

EPILOGUE

Making Peace with Our Bodies

 IN RESPONSE TO THE terrorist attacks on the glittering blue and gold morning of September 11, 2001, I turned off the TV images of destruction and drove to the ocean to seek comfort and grounding. Within the hour I was at Singing Beach in Manchester, Massachusetts, which holds deeply nurturing little-girl memories for me. I'd learned to swim there. I'd eaten Fluffernutters and built sand castles there, always knowing that by morning the surf would have swallowed every trace of what I'd built and returned it to the wide sweep of shoreline. As I stumbled onto the beach, I heard a cry of agony. I realized it was my own: *"What am I doing researching sexuality and spirituality when all these really important events are happening in the world—?"*

As so often happens when the time is ripe, the answer came back fully formed even before I'd completed the question. *"Your job is to teach about nonviolent relationships,"* the ocean boomed. *"Now get back there and get on with it!"*

I was able to put this commandment into action that very weekend when I was conducting a workshop at Rowe Conference Center in the Berkshires. The 9/11 energy impelled our circle of women to ask the big questions about sexual desire and partnership: What *are* love and sex? What do they mean in our lives? How do our yearnings for belonging and pleasure connect to the sweep of world events?

Together we explored the notion that our intimate relationships form a template for all the relationships that affect our lives. That is, how each of us relates with our bodies, ourselves, and our partners lays down the basic pattern for how we relate with our families, our coworkers, our communities, and beyond, including politics, the environment, and even the realm

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of spirit—God, Goddess, Higher Power, Universal Energy. Simply stated, all of these relationships begin at home, in our hearts, minds, and bodies. Self-acceptance and love lead to growthful, soulful connections. Fear and self-hatred lead to control, alienation, and violence. Riane Eisler lays out these ideas with grace and brilliance in her book *The Power of Partnership*.

Once we accept that our personal ecosystems are part of a very much larger picture, it's possible to envision how each one of us affects the collective reality. If we believe that pleasure is an integral part of the colorful mandala of creation, nurturing our bodies can become an act of worship. And it can become an act of resilience and optimism to ally our physical bodies with the energies beyond—the unseen world inhabited by powerful spirits, who really do guide our steps when we let go and let them.

The present turmoil in the world presents a prime opportunity to exercise our ordinary and extraordinary abilities for such connection. We can begin by resisting images of war and destruction and make peace with our own bodies. The winter before we bombed Baghdad, some hardy women in a handful of communities around the globe chose to take this idea literally. They stripped off their clothes and spelled out P-E-A-C-E with their naked bodies. But we can participate at other levels, too, fully clothed, as long as we are also fully aware.

To prepare the template of inner peace, it may be necessary to unlearn old fears, old pain, old images, old ways of holding on to what's no longer useful—workaholicism, victim roles, just-say-no messages. We can allow ourselves to feel deeply connected to the earth and to all the beings, seen and unseen, who inhabit it. Once we've experienced that knowing in our cells, we can never be at a total loss, even when the world around us seems to be spinning out of control.

Walking this path of connection means surrendering the defenses we've constructed around our bodies, minds, and emotions so that the flow of spirit can enter in. How do we surrender these defenses? Breathe—this is inspiration at its most literal. And when we breathe together it becomes *conspiracy*. Trust—hold the energy of yes instead of no. Expand the heart in love. Ask for help with an open hand. Sing the sudden music of praise. Or (perhaps most radically) stop doing. Simply hold space and allow the cycles of nature to work their magic, as they did on my sand castles so long ago. In

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the words of a wise Buddhist friend, “Don’t just do something. Sit there.” This, too, can fulfill the injunction about nonviolent relationships so clearly communicated to me on 9/11 and still so poignant in the years since.

It’s customary to begin a spiritual journey with an offering. But in this book I would like to end with an offering—a kind of love poem. This is a prayer for new endings and new beginnings, an invocation to the spirits in time of national neurosis and international fear. I’ve addressed it to “a woman,” but it’s intended for all who feel a connection with it.

FOR A WOMAN WHO FEARS SHE
IS TOO DAMAGED TO LOVE AGAIN

Holy spirits of fire befriend and warm this woman.
Earth and water wrap her in bounty.
Spirits of air guide her to walk the paths of her heart.

Sun smile on her. Stones accept her. Stars remind her.
Ocean storms burnish her terrors to translucent pearls.
Creatures of hills and hollows, beings beneath the ground
watch over her, comfort and nourish her.
Snakes and rivers, ancient dragons dance sinuously with her.
Swirling spirit of volcano invest her with power.
Eagle and sparrow give her wings and sight.

Snails of Buddha, saints of God, Great Spirit
Yahweh, Magus, Shiva, Isis, Astarte of the flowing hair,
Goddess of Grain, Angel of Sweetness, Higher Power,
protect this fearful one, this angry, armored one,
this giver, healer, striver, survivor, lover.
Cherish her—waif and victim, elf and Amazon.
See this holy woman now. Touch her.
Brush her with the breath of love.

Ganesh, sacred elephant who cries human tears
and oversees new ventures, help her begin again.