speak, Dianne adds that *this is such a good example of how you have to figure out how to make these kinds of rituals and ceremonies really work for the circumstances of your particular life*.

We admire and talk more about the flowers, seeing how the roses form the strongest base of our work. Absorbed in our work, a bird chirps along beside us. Judy finishes her garland and holds it up as we admire it. Judy tells me that the lemon, the bathing and the anointing of the rock, have to do with cooling down shakti—sandalwood paste and turmeric are natural coolants. She says, *right now everything astrologically is beating up, it's good to get lemon and turmeric into things to cool things down*. “Shakti” is a term not easily translatable into English—I cannot think of any English concepts that so closely describe or embody primordial creative female power. Shakti can be likened to the creative wisdom of female energies, the primordial cosmic energy that can be embodied in Goddess(es). It can be the “heat” that creates and heals and clears the way. It is all manner of *shattering* or liberating things. Judy speaks more about how when she and Dianne returned from India one time, they had been at some very strong shakti rituals with people dancing all night. There was provocative drumming that brings the spirits into the body, *it's very sensual*. They attended these rituals for weeks, often standing in the middle of the drums. When they came home from India, they were so full of shakti that Dianne had to put turmeric on their film casings to get the cameras to play. They ended up bathing themselves with turmeric, rose water, sandalwood and milk.

I wonder out loud, *when do we want shakti, and when do we not?* Judy says, *you want it when you're creative, but then you need to cool it off to be able to do things like drive a car, or think about what to cook for dinner*. Dianne adds that *there are so many stories about the Goddess that way. You work to bring her up, but then you need to cool her down again because She can't operate through heat all the time. She can create so much it becomes chaotic, so death has to come in. It can't be non-stop creativity, there has to be a cycle*.

I think of my own writing about the relationship of shakti to birth-giving energies (Jordan, 2009), and the challenges of medical and midwifery health care practices. The dominant culture wants to cool down women's birthing shakti, as if to contain the big openings of physical, emotional, sexual and psychic energies of birthing women with anesthetics and technology. Birth is reduced to the fear of surrendering to its overwhelming experience and potential sensuality. There is also the fear of death (mortality) in birth. In a medicalized context, the mother can end up with an externally and forcefully controlled experience of her own power and the baby coming through her. Grassroots midwifery, as I knew it, is woman-centred, working *with* the birthing, life-force energies of the moaning, sensation-filled, rocking, bleeding, fluid, emotional body, towards ecstatic, joyful and relieved re-union of mother and baby at the moment of birth. I understand birthing energy as being “shaktic” in its dimensions. The potentiality for illumination is always there in the mother as she births. This is corroborated in research by women who experience birth as a specifically *spiritual* event (Lin, 2008; Maloney, 2006). The baby her/himself undergoes the intense transformation of being born. It is a transition greatly aided by midwives and caregivers who allow birthing energy to unfold, supporting all with love and care for this sacred, creative act.

I reflect upon the business of my own life. I am in a productive, creative phase of multi-tasking work, relationships and travel. It's hard for me to just stop and breath—I feel so responsible towards all my activities and people, towards women and the social change I seek. I am a committed student, university worker, teacher, researcher, birth activist, mother and homemaker. I greatly value both my working life and the time I take to tend to my home, meal preparation, and the care of my children and family life. I generate and push a lot of energy outwards towards others. Yet I sorely need the release of laughter and abandon, time for playing and dancing, and time for rest, and more rest. As I later discover, and despite everything I know about caring for myself, I am about to burn myself out. I dearly need these Goddess rituals. Goddess herself cannot maintain a schedule of constant creation. Goddess (and I) must cool off, and take it easy for a time.

Throughout all this talk, Dianne, Judy and I have tied our garlands together into a beautiful circular strand of flowers. We are ready to perform the ritual. After sweeping the site, Dianne draws a Kolam on the stone slate next to the black rock. This is a tradition in South India, to sweep the front of the home, or the earth itself, and draw mandala-shaped symbols with rice flour onto the ground. Kolams mark a site or ceremony as sacred with the actualizing potency of symbols that mark certain elements, or are the sign for a particular Goddess or God. We each light a stick of incense and place this into a holder next to the lamp and



rock. The air fills with the pungent aroma of its sweet smell. We light the lamp, and Dianne and Judy sing traditional mantras for the ceremony. Both smoke and sound fill the air, inviting sacred presence and our combined consciousness to drop into and centre in this ritual space.

