

A Reclamation of the Divine Feminine:  
Developing an International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women  
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## **Part I: Preamble**

### **Principles and Values that Guide My Practice**

The inspiration for my life's work comes not only from my innate desire to heal myself, but also from my calling to be an active participant in our collective healing as a planet. As a sustainability educator, my aim is to use holistic perspectives, always keeping in mind that my motivations are built from the values and principles which are the bricks of my spiritual foundation. That being said, it is important for me to continually ask myself where I notice dissonance between my value systems and actions. In order to maintain integrity, I must be willing to assess whether or not I am truly committed to these values and if I am "practicing what I preach." This system of self-reflection is part of my spiritual maintenance.

My philosophy as an educator begins with the notion that all life has value, and not only is all life valuable, but it is also interconnected and interdependent. Western culture is relentless in its pursuit to colonize our minds, convincing us that we should bow down to the holy idea that "independence" equals freedom and "dependence" equals weakness. These oppressive social constructs, which our capitalist society depend on, violate all principles of social sustainability.

Author David Orr (2007) contends that, "the illusion of independence is a kind of servitude while gratitude- the acknowledgment of interdependence- sets us free" (p. 44). I wholeheartedly believe that all beings are entitled to and worthy of freedom and that the backbone of sustainability education is inherently spiritual. The concept of banking education (Freire, 1970) exemplifies the idea that the oppression of peoples and other beings occurs not only in the bonds of slavery, but also in the classroom, where students are often objectified, along with other beings such as plants, animals, and ancestors. Tisdell and Tolliver (2003)

suggest that, “spirituality is about a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things” (p. 374). The heart of my teaching practice lies in the desire to serve my own highest good, and because of our interconnectedness, I can rest assured that my intentions serve the highest good for all beings. I am relentless in my quest for self and know this is because I want to experience gratitude, I want to feel connected, I want to be free.

Several learning and teaching theories offer useful pedagogical strategies for those of us committed to the collective healing of Earth communities. In particular I have found that many elements of indigenous pedagogy (Nelson, 2008), popular education (Friere, 1970), critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991; Baumgartner, 2001) are in affinity with me. Integrating these ideas into my current educational framework, I have developed an authentic teaching philosophy which stems from a spiritual foundation and includes Awareness, Power & Faith, and Spirituality. Please see Appendix A to read the *Principles of my Teaching Philosophy*.

The stories and experiences guiding me to this particular teaching philosophy at this particular moment in my life span generations so it is impossible for me to articulate them all. These three collections of principles, Awareness, Power & Faith, and Spirituality are my attempt to synthesize a firm but flexible set of beliefs that guide my practice as a sustainability educator. Yet these philosophies are meaningless without action. To carry out good work in my community based on these principles, I must engage directly with others. It is my hope that I can support women in their eco-spiritual leadership development as they reconnect to their body’s wisdom.

Spirituality is woven into all aspects of my philosophies as I am passionate about the idea that we humans, as a species, are in need of collective spiritual renewal. I have found in my

teaching practice that women in particular are hungry for ritual, for tools to cultivate compassion, and to connect with self /Mother Earth. At PSU, almost all of my peers working in the Sustainability Leadership Center were women, and most of my LSE cohort is women. I have several examples of women's eyes opening wide when I describe the healing practices I use or the techniques and rituals I have created in order to better connect with my Divine Femininity. In a way, I accidentally became somewhat of a community organizer/Buddhist witch priestess for my peers. My role as an eco-spiritual leader has allowed me to practice Popular Education's horizontal leadership techniques, (Friere, 1970) while guiding embodied learning experiences for those involved.

At times, especially the Women's Moon Circles I facilitated, I had to exercise a new level of trust in my intuition as I conjured up a meaningful set of rituals for us. I allowed for spontaneity and emergent patterns. Here is an example of collaborative leadership used in this setting: After teaching songs to the participants, I would always ask, "Does anyone else have any songs they would like to share?" and often at the end of the ritual I would remind the women, "If anyone wants to lead next time or bring an activity, that would be great too!" It was important to me that these women knew they had just as much magic and divinity to add to the experience as me. Eco-spirituality, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), experiential learning, and transformational learning are some of the fields of study which have positively affected my leadership framework.

### **Reflective Narrative**

**Self understanding and commitment.** It has been an incredible journey exploring the meaning of sustainability leadership and clarifying my personal strengths and weaknesses as an

agent of social and environmental change. I am very committed to self-awareness and have taken the time and reflection necessary to cultivate a cultural identity and personal narrative that I am proud of. This has been a vital asset for me as a role model particularly for young women in both my professional educator roles and as an activist, musician, and performer. An example of using awareness as a useful tool comes from a session I led at the Oregon Higher Education Sustainability Conference Student Summit at PSU in 2013. My workshop was titled “Power, Privilege, and Sustainability” and dealt with issues such as environmental justice, internalized oppression, and white privilege. As the facilitator, I felt I must pay attention to *who* was present and *who* may or may not be getting their voice heard in this critical conversation. Being aware of individual and group dynamics also allowed me to find the best leverage points for asking challenging or vulnerable questions to the participants. Using mindful awareness in this environment served me well, and participants were very responsive.

In order to lead effectively and with enthusiasm, it is crucial that I simply have faith in people to discover their own truths, to create their own healing. If I choose to feed a person a bunch of information rather than let them discover it for themselves, I rob them of an authentic learning experience (Margolin, 2005; Yunkaporta, 2009). Friere (1970) and Heider (1985) emphasize the importance of holding space for others, rather than attempting to control the outcome of their learning. This is especially important for women, who have been historically subjected to dominance in learning environments and otherwise. When I led a women’s workshop in Thailand called “Find Your Voice, Find Your Medicine,” for example, I spent some time discussing the power of songs and helpful hints for singing as a group, but I know very well that the real embodied learning and transformation happened when I stopped talking and we

started singing together. As a woman myself, I have to be mindful of my own internalized patriarchy when I am leading, for sometimes that little voice tries to tell me that I am not equipped to do this work, that women's spirituality is silly or sinful, or that verbal cues are the only way to communicate information.

The most impactful aspect of self-understanding I gained from the LSE program was that I began to deeply trust my intuition. I have spent many years in the field of education, and I admit that I have feared what it may mean to let go of being a predominately cerebral leader to one who unapologetically embraces spirituality. The current educational paradigm we are suffering within puts little value on emotional intelligence, and it is much more vulnerable and possibly controversial for me to lead from my heart center, as I may not always have "scientific evidence" to back up my ideas. The past few years have gifted me with an abundance of opportunities to embrace my intuition. For the LSE course *Spiritual Leadership*, I created a community-based learning (CBL) project with my local community of elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Armed with Starhawk's (2004) book, *The Earth Path*, I spent three days alone in the woods writing and reflecting on the question "In listening to nature, can I hear my own voice more clearly?" This wild and unique educational experience changed my life and strengthened my relationship with non-human beings and myself. I also attended the Women of Wisdom Conference for my CBL in *Global Political Ecology*. For five days, I delved into the divine feminine through experiential workshops and trainings. Both of these CBL experiences were wonderful, and the oral and written reflections required of me deepened my learning and helped me articulate and integrate the knowledge I had accumulated.

