

THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

Diane McCann

In the past few years we have seen the role of women change dramatically. Think about your grandmother, if you are over 40, chances are she didn't work outside the house but she kept a spotless home, served the meals exactly on time and washed and ironed everything in sight! In the movie *Heaven Can Wait*, set in the 50s, it depicted the star as a "perfect" housekeeper in her belted, full skirted, floral dress, using the latest Hoover to vacuum her home and being such a good cook that she was interviewed by the *Ladies Home Journal*, the 'in' magazine of the time.

In the 60s women left the kitchen and the Women's movement was born. They found a degree of freedom with the advent of the Pill and life changed again as the working mother came more to the fore and women attempted to free themselves from the confines of the role as portrayed, perhaps by their mothers. Some marched to end the war in Vietnam with their babies in pushers.

Forty years on...and where are we now? I see some women still struggling with claiming their power; some still fighting to find equality in their jobs and relationships; many attempting to redefine their sexuality and discover the feminine consciousness; many still doubting themselves and the choices they have made. There are a million tools out there in the form of books, seminars, techniques etc to show us how to heal ourselves with ease and grace ... it is just a matter of wanting to do it more than we want the pain of how it is now! For many, our burdens are what keep us going, they are the crutch that stops us from having it all. People get inspired for a day or a week and then forget... to do the affirmations, to visualize, to meditate.

To the best of my knowing women want a world that is a safe place for their babies and children... one where children do not live in fear and many people now believe that when the women gather together and learn from each other and work with men toward ending violence.... both in households and in the world, then we will see peace. We have to find a way to empower, to support, to bring spirituality, compassion and the desire and necessity for peace to women and thus the world. We have to remember the truth of who we really are right now and move on.... This is the most exciting time in history so I would like to inspire you all with some stories of the past and the present.

The Sacred Feminine is re-emerging on our beautiful Gaia, Mother Earth, mostly through women but also through our beautiful conscious men. Many books (*Mists of Avalon* and *Da Vinci Code*) have delved into the figure of Mary Magdalene indicating that she holds great meaning. Some churches now use prayers directed to Mother-Father God; Judaism speaks of Shekinah, a Feminine Divine presence, Orthodox religion is putting more emphasis on Mary as Theotokos which means God Bearer and there are Black Madonna statues everywhere. So what is the Sacred Feminine? It is, in essence, the maternal concerns, compassion... the feminine principle which leans toward the spiritual, toward wholeness, which in turn can move us toward acknowledging the divine, outside us and inside us. It unites the world.

Did you know that the first Mother's Day Proclamation was a call to gather the women? It was directed to women to add their voices to the voice of a devastated Earth and called for women to take counsel with each other to find the means to bring peace to the world. This was written in 1870!! In the 19th century a man called Matthew Arnold said: "If ever there comes a time when the women of the world come together purely and simply for the benefit of (hu)mankind, it will be a force such as the world has never seen."

Muhammed Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh started the idea of micro loans in 1976. Several million borrowers have received and repaid more than two billion dollars. The bank loans money to women who use the money for a source of future income, such as chickens or a goat, a sewing machine or vegetables... something other people will pay for the end result of (eggs, milk, a dress etc). In groups of 5 women, woman discuss their ideas. 1 or 2 get the loan and the others support those women. After 6 weeks of regularly repaying weekly, two others get their loan and everyone supports them until all five have their own money producing businesses. This builds trust, community and draws upon the ancient idea of circles of women.

In Nigeria in 2002, 600 women aged from 20 to 90 protested and staged a sit-in that closed down a huge Chevron Texaco Terminal. About 150 women managed to get inside the facility and block the airstrip and port that were the exit routes and they held 700 workers hostage. Why? The facility is in the oil rich Niger Delta and the people surrounding it live in abject poverty, with no electricity or running water. The women staged the protest to persuade the oil company to hire their sons and husbands and fathers to give some of the huge revenue back their villages. The company called in police and soldiers with guns but in the end it ended peacefully... the company installed electricity and water systems in their communities, built schools and clinics, hired the sons and husbands and helped the women build chicken farms to sell the food to the company cafeteria. It was a core group of older women who led the protest!

In Argentina from 1976 to 1983, under military rule, nearly 30,000 people disappeared. They were kidnapped, arrested, tortured, mutilated and murdered. The ones who protested were the mothers of those who disappeared, who came to be known as members of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. In 1977 they began marching in the plaza every Thursday. One woman lost 7 members of her family and begged the archbishop to use his influence only to be told to commend herself to the Virgin Mary and resign herself to her loss! Why did they march? Out of desperation, out of concern...out of needing to be heard. Fourteen women walked the first time and nine of those women, including a nun, were taken away, never to be heard of again but the Mothers returned the following week and the weeks, months and years after that. In the early days they were known as the crazy ones. Now they are considered to be the conscience of Argentina.

In a Ugandan village a woman was severely and regularly beaten by her husband. When the other women villagers asked her about it, she told them she felt she "deserved" it. They pointed out that if she were killed her children would be without a mother and then she decided to allow them to help. They gave her a plastic child's whistle and the next time she was beaten she blew the whistle, every woman from the village came running into the hut asking to be beaten too! The beating stopped. Soon all the women in the village carried a little whistle and this idea went from village to village and eventually led to legislation that made spousal abuse illegal.

Inspiring stories I hear you say and my question to you is what are you going to do now? As with every second of every one of our days we have choices. We can go back to hiding behind the self doubt, listen to the little voice that says "You can't do that!" Or we can go to stretch ourself... go beyond our limiting boundaries, out of our comfort zone into a place where our Spirit can express itself through us; where our intuition guides us to where we need to be, where our Core Self allows us to be the truth of who we have always been?

So in closing, what is the connecting link? I believe it is women supporting each other; women wanting to make a difference, not just in their own lives but in the lives of others. From time immemorial women have gathered together and sat in circles, some sharing, some listening, all being there for each other, without judgement, simply with compassion and love. A circle with a spiritual core invites the invisible world of the soul to be present and in that presence will flow peace. What I wish for you is to find a circle of friends that ask more of you than you do... that

wraps its arms around you when you are sad and laughs and celebrates your joys. A circle in which you know that your life is important and you do make a difference. Like Clarissa Pinkola Estes (Women who run with Wolves) says: “Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the parts of the world that is within our reach.”

Diane McCann is the presenter of The Goddess Within. A 2 day seminar for women that has been running for 20 years and is held in Australia, UK and Asia. She also co-facilitates with her husband Tantra trainings for couples and a men only course, Man's Inner Journey. She can be contacted on 08 8248128 or email beyondtheordinary@internode.on.net. Web: www.goddesswithin.com.au