I begin to bath the rock with the milk, pouring liquid over her form. I wash her over again with water and then spray her with lavender scent. Such fluid-logic is the medium of our devotion. As I pour and spray more fluids over her form, Judy cautions me to be careful not to cut myself on the rock's sharp edges. Dianne tosses large handfuls of turmeric over and around the rock until She is covered in this bright yellow powder. She gleams with her make-up adornment. Next, Dianne brings a red sari cloth. She wraps it carefully around Her, in layers and tied at the back. *She is dressed.* I stand as witness, looking at and feeling the presence of Goddess emerge and merge with the rock. *She is lovingly created or revealed before our eyes.*

Dianne and Judy each hold a side of our long flower wreath. They double it together and place it around and over the rock. *She is bathed, dressed and adorned.* As the flower necklace lies around her, I admire this form. I feel a sudden surge of tears well up within me. I begin to spontaneously cry and ask for guidance from Goddess within myself. Judy and Dianne instinctively move to sit on either side of me as I cry. I suddenly feel the emotional impact of how much I have taken on in this one week, meeting simultaneously with each of my co-participants for my research. How much yearning and feeling I have to do things in a good way for others and myself. I sense the effort of presence and focus needed to meet the individuality of each woman I have practiced with. My tears wash away the stress of working to stay in “not knowing” until I feel myself *open to the unknown without grasping.* I simply open into the unknown without grasping. I drop into a place of relaxed curiosity. And then something else emerges.

In this clearing of tears, I feel an immense sense of gratitude for this life and my relationships within it. I am grateful for all the paths that have opened before me in my devotion to life, to women's life-based ways, to birth and birth-giving, to “Her” as divine presence(s), and for the travels that bring me closer to Her even as She resides always within me. Judy and Dianne sit quietly and closely next to me as I release these tears. They, and Goddess, are mothers holding their child, standing guard as my feelings flow. I tell Goddess I know She has always been there and within me. Gratitude, tears, love, more gratitude, tears, love, come through. As my tears fade and become another liquid offering, we continue to sit together in the *washed and adorned quiet.* We collect apples that have fallen from the tree and place them next to Her—more offerings. I stand up to meditate on the presence of this event and admire its creation. I feel bathed in quiet presence and joy. I grasp my camera again, and turn to see Judy and Dianne smiling and beaming, focusing intently on Her fully adorned form. Judy's hands are extended with palms open in a welcome, or a benediction. A small honeybee has arrived and sits within the wreath of our flower offerings. Taking nectar from the collected blossoms, the bee lingers, hovers, blesses, and leaves us in delight.

*The bee lingers, hovers, blesses, and leaves us in delight.*



Figure 1. Jordan, N. (2009). *Goddess revealed*. Palo Alto, California.

### Goddess Revealed: The Value of Contemplative Practices

Washed of my tears and tensions during our puja, I was able to view my larger research study with the empathy and gratitude that lay at its heart—a contemplative insight. This contemplative ritual practice affected my inner world by shifting my focus off of my habitual or dissatisfied thoughts, towards an inner stillness and awareness. In this case, the embodied experience allowed me to fully feel and release emotions without judgment. I witnessed my previous grasping and settled into a wider state of consciousness. I had created my research study based in my love for the kinds of awareness and embodied knowing that are possible within Women’s Spirituality education. In this Goddess puja, that love of path and my gratitude for others was re-affirmed in an experience of *grace*. Inner meaning came to the fore, and I knew I was on “the right path.” This sense of being enveloped in love is intangible, but very real to the development of my larger sense of Self. In a world that places value on competition, individualism, and materialism, rather than prioritizing relationships and life-centred qualities, such awareness supports me to go on in my work despite the challenges. In the over-business of my life, this practice deeply reminds me to take myself seriously as a contemplative practitioner and educator. I truly need to care for others and myself through contemplative arts. I yearn to continue to experience and stabilize such states of open, loving consciousness.