While in my second year of graduate school, I simultaneously took intuitive healing courses at Lotus Lantern Healing Arts. The combination of spiritual, embodied education with the academic learning of LSE was unbelievably powerful. I distinctly remember a day in *Advanced Leadership for Sustainability* when our class was discussing Wheatley's (2006) theories about invisible fields of energy and how they pertain to leadership. The next day I attended my intuitive healing course, and we ended up using dousing rods to literally view the fields of energy of our classmates. It was shocking to discover the similar language coming out of the academy and my informal spiritual healing course. It was the combination of these two differing environments happening simultaneously that truly enriched my learning and satiated both my cognitive and spiritual curiosities, empowering me as a sustainability leader.

During the past few years, in my many capacities of leading, I was more keenly aware of my body. I paid attention to my senses, my gut, and the invisible forces of energy working around me in the learning environment. This beautiful merging of my intellect, emotions, body, and spirit helped me heal the internal fractures caused by an illusion of dichotomies ("*Am I healer or a teacher? I can't be both!*") A trust in my intuition has allowed me the clarity to more effectively see leverage points in systems (*Advanced Leadership for Sustainability/Global Political Ecology*), to use listening and silence in my teaching techniques, and to feel an overall greater sense of wholeness and ease in my identity as a sustainability leader. This was epitomized a few months ago when I unexpectedly acted as a spiritual leader for my family. The tools I have been learning over the past few years enabled me to be alone with my dear grandmother when she died. I actively crossed her over using song, silence, and intuition, trusting that I knew the right medicine for the moment. I felt the Divine Feminine in my bones, and had no reservations

that I was the right person to be with her. Only later, when my family responded with gratitude and respect, did I realize that I had acted as a “leader.”

**Systemic view of the world.** Learning about systems theory was unexpectedly exciting to me, and I was thrilled to discover new ways of integrating ecological design into my life.

*Advanced Leadership for Sustainability* offered me language for concepts that I had understood but not known how to explain. Many of my academic courses helped me critically examine dominant systems and paradigms as they are related to humans and our disconnection with nature. I gained a very fresh perspective on creative problem-solving when I took *Non-Violence and Gandhi's Educational Philosophy of Sustainability*. Pramod Parajuli visited our class via Skype as a guest speaker and shared a few stories about observing animals in their natural environments. He paid attention to the creative ways they found leverage points, and shared his curiosity and awe with class, “We’re in a drought! How can that squirrel be so fat?” He also talked about his spiritual belief that we, as humans, are interconnected with the other beings of Earth (and ancestors of the Earth), and if we listen closely enough to ourselves and to nature, we should be able to discover or even remember how to live more sustainably (personal communication, June 23, 2012).

**Bio-cultural relationships.** In this time of global spiritual crisis, the ability to effectively collaborate with diverse cultural groups is critical. Through my experience in the LSE program, I was able to gain many new strategies for creating environments where people with conflicting worldviews may be able to communicate in a peaceful manner, the most important being *compassionate listening*. My first opportunity to engage in this specific tool within an academic environment was in my LSE elective course *Storytelling and Social Change*. Next came *Non-*

*Violence and Gandhi's Educational Philosophy of Sustainability* where we spent a great deal of time studying non-violent conflict resolution and listening methods. In *Advanced Leadership for Sustainability Education*, a few peers and I interviewed folks from the organization The Compassionate Listening Project where we were able to participate in a listening circle which revealed great tenderness and vulnerability among participants. I actively practiced using this method several times following the experience in class.

This tool became extremely important to me, and I merged printed materials, ideas, and strategies from my classes with The Compassionate Listening Project resources to create my own listening workshops which I used with PSU's Food Systems Volunteer Task Force and my own Cultural Sustainability Volunteer Task Force. While in the LSE program, I also traveled to Thailand and studied peace-building and engaged Buddhism with a group of sixteen women from countries around the world. In this global context I attended multiple workshops focused on empowerment listening and was able to practice these skills with women from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, South Africa and more. It was an absolutely beautiful, expansive experience, and I am sure that some of the deep bonds I created with others were due to these listening activities. Cultivating compassion helps me empathize with others' stories, and in doing so, I gain a clearer understanding of their perspective. Listening exercises have also been useful to me because, when emotionally triggered, I am able to stay present and calm, deciphering the person's story and emotions from my own.

The most challenging and impactful class I took in regards to this key learning area was an elective from the Graduate School of Social Work titled *African American History: Issues of Intergenerational Trauma and Violence*. Although no one in this class spoke of "sustainability,"

the entire syllabus focused on topics related to *sustaining* the physical and social health of the black community in the United States. The demographic of students was more culturally (and racially) diverse than my LSE classes, and the stories and conversations were sometimes emotional. Despite the instructor's tendency to certain banking method teaching strategies, I still walked away from the class with copious amounts of useful information. In part, this happened because the professor, as a black woman, offered a distinctly different perspective than her white counterparts I am used to hearing. My Buddhist peace-building program in Thailand also exposed me to diverse perspectives, and I was repeatedly challenged and pushed to extraordinary learning in regards to power, privilege, and leadership. Experiential learning was the key.

**Tools for sustainable change.** My sustainability leadership toolkit includes new visions, techniques, theories, and pedagogies that have strengthened my identity and sense of purpose as an eco-spiritual leader. Many authors (Burns, 2011; Palmer, 2007; Heider, 1985) emphasize the importance of slowing down and reflecting. *Spiritual Leadership* in particular, helped me truly understand the value of silence, stillness, and rest. This was enhanced in later courses when I more deeply studied Indigenous pedagogies. I also borrowed the Permaculture design principle: "Stack functions" (Mollison, 1988) in order to preserve my energy, by overlapping schoolwork between courses.

Language is a tool that, when used well as a leader, can have a tremendous impact. One gift I received from the LSE program was language for frameworks or teaching methods that I, for the most part, was already using but could not articulate verbally. In my work at PSU as a sustainability leadership educator, I have been able to better articulate a variety of theories and pedagogies with my students so that they can explore what methods and principles work for

them. Critical Pedagogy of Place (Gruenewald, 2003), Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991; Baumgartner, 2001), Popular Education, and Liberating Education (Friere, 1970) are some of the frameworks that resonated with me most. I love the term “horizontal leadership,” which I have also heard called shared leadership, collaborative leadership, and power-with leadership (as opposed to power-over) (Macy, 2007). The essence of this concept is that all people in a learning environment are co-creating the experience together, and everyone is a potential leader with valuable information to offer. Unlike the dominant educational paradigm where students view the teacher as a distant and often authoritative “expert,” horizontal leadership is an empowering model that reflects many sustainability leadership principles such as holistic thinking, integrating multiple perspectives, and recognizing the value and interconnectedness of all beings.

## **Part II: LSE Comprehensive Project**

### **Introduction**

The human species is living at a time in which we face great environmental peril and social strife (Macy, 2007; Edwards, 2010; Orr, 1998). Invasive human influence on the self-regulating natural systems of Mother Earth has created tremendous ecological imbalances that can seem impossible to remedy. Spiritual ecologists recognize that reason has become more valuable than “faith, tradition, and revelation,” and that the “growing predominance of a global mechanized worldview” (Tucker, as cited in “About Spiritual Ecology,” 2013) has shattered our collective sense of the sacred. Masculine values such as rationality, individualism, and disconnection, taken to the extreme, have encouraged us to sever our intimate relationships with Mother Nature (Kumar, 2004, Norberg-Hodge, 2012; Barndt, 2008; Gomes & Kanner, 1995).