The puja was also an incredibly beautiful contemplative practice. Attention to colour and texture of the flowers, creating the malas as art, and the tangible use of water, milk, scent and the sounds of bells, are an intimate and evocative part of creating this ritual. These materials, actions, and qualities ground one’s awareness in the sensory beauty of life. They are at the heart of the life-giving and life-honouring aspects of puja. The appearance of the bee who came to drink from the mala flowers of the Goddess at the close of our puja was a further encounter with grace. This was a synchronicity where our awareness of the world and other beings (or bee-ings!) took on a luminous, joyful quality.

In regards to my further learning, studying with spirited women is an ever-evolving aspect of my own spiritual journey that I began when working in midwifery. In a way, attending births was my first embodied contemplative practice, where I would move beyond my limited ego concerns to sit in the presence of

another, ultimately experiencing the divine. Throughout many years, I also witnessed how the basic wisdom practice of kindness in regards to caring for birthing women and babies can be overridden by layers of fearful, traumatic socialization around women's bodies and power. Yet the potential for spiritual depth in birth keeps leading me on a unique, birth-based philosophical inquiry. The Goddess puja was itself an experience of being *midwifed*. I was compassionately held by the ritual materials, symbols and gestures of supplicating Goddess. I was held in caring relationship with my co-participants, Dianne and Judy, with whom I could trust my authentic self to emerge, releasing to love. I was held until I burst into, and gave birth to, the realization of Goddess's presence.

Contemplative practices cultivate self-authorization, working to manifest what it is we are working towards in following an inner compass towards the transmutation of self, culture and society. Following midwifery threads, much of my work aims to transform understandings of birth and birthing experience for women, babies, men, families and society. This puja, as contemplation, allowed me further awareness of the energy of women's birth experiences as being *shaktic* expressions of Goddess—a creative life force energy for which we in the West have no names. If something is unnamed, can it exist or thrive? Is it left to the tensions of no-naming? Using the term “shakti” across a cultural gap and context, applying it in new ways, is a complex insight I carry towards further inquiry. Beyond pain and fear, for some women birth-giving is an embodied spiritual event. This is reflected in the dynamics of life energy moving through the birth process as an intense physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, sensation-filled state of being. In surrendering to the birth process, one is carried to wider states of consciousness—a contemplative consciousness that is at work in the very processes of the body itself. This is a physiologic-psychic (soul) aspect of birth-giving that is not well understood by medical or social practices.

Thus, there is a need for radical re-education about our bodies, about how we view the birth-giving event and female-based birth knowledge. The roots of fear of birth, and fear of the bodies of birthing women, may lie in how women appear as unruly (un-ruled, un-linguaged), creative Goddess-forces, standing at the gates of life and death. Engaging this primal knowledge in a more direct way could include puja-like understandings of heating and cooling in the body. Supportive substances and practices can raise or cool shakti in its creative, shattering heat. I wonder if the practice of puja originates from midwifery itself? For millennia, midwives have worked closely with the opening impulses, and the potentially dangerous journeys, of women giving birth (Chawla, 2006). Midwifery practice encourages the vulnerable yet powerful mother to alternately rest, change positions, walk, dance, vocalize, be massaged or immersed in hot or cool waters—following her body's needs. How can we integrate this ancient wisdom with the advances of medical practice, without subsuming the central spirituality of birth? The fuller implication—what does it mean to encounter all birthing women as sacred emanations of Goddess and Her life force energy?

In practicing with the women in my larger study, including Dianne and Judy, my experiences were shaped by my own presence in each activity, by my relationship with each woman, and by the spiritual presence we evoked in our rituals. As I experienced in this Goddess puja, relational practices are co-creative and co-emergent, such that we *learn from* practice. Throughout my research, contemplative practices were not only sites of learning, but had the larger effect of blessing this research, as well as “me” the researcher. The experience of blessing was a gift when it arrived. Blessing, as a desired “outcome” of contemplative practices such as the Goddess puja, cannot be forced. Through devotional practices we merely offer ourselves towards its soulful grace. I felt blessed by an ineffable sense of Goddess' presence, by the moments of felt pleasure and joy, by the gift of inquiry and learning itself, and by the sweet ability to notice the smallest things. Just as the little bee lingered, hovered, left, and blessed us with delight.

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