Values which are considered feminine, such as intuition, creativity, and holism have been delegitimized by the dominant culture (Goleman, 1995; Gomes & Kanner; Starhawk, 2004). Most people are aware of this imbalance and are doing everything they can to avoid the pain that surfaces when they acknowledge what is happening to “our own and other species, to the legacy of our ancestors, to unborn generations, and the living body of the earth” (Macy, 1998, p. 27).

Attitudinal norms imposed by colonialism and modern industrialization not only encourage human behaviors which are unsustainable and devoid of spiritual concern, but they also compel us to create great suffering for ourselves and other beings of the world. At the root of this suffering, this spiritual crisis, are feelings of disconnection from the divine (Starhawk, 2004; Macy, 2007; Roszak, 1995; Reeves, 1999; Kumar, 2004). To generate ecological and spiritual healing, it is imperative that all people, not just women, bring the feminine and the masculine back into balance both personally and collectively. Although there are drawbacks to using the seemingly dichotomous terms of “masculine” and “feminine,” for the sake of clarity in this paper it is useful to do so (see Appendix A for a chart describing these terms). Rather than view them as opposing forces, they can be understood as complementary aspects of a whole.

During the past several hundred years, women in particular, have endured various spiritual assaults which continue to manifest in their psyches (Estes, 1995). Historical and current patriarchal socialization has created a context where women often struggle with internalized oppression and disembodiment (hooks, 2002; Beauvoir, 1953). Global mainstream media and formal education systems are just two of the social institutions which perpetuate these unhealthy patterns. *Ecofeminism* unites ecology and feminism, exploring the interconnections between male domination over women and domination of nature (Ruether, 1992; Roszak, 1995).

Women's intuition is linked to nature, and because women have been taught that intimacy with nature is morally suspect, they are often suspicious of themselves (Reeves, 1999; Starhawk, 2004; Gomes & Kanner, 1995). This ability to trust one's internal voice is, (Baxter Magolda, 2008) arguably, the single most important factor in being an authentic leader.

As Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (2013) plainly states, "A spiritual revolution is needed if we're going to confront the environmental challenges that face us" (p. 28). The burgeoning field of spiritual ecology "acknowledges the critical need to recognize and address the spiritual dynamics at the root of environmental degradation," ("About Spiritual Ecology," 2013) and promotes the idea that creation is sacred and should be honored (Macy, 2007). Martinez (2008) agrees, arguing that, "The greatest healing that needs to be done is the healing of the European idea of the separation of people from nature" (p. 107). Sustainability leadership models (Burns, 2011; Wheatley, 2006; Ferdig, 2007) counter mainstream pedagogies by offering collaborative, reflective strategies for those interested in sharing spiritual ecology values. Non-formal learning organizations can offer conducive spaces for workshops or other experiential learning activities aimed at women who want to begin or deepen their practice as eco-spiritual leaders.

In the Portland, Oregon metro area, there are numerous businesses and nonprofits that offer yoga or other spiritual practice, but they tend to focus solely on inner healing while disregarding social activism or engagement with their community. Conversely, the city is also home to many activist organizations who may dedicate themselves to social justice or sustainability causes, but whom lack spiritual practice or tools for self-care. In order to empower women to rise up as global eco-spiritual leaders, there must be non-formal educational

opportunities for them to experience personal transformation and healing while developing practical skills they can use as active change agents in their communities. I propose the creation of an International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women in the Portland area. The center will incorporate a transformative and holistic educational “model in which participants use head, heart, hands, and spirit (intellectual, emotional, kinesthetic, and spiritual modalities) in the learning process” (IWP, 2013). This will be a space where women (and their allies) from across the globe can gather to reconnect with their body’s intuitive wisdom, deepen their spiritual practice, and collaboratively cultivate tools for non-violent activism.

## **Literature Review**

### **Why we need a reclamation**

*The Divine Feminine and intuition.* Historically, women’s contributions to the spiritual and physical well-being of their communities were valued as “influential cornerstones in the foundation of the art, science, religion, and law” of their cultures (Reeves, 1999, p. 6). In most pre-industrial communities, female spiritual leaders in the forms of herbalists, midwives, and traditional healers were commonplace, and through embodied learning, these women seamlessly knew how to weave the sacredness of nature into their practices of medicine and magic (Reeves; Starhawk, 1999). Reeves notes that these leaders were, “out of necessity, steeped in an intimate knowledge of the Earth, of herbs, the mysteries of childbirth, and the ecological cycles of renewal” (p. 7). Nature, spirituality, and intuition were deeply intertwined. You could say that women were fully connected to the powerful Divine Feminine.

What is the Divine Feminine and how does one reclaim it? Sometimes called the sacred feminine, the wild feminine (Kent, 2011), or the “dynamic feminine” (Gomes & Kanner, 1995),

the essence of this concept is similar to what some people name “Gaia consciousness.” Many eco-spiritual leaders believe we are on the brink of a spiritual paradigm shift, sometimes called “The Great Turning,” (Macy, 1998) which will lead our world back into a state of equilibrium. A collective surrender to the elements found in the archetype of the Divine Feminine is what may lead us on this healing path. These elements include silence, mercy, empathy, collaboration, creativity, diversity, and receptivity, “the set of qualities that are systematically devalued in patriarchy” (Gomes & Kanner, p. 119). There is not one *right* way to describe how the Divine Feminine is understood for it reveals the unconscious, our intuitive, inner knowledge that “literally *cannot* be expressed in words” (Starhawk, 1999, p. 32).

Although these values are not exclusively reserved for those who identify as female, many leaders stress the particular importance of women’s reconnection to their divinity. Healer Tami Lynn Kent (2013) claims that, “the world is shifting and the feminine is rising - yet how do we tap into the power of the feminine when all of our old structures and even the energy patterns in our bodies and daily lives are running with an absence of feminine energy?” (“Wild Feminine”). Kent, along with numerous eco-spiritual leaders and organizations around the world, are dedicated to answering that significant question.

In essence, the Divine Feminine is our intuition. “Intuition has been described as the capacity to sense messages from our internal store of emotional memory - our own reservoir of wisdom and judgement” (Agor, Carlson & Kaiser, Chapman, Cosier & Aplin as cited in Downey, Papageorgiou, & Stough, 2006). Our intuition helps us decipher truth from lie, to recognize what is unconscious programming from dominant culture and what is a direct message from the soul (Estes, 1995). Macy (1998) believes that, as a collective, we are intuitively awakening to “what

we once knew: we are alive in a living Earth...and despite our conditioning...we want to name, once again, this world as holy” (p. 21). For eco-spiritual leaders, a reclamation of their Divine Femininity is necessary for both the healing process and for one’s development as an authentic leader. Despite the many claims emphasizing the importance of intuition in effective leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008; “Top 10 Qualities,” 2012) there is very little to no help on *how* to nurture this way of knowing. This may be why “we still tend to rely not on our own deep intuition but on external authority, preconceived actions and mechanisms for scheduling and control” (Jones, 2007, p.1). It is crucial that women are given opportunities to develop their intuition through educational, experiential activities such as meditation, creative arts, or gardening.

*The witch persecutions and the beginning of a new paradigm.* A major spiritual shift in consciousness began to take place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during the Industrial Revolution when Westerners introduced “a new ideology, the mechanistic model of the universe, which saw the world as made up of separate objects that had no inherent life, could be viewed and examined in isolation from one another, and could be exploited without constraint (Starhawk, 2004, p. 23). During this same time period, thousands of people, mainly peasant and working class women in Europe, were killed during the Witch Persecutions, their essential body-held wisdom and animate worldview now held under contempt (Starhawk; Allen, 2008; Gomes & Kanner, 1995).

These supposed “bad” witches were mercilessly “burned at the stake, drowned slowly, horribly tortured, and mutilated in the cultural attempt to frighten the healing energies of the feminine, with its repository knowledge of ritual and the body, into extinction” (Reeves, 1999, p. 7). Women were subject to forced physical examinations of their underarms, breasts, and genitals

as part of their rigorous testing in order to detect if they were truly purveyors of evil magic (Reed, 2007, p. 223). It is impossible to know exactly how women's oppression of that time affects us living in the modern age, but "in general, women have become disconnected from this [intuitive] wisdom, not only because of personal traumas such as sexual and emotional abuse that may have caused us to dissociate, but as inheritors of a centuries-old fear of women's power that is expressed through her intuitive knowing" (Reeves, p. 6). This repression of the Divine Feminine is the same energy that represses anyone considered to be Other.

*The assault on women's spirituality.* This same paranoia of witches, women, and those connected to nature affected many indigenous people through the colonization process (Allen, 2008; Cajete, Mohawk & Rivera, 2008) as they too, were accused of being uncivilized, superstitious heathens devoid of humanity. Similarly, in Kenya, activist Wangari Maathai (2007) recounts the ways in which the animist spiritual beliefs of her community were destroyed by European missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. She recounts, "They taught the local people that God did not dwell on Mount Kenya, but rather in heaven, a place above the clouds. The proper place to worship him was in church on Sundays" (p. 6). Many in her community accepted this new paradigm, "and within two generations they lost respect for their own beliefs and traditions" (p. 6).

Another example of female spiritual leadership from the past can be found in the African-American slave communities of the United States. Black midwives and healers used their knowledge of plant medicine and magic to treat ailments in their communities, sometimes as a form of resistance against slave owners (Fett, 2002). Many white male doctors were threatened by the midwives' high rates of success, and they used their supremacy to belittle the gifts of these

women. One white physician from New Orleans (as cited in Mitchell, 1997), in reference to black midwives, stated “that such uneducated persons should be generally successful is owing to the fact that in a great majority of cases no scientific skill is required, and thus a lucky negress becomes the rival of the most learned obstetrician” (p. 34). The subjugation of these resilient African-American women, along with the attack on female spiritual traditions throughout history, created wounds women collectively need to heal.

The sexist perception of women’s natures as deviant may still have a powerful influence on women’s ability to trust themselves, particularly in their capacity as spiritual leaders. Starhawk (2004) claims that “Since the time of the Witch persecutions, knowledge that derives from the worldview of an animate, interconnected, dynamic universe is considered suspect—either outright evil or simply woo-woo” (p. 26). It takes courage for women to rise up and act as change-agents in their communities, considering all of the efforts made to silence them. This is why it is crucial that women have experiential learning opportunities which will help them develop pride in their lineage as women, heal internalized oppression, and nurture intuition.

***Internalized oppression.*** The phenomenon known as internalized oppression occurs when an individual believes that the derogatory messages and stereotypes the dominant culture conveys about them are true (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Rosenwasser, 2002; Leary, 2005). For young women in particular, one of the main messages they hear is that they do not have intrinsic worth, rather their value arises from their physical attractiveness. Female scholars such as de Beauvoir (1953) “have long been aware of the negative effects of living in a culture that sexually objectifies women,” (as cited in Fairchild, 2012) but the pervasive and unrealistic standards of

beauty of today have created an epidemic of appearance anxiety, body shame, and self-loathing (Balcutis, Cole, & Chelberg et. al, 2013; hooks, 2002; Brown, 2012).

This global obsession with being thin and (in many places) light-skinned often results in disembodiment and self-objectification. Like internalized oppression, this self-objectification compels women to take on an “outside-in” perspective on themselves, rather than an “inside-out” one (Roberts & Water, 2004, p.7), further distancing them from their intuitive nature. Evidence shows that self-objectification may reduce women’s involvement in social activism as they are less likely to challenge the gender status quo (Association for Psychological Science, 2013). This is a serious problem since engaged activism is one of the avenues in which women can reclaim their authentic voice.

If women internalize the dominant narrative that they are worthy of oppression, they may defer to the wisdom of men rather than stepping up in leadership roles. “Women are often under-represented in management” (Downey, Papageorgiou, & Stough, 2006, p. 253), and the same goes for sustainability and spirituality leadership. In 2013, Watkins Books released a list celebrating the positive contributions of the top “Spiritually Influential Living People” in the world (Watkins’ spiritual 100 list for 2013) and only three of the top ten leaders were women. Although it may be, in part, a matter of women simply not being recognized, there is no denying that internalized oppression plays a role in women’s distrust of themselves as leaders. In order for women to be liberated from these destructive thought patterns that encourage a mind-body split, they must be exposed to experiential learning activities. Then they will better be able to “construct knowledge through direct engagement in bodily experiences [by] inhabiting one’s body through a felt sense of being-in-the-world” (Freiler, 2008, p. 40). Creative physical

expression and re-connection to Mother Nature can help women come home to their bodies so that they can lead from the inside out, rather than the outside-in.

***Formal education.*** Mainstream educational environments are largely unfit for this kind of healing work as it requires flexible time for emotional reconciliation, deep spiritual reflection, and practice. In fact, most public school settings and pedagogies in the United States contribute to, rather than debunk, women's suspicion of self-generated knowledge. Robinson (2010) claims that the current public education model, which was "conceived in the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment and the economic circumstances of the Industrial Revolution" (n.p.), is no longer relevant and causes feelings of inadequacy in many people. In essence, the education model is a microcosm of the larger globalized economy, promoting "monocultures of the mind" (Shiva, 1993), and measuring intelligence through standardized testing. This is evidenced in the U.S. Department of Education's mission which "is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Formal education encourages students to achieve and compete

Conformity, speed, and rote memorization are rewarded in these settings while intuitive knowing, whole-systems thinking, and what Orr (1996) calls "slow knowledge" are discouraged. When schools face budgetary constraints, music and art are the first subjects to go, depriving "students of the best sources for cultivating the creative imagination" (Aronowitz, 2008, p. 29). There are several ways to imbibe information, and our species may be making a fatal error by emphasizing engagement of the analytical mind alone, abandoning our bodies, hearts, and spirits. Kumar (2004) reflects on the significance of this imbalance:

Pure rationalism is in itself violence of the mind. Rationalism by its nature cuts through,

separates, divides, isolates. This is not to say that rationality has no place in our lives. It has. But it should be kept in its place, and not given an exaggerated status in our society. Rationality tempered with feelings and intuitions of the heart, in yin-yang balance, can create a culture of non-violence, wholeness and compassion, whereas pure Rationalism creates a culture of violence (p. 104).

Clearly, formal learning environments are not designed to enhance students' emotional intelligence, spiritual development, or intimate relationships with nature.

Not only does mainstream education tend to over-emphasize rationality, but the educational settings are often sites of cultural imperialism (Friere, 1970) wherein “[C]ultural capital allows students from middle and upper classes to use patterns of talking, common words, general knowledge and values from their lives outside of school to fit into the patterns of interaction in school” (Lareau, 1999, p. 24) while those who lack the appropriate “cultural capital” are ostracized. This is true for adult learners as well as children and can have a particularly detrimental effect on females. Unlike many sustainability leadership models, which encourage student-centered learning and empowering teaching methods (Ferdig, 2007; Burns, 2011; Friere, 1970), mainstream education frequently employs pedagogies that dehumanize and disempower the student.

For those who dare to integrate healing or spirituality work into their formal educational environments, many complex problems abound. Firstly, there is supposed to be a strict separation between church and state, and leaders who choose to integrate self-care rituals such as breathing, yoga, or meditation into their classrooms put themselves at risk of complaints of being “too religious” for school. It would also likely be problematic for teachers if they attempted to

integrate an animist worldview where they gave life to plants or water, referring to them as “friends” or “relatives” rather than the anthropocentric term “natural resources.”

Another issue relevant in formal (and non-formal settings) may arise when well-intentioned white, Western educators wish to appropriate spiritual practices such as yoga or singing indigenous songs. If they lack cultural competency or historical knowledge of the practice, there is potential for the educator to disturb or disrespect students who originate from that cultural, ethnic, or racial community but whom have been marginalized or oppressed for practicing those same traditions (Smith, 2013). Another relevant issue is the fact that many Westerners simply find spirituality to be intensely personal and see no value in collective spiritual practice.

It is debatable whether or not true spiritual revelations can actually be fostered within the confines of formal education, since academia is largely a cerebral setting (Steingard, 2005), but research shows that the majority of university and college students *do* want spiritual development to be a part of their learning experience (Lindholm, 2007). Tisdell and Tolliver’s (2003) research affirms that spirituality has its place in culturally relevant and emancipatory education settings, and Holland (2004) found that, for his students with disabilities or chronic illness, mindfulness and meditation practices significantly improved their ability to deal with stress. On the other hand, Wilber (as cited in Steingard, 2005) believes that “these intellectually sourced practices ‘simply offer new ways to translate the world’, not ways to transform consciousness into subtle, causal, and nondual domains” (p. 243). He goes on to argue that true transformation requires spiritual practice: [Without] “genuine contemplative practice...all intellectual pursuits of Spirit are reduced to ‘linguistic chitchat and book junk.’” (p. 243).

Although it is up for debate whether or not short periods of mindfulness practice within public school, for example, can instigate a spiritual paradigm shift within students, there are, in many ways, less restrictions when creating learning environments in non-formal settings. To develop authentic eco-spiritual leadership skills, it is imperative that women are provided learning environments that are not hyper-restricted by time or other constraints such as formalized assessment or a desk-bound classroom environment.

### **Coming home**

*The wisdom of the body.* It is essential that experiential, kinesthetic learning activities are part of a woman's spiritual leadership development process if she is to heal her internalized oppression and embody leadership as "an expression of authenticity" (Eriksen, 2009, pp.751-2). Mindfulness, meditation, singing, dancing, gardening, cooking, self-sufficiency skill-building...these are all ways to engage the body. If women are present in their bodies, they can more easily tap into the Divine Feminine, their intuition. According to Ladkin (2010), "...a leader must be attentive to the somatic clues of their body as they experience situations, and then choose how to express them" (p. 22). Due to the nature of the work, it is particularly important for eco-spiritual leaders to know their bodies well and have tools that expand their capacity to handle the emotional dissonance, conflict, and grief which may arise within their learning environments (Macy, 1998).

Many eco-spiritual leaders hope to shake people out of their apathy, "[arousing] our passion for life and our power to protect it" (Macy, 1998, p. 5). In order to ignite the sparkle of participants' learning (Nelson, 2008, p. 5) and healing, leaders may ask them to delve into emotional issues such as historical trauma or species extinction. It is natural for both the leader

and participants to have somatic, emotional reactions to these conversations, but it is critical that leaders are in tune with their bodies so that they can firstly, understand how they are feeling and secondly, as a means of self-care, separate their own feelings from those around them. Self-care, a theme emphasized by sustainability leaders such as Jones (2007) and Edwards (2010), is crucial for leaders who do not want to get burnt-out or overwhelmed with others' emotions.

Several sustainability leadership theorists emphasize the importance of “creating a sense of place” by connecting to one's local natural environment (Orr, 1992; Edwards, 2010). We can learn all sorts of lessons from the land and plants around us, but we must look to our body as our first teacher, as it is the most immediate and manageable system in our field (Reeves, 1999). This hyper-local knowledge of self may be the key to understanding blocks and flows in the larger, complex systems that wreak havoc on our global communities. Honoring our bodies is one way to reclaim the sacred. “Because we are microcosms of Earthly patterns, practicing respect for our bodies demonstrates respect for the Earth” (Walla, 2008, p. 3). Not only will women's return to their bodies be healing, but in the practical sense, they will function much more effectively if leading from their whole, embodied selves.

***Mother Earth.*** Coming home to one's body and coming home to Mother Earth are essentially one in the same for, “We are part of the living earth, and to connect with her is to connect with the deepest parts of ourselves” (Starhawk, 2004, p. 11). Many authors who share their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) emphasize that, within their cultures, there is no separation between themselves and nature (Allen, 2008; Lyons, 2008; Adamson, 2008; Martinez, Salmon, & Nelson, 2008; Alarcon, 2008), and storytelling, dance, art, and other ritual serve to enhance those sacred, interconnected relationships. Armstrong (2002) offers a familial

perspective when she shares how her people “grew up loving each other on the land and loving each plant and each species the way we love our brothers and sisters” (p. 67). Similarly, Rebecca Adamson (2000) believes that “people rooted in the land over time have exchanged their tears, their breath, their bones...all of their elements with their habitat many times over” (p. 34). Gandhi, (as cited in Kumar, 2004) who is most well-known for his non-violent approach to human conflict, considers the value of other living beings as well. He writes, “I want to realise brotherhood not merely with the beings called human, but with all life, even with such beings as crawl on the earth, because we claim a common descent from the same God” (p. 155). Many other eco-spiritual leaders share this sentiment that nature is divine, and since we are a part of nature, we too, are divine.

If women can start to view the beings of Mother Earth as “relatives” (Martinez, 2005, p. 92) who are a loving part of our Earth family, rather than “natural resources” that we “steward,” they will be able to expand their heart’s capacity for compassion and build intimacy with a new community that may include the sun, stars, plants, trees, birds, worms, and ancestors. As Wheatley (2006) challenges us, “Information must actively be sought from everywhere, from places and sources people never thought to look before” (p. 83). In listening to nature, they may access precious information that will help them develop their authentic leadership identity. As women *re-build* and *remember* their intimate relationship with Mother Earth, they show peaceful resistance against the global patriarchy, build their esteem, and reclaim their Divine Feminine.

### **Solution: Developing The International Spiritual Ecology Center For Women**

#### **Proposal.**

It is time for a reclamation of the Divine Feminine.

More and more women are interested in reclaiming their Divine Femininity and questioning what leadership role they may play in “The Great Turning.” Others are fully aware of their gifts and can offer guidance and support to women who want to become more embodied, conscious beings. I propose the creation of a non-formal educational organization that seeks to empower women as eco-spiritual leaders dedicated to a paradigm shift towards sustainability. The site for this organization will be in or near Portland, Oregon, ideally in a semi-rural or forested area. The design principles and mission for this organization will be modeled off of a variety of educational sites and nonprofits that I have been involved with, primarily The International Women’s Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) in Mae Rim, Thailand.

In 2004-05 I lived in Thailand for several months and as part of my trip I participated in an internship at Pun Pun Center for Self-Reliance. The context, content, and hands-on learning methods were just the right recipe for me at that time to experience a spiritual transformation. As part of our internship, we also visited IWP, whose goal is to support grassroots women’s activism, primarily in Asia. I was genuinely blown away that spaces like these existed, where international communities could come together and share in such communal, collaborative learning and where principles of spiritual ecology were the norm.

This year (2013) I returned to IWP to study Buddhist Peace-building with a group of sixteen women. I was able to see many parallels between the variety of pedagogies used and the sustainability leadership theories I was studying at Portland State University. In addition to these experiences, I also delved deep into my Divine Feminine through intuitive healing classes, a women’s spirituality conference, and healing body work. These are only some of the significant learning experiences that have informed my framework in designing this model.

I have lived in Portland for nearly my whole life and have dreamed of walking into a welcoming community hub like The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women. Yet a Center like this simply does not exist. Involved with a vast number of sustainability, social justice, and healing organizations over the years, I have found very few spaces that unite the personal with the social, the development of spiritual practice with activist training. Yet I have been motivated by several local and global non-formal educational organizations who will serve as inspiration for this project. See Appendix C for a list of organizations who have and will help me in the development of the Center's aesthetics, mission statement, guiding principles, pedagogies, and spiritual rituals (the list only includes resources with whom I have engaged directly). I would also like to emphasize the use of arts and music as a healing tool, as that is my particular area of interest. Some of the text for this written model will be pulled directly from IWP's website, as they are the closest existing organization to what I imagine for this Center. I am also considering the possibility of partnering with them somehow as a sister organization.

### **Who are we?**

*Description of center:* The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women is a training and retreat center located about 30 minutes from Portland, Oregon. Our center includes accommodation, dining area, outdoor and indoor meeting spaces, gardens, sauna, library, and meditation hall. Our center is comfortable and promotes a simple way of living.

*Description of what we do:* The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women is a spiritual-based feminist organization working to support grassroots women's activism and leadership development in Cascadia and beyond. We offer workshops, retreats, and training courses inspired by the principles of Spiritual Ecology and Feminism. We believe that all life is

sacred and understand that the root of environmental and social degradation is spiritual. Integrating feminism, social action, sustainability, art, self-sufficiency, and spirituality, we advocate for transformation at the personal, community, and global levels. We practice a partnership culture and work with women's organizations, community peace groups, nonprofits, and grassroots activists from around the world. Our approach incorporates Buddhist and Earth-based spiritual teachings and practice.

*Values:* The work of The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women is grounded in four core values: **spiritual ecology, feminism, social activism, and spiritual practice**. We embody our guiding principles and values through the use of methodologies that reflect power sharing, respect for diversity, non-violent conflict resolution, unlearning internalized patriarchy, holistic, experiential learning, simplicity, and the combination of personal practice with social transformation.

*Guiding principles:*

- We honor the Divine Feminine.
- We are part of the living Earth and view all living beings as sacred.
- We aim to serve the highest good for all living beings.
- We promote non-violent resistance to social oppressions.
- We believe all beings are capable of transformation.
- We believe that everyone is a potential leader.
- We honor diversity, whole-systems thinking, and the interconnectedness of all life.
- We choose simplicity.

**Methodologies: The four element eco-spiritual leadership model.** The workshops or educational experiences facilitated at the International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women will be guided by the Four Element Eco-Spiritual Leadership Model. Integrating useful learning and teaching theories from the fields of sustainability, spiritual ecology, feminism, critical pedagogy, indigenous pedagogy, and adult education, I have developed this model to guide the Center's leadership practice. Transformation, emancipation, and empowerment are at the heart of this model, and it is heavily influenced by Liberation Education (Friere, 1970), Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, year), Transformational Learning Theory (Baumgartner, 2001), the Social Change Model of Leadership (Wagner, 2007), and various Indigenous Pedagogies.

Many leaders struggle against the ever-present dichotomies that permeate Western culture such as mind/body, self/others, spirituality/science, humans/nature, and self-care/service. These dichotomies create feelings of disconnection and can make it difficult for leaders to maintain integrity and wholeness. This leadership model seeks to bridge those gaps by focusing on (re)connection. In order to incorporate the powerful symbolism of the four elements, I centered each principle around qualities that embody the element. Understanding that those qualities are subjective, I based my model off ideas from Starhawk's (2004) book *The Earth Path*. These principles are designed to provide healing and empowerment for both the facilitator and the participants.

#### ***Four Element Eco-Spiritual Leadership Model***

*EARTH: Connect to earth. connect to self. Know your own story, the stories of the human family, and the stories of the land.* There are several reasons why the development of a healthy self-narrative is key to the empowerment of women and sustainability leaders. Despite the content of one's personal story, be it tumultuous or not, studies show that children who have the

most self-confidence are the ones rooted by a strong family narrative. Cultivating this “intergenerational self” helps people “know they belong to something bigger than themselves” (Feiler, 2013, p. 3) and have a place in the context of the Cosmos. Connecting to oneself through embodied storytelling and listening techniques can help students intensify self-awareness and precipitate constructive, developmental change (Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007). Writing or speaking one’s own story has the potential to trigger a “disorienting dilemma,” which can result in the the storyteller experiencing their narrative in a new way. As their story moves from the inside out, women may be able to more easily engage in critical self-reflection.

Cranton (2002) describes critical reflection as “the means by which we work through beliefs and assumptions, assessing their validity in the light of new experiences or knowledge, considering their sources, and examining underlying premises” (p. 65). This process can challenge students to expand their worldview about what is true and what is possible. Once a woman is able to view her story as malleable rather than fixed, she may be empowered to change the outcomes of her story (McCray, 2002) and act as a participant, rather than a bystander, in her own life. This can help reverse the process of self-objectification.

Listening to other’s stories within the context of compassionate listening circles or empowered listening exercises can not only catalyze participants into a more creative state of thinking, but the process can also renovate our old belief systems (Cohen, 2004). Emerging literature has highlighted not only the success of using storytelling in adult educational settings (Butcher, 2006; Cohen, 2004, McCrary, 2002) but it has provided frameworks and activities as well. Useful techniques for narrative development come from Bell and Roberts’ Storytelling Project Model (2010), Boal’s (2002) Theatre of the Oppressed, Compassionate Listening Circles,

and Macy's (1998) body of activities she calls "Work That Reconnects." These practical, experiential storytelling techniques can be used to help women become embodied while simultaneously addressing systemic issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia.

In this era of globalization, it is imperative that eco-spiritual leaders have the capacity, compassion, and integrity to work with diverse peoples. In designing courses using ecological principles, Burns (2011) contends that it is important for learners to "...consider complex ecological and social issues from diverse perspectives" (p. 2). Problematically, there is little energy put into cultural competency education in the U.S. In my experience I have found that many white folks, including those in leadership positions, do not feel they have a "culture." Yet their denial of self, of their culture reflects their privilege for "to ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it. Without specifically addressing white ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other" (Fusco as cited in Martin et al, 1996). The Center will employ activities that help participants delve into their family histories (if known) and our collective history, in order to develop a strong sense of self (this process may involve a great deal of shame and denial as participants look at systems of power and privilege).

In a city like Portland, Oregon, who has a heartbreakingly racist history, it is imperative that The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women addresses these local inequities and provides space for reconciliation and positive cultural, spiritual identity development. Without a grounded cultural identity, we run the risk of leading from the unconscious mind, perpetuating ideals we do not actually support. Friere's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed addresses the reality that "...there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize." (n.p.) It is vital that we

move beyond well-intentions and raise our own consciousness if we are to legitimately participate in emancipatory education.

*WATER: Connect to water. Connect to Mother Earth. Be receptive to new ways of living and leading.* Building an intimate relationship with Mother Earth is crucial to the healing and development of eco-spiritual leaders for, “When we attune to the rhythms of nature, the possibilities are endless” (Edwards, 2010, p. 149). The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women will integrate meaningful ritual into our workshops and learning environment. Although meditation and earth-based visualizations will be incorporated as ways to connect to one’s body and natural cycles, “if we leave the natural world out of our practice and rituals in any real sense, if we invoke an abstract earth but never have any real dirt under our fingernails, our spiritual, psychic, and physical health becomes devitalized and deeply unbalanced” (Starhawk, 2004, p. 6). Women must go outside and experience the mysteries of nature.

The learning site itself will allow for place-based educational practices that can occur in a non-urban environment. Every season’s turning will be celebrated with rituals that involve physical connection with Mother Earth. The power of ritual should not be underestimated, and as Woody (2003) points out, ceremony can be a beautiful and dignified “response to the Creator in appreciation for the willingness of Nature to serve humankind”(p.13). Farm work, such as turning piles of compost or harvesting apples, are also healthy ways to connect with the cycles of nature if done mindfully. The Center will ideally model a self-sufficient system, and I hope to provide hands-on building workshops (building the library using mostly natural materials for example) for women to physically engage their bodies. Experiential activities such as seed-saving, medicine-gathering, or soap-making can incite great pride in women while deepening

their relationship with the divine. The presence of rainwater catchment devices, composting toilets, gardens, and beehives can help women connect to food sources and other gifts of nature often taken for granted. All of this learning will be experiential (Kolb, 1984).

For city-dwelling women in particular, there is no emphasizing how important these activities are. They lay the foundation for one's relationship to Mother Earth and can help women intuitively understand how over-consumption or factory farming affect the interconnected systems on the living body of Earth. Re-connecting to nature through reflection, work, art and play links us to our ancestors and can have a surprisingly emotional effect. Simply providing space, time, and silence for women to explore their relationships with other beings of the Earth family is crucial to the Center's mission. Creative, reflective activities such as journaling or collaging will enhance these experiences when suitable.

*AIR: Connect to air. Connect to Spirit. Use personal practice to cultivate a clear mind.*

The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women will use a variety of experiential, transformative learning activities that will invite women's Divine Feminine to shine. Finding and then trusting one's intuitive voice happens mainly through a process of surrender. Instead of trying to name everything, using words and rationale, Heider (1985) believes that we should "pay attention to the silence" and "learn to see emptiness" (p. 21). Peirce (as cited in Reeves, year) further explains that, "Activating intuition always starts with a shift into softness and silence," encouraging people to "tune down the masculine mind"(p. 47) and simply rest.

The Center's goal in providing spiritual practice is to help participants cultivate mindfulness and their connection to the Divine, sometimes called one's "Buddha Nature" or "Christ Consciousness." This enlightened state is the space where one intuitively knows that all

of life is interconnected and that all beings are worthy of love. Mindfulness is a practice that can be used no matter what activity one is doing and is more a state of being than a goal to achieve (Hanh, 2013). The Center will integrate breathing techniques and mindfulness into many of our learning activities in order to expand our capacity for loving-kindness and compassion, important qualities for eco-spiritual leaders.

Palmer (2007) encourages us to attend to the voice of the teacher within through solitude and silence, walking in the woods, or keeping a journal. He believes that “we need to find every possible way to listen to that voice and take its counsel seriously” (p. 33). It is my hope that the Center could expose women to a variety of meditation techniques and other spiritual practices so they can find what best suits them. Every evening in the meditation hall, sitting and walking meditation will be encouraged. Singing, dancing, and outdoor activities are also forms of spiritual practice. Ultimately, these experiential activities can lead women back to their bodies, and this is vital, “For body wisdom contains the essential truths about what matters most to a woman and ultimately to the human race as a whole. Body wisdom especially amplifies the inherent sacred relationship between a woman and the deep feminine” (Reeves, year, p. 4). Regular spiritual practice encourages the body to slow down, which then enables leaders to make decisions from a clear, uncluttered mind.

*FIRE: Connect to fire. Connect to your creative source. Let true expression lead you to know and appreciate your gifts.* One of the most successful ways for women to re-connect with their Divine Feminine is through art. “The realisation of art is an outer manifestation of self-realization” (Kumar, 2004, p. 141). Creative activities, which are inherently spiritual, (R. Wolf, personal communication, May 18, 2012) can unite our fragmented selves, allowing our

unconscious to create what it needs to create in order to heal. As we surrender to self-expression, we open up to all that is sacred in the Universe. “All artists know that when you are “in the groove” or “in the flow” using your hands, bodies, and minds in creative ways, [you] are not thinking of the past or concerned with the future. We are present in the moment as an integral part of creation” (p. 292). This is a way to nurture one’s “Buddha mind,” a space of mindfulness.

Creative activities serve many purposes in the leadership development process. For oppressed peoples, the practice of traditional cultural arts can be a vehicle for decolonizing the mind, and Indigenous author Nelson (2008) believes that, “This creative liberation is a foundation and form of cultural sovereignty” (p. 292). Orr (2011), in his discussion about modern culture’s obsession with speed, notes that story-telling, music-making, and craftwork are “speed-control devices used by every healthy culture” (p. 29). Besides slowing down, art also has the capacity to help women heal from internalized oppression. Musical therapist Silvia Nakkach (2012) reflects on her practice, stating that, “Over and over, I hear the voice of self-trust arising as the singing voice grows freer and a sense of possibility opens up for those who are facing physical or emotional challenges” (p. 12). In *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 2002) a popular education method that employs acting and games as a means to liberation, “...reality is not only shown as it is, but also more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for- to become what we have the potential to be” (p. 6). Embodied learning strategies, such as using theater in experiential learning activities, have also shown great success in helping participants analyze structural power and privilege in regards to racism, sexism, and classism (Frieler, 2008).

For eco-spiritual leaders, the use of creative expression in our work is crucial. Art has the ability to bring out intense gratitude in not only those who create it, but those who bear witness

to another's process. If we are to heal from our feelings of disconnection, we must embrace art as medicine. As Steindl-Rast (as cited in Orr, 2007) puts it "...only gratefulness has the power to dissolve the ties of our alienation (p. 44). Individual and collective activities that integrate dance, collage, crafts, theater, singing, painting, poetry, drumming, and more will be the creative heart center of The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women. The experience of collective grief or joy through music, for example, has tremendous healing effects and can renew our faith, filling us with possibility and wonder. Nakkach (2012) agrees, stating that "the emotional magic of singing, scientifically applied, will contribute to awakening consciousness and relieving human suffering on a grand scale" (Nakkach, p. 34). Sparking the fire of creativity in women is one way to enhance their power and authenticity as leaders.

**Conclusion.** There is still much work to be done in order to turn this concept into a reality. In order to attract international participants, there must be great visibility of the Center and its goals. Building relationships with like-minded spiritual leaders, sustainability leaders, healers, educators, activists, counselors, homesteaders, and artists is how I will build my community of co-creators. There is also the reality that, in many aspects, the mainstream sustainability movement has operated in an elitist, oppressive manner, resulting in a very white, homogenous community of leaders, particularly in Portland, Oregon. In order to attract communities that have been repelled by organizations that mention the word "sustainability," the leaders involved with the birth of the Center must come from culturally diverse backgrounds, offering insights from a range of perspectives. Ideally, the Center will serve a truly diverse population of local and global, culturally diverse leaders and potential leaders. Costs and access must be considered.

It is also important that the community understands why the Center would focus on *women's healing*. Although it by no means would be an exclusive space, (it would be great to have people who didn't identify as female involved), the primary mission is to serve and empower women and for some, I expect this would be problematic. We are collectively suffering from the effects of globalization, and all sorts of people are looking for ways to connect and to heal. I must be ready to justify the importance of anti-oppression and spiritual leadership development for women while also brainstorming and reflecting with others about how to attract and engage a culturally-diverse global community of women.

For now, I am going to create an online presence (website of some kind) to promote the principles of spiritual ecology. I will also begin to offer more trainings and workshops for activist organizations, educational institutions, businesses, and individuals who want to transform themselves by integrating mindfulness practice, art, and spirituality into their lives.

*"We may love nature, we may even profess to worship her, but most of us have barely a clue as to what she is murmuring in the night." -Starhawk*

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## Appendix A

### **Principles of my Teaching Philosophy** (Nicole S. Barrett, 2013)

#### ***Awareness***

- I am committed to self-love, personal authenticity, and continually working on self-awareness.*
- I live in a series of nested systems which are as tiny as my cells and as vast as the universe. An awareness of system flow and blocks enhances my leadership skills and ability to be of service.*
- I operate from a particular cultural standpoint (way of being, knowing, doing and valuing) and must continually remember to refrain from making assumptions about how others learn.*
- In order to maintain integrity, it is imperative that I am grounded firmly in my own story, history, and identity in order for me to work compassionately with diverse peoples.*

#### ***Power & Faith***

- I believe that all beings are capable of transformation.*
- I am dedicated to the empowerment of all beings and must avoid excess intervention on their discovery process lest I be an oppressor.*
- We all have unique gifts to offer the world, and it is the birthright of every being to have the freedom and personal power to know and share their gifts.*

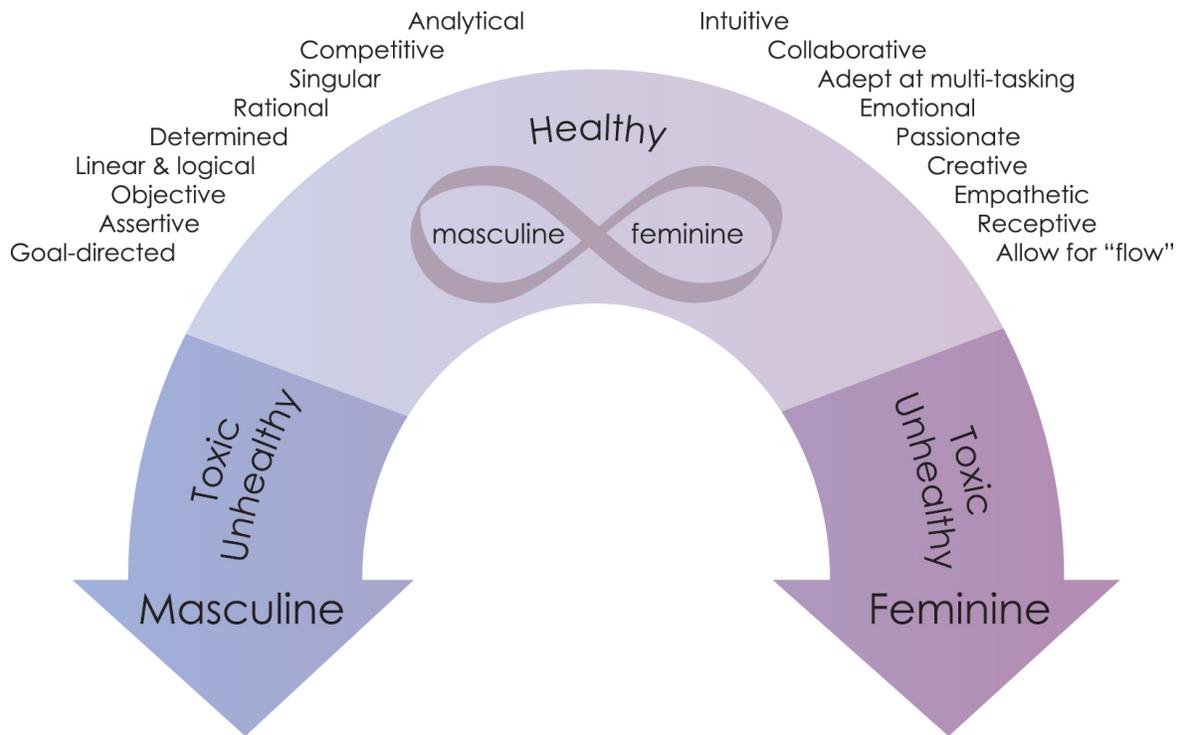
#### ***Spirituality***

- All beings are interconnected and interdependent.*
- The greed, anger and ignorance I witness in society are also within me. Reducing suffering in myself or society are one and the same.*
- Intuition, physical feelings, spiritual and emotional intelligence deserve equal or more attention than intellectual prowess.*
- Ancestors and future generations are key players in our collective learning experience.*
- “We need to see ourselves in the context of eternity” -My Grandfather*

Appendix B

*The Masculine - Feminine Energy and Duality Chart* (Cocconi, 2012) demonstrates one interpretation of “masculine” and “feminine” ways of being. This paper argues that collectively, we have reached the “toxic/unhealthy” range of masculinity.

**The Masculine - Feminine Energy and Duality Chart**



Appendix C

Influential Local and Global Models for the Development of The International Spiritual Ecology Center for Women (in Portland, Oregon)

*The International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP); Mae Rim, Thailand*

*Pun Pun Center for Self-Reliance; Mai Tang, Thailand*

*The Baan Hom Samunphrai School; Chiang Mai, Thailand*

*Songdhammakalyani Monastery; Nakom Patom, Thailand*

*Lotus Lantern Healing Arts; Portland, Oregon*

*Western States Center; Portland, Oregon*

*Women of Wisdom Foundation; Seattle, Washington*

*Ecology Center; Berkeley, California*

*Queer Dharma at Shambhala Meditation Center of Portland; Portland, Oregon*

*Portland First Christian Church; Portland Oregon*

*Basic Rights Oregon; Portland, Oregon*