

Moon Meetings and the Meaning of Sisterhood: A Poetic Portrayal of Lived Feminist Spirituality

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Abstract

Feminist spirituality is a center of sisterhood and feminist disruption that is often underappreciated within the scholarly literature. Here, I use poetic inquiry combined with autoethnography to open a window into the real-world practice of feminist spirituality in a small sisterhood I'm fortunate to be a part of. The poems contained within chronicle my failing marriage while the vignettes between them shed light upon the sisterhood that kept me strong as I coped with it.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; feminist spirituality; autoethnography

But on Saturday night, the cabins have emptied out and the womb room is vacant; the hundred women who have come to the Feminist Spiritual Community's Tenth Anniversary Celebration are all in the dining hall, where tables and chairs have been pushed out of the way to make space for the Crone Ceremony. ... As the younger women listen, the crones talk among themselves about what it's like to be an older woman, how their lives have changed, how other people react to them now. (Eller, 1995, p. 1)

Our small group of women, our secret Feminist Spiritual Community, has eleven members and four crones, these being women of or over the sacred age of fifty-six. I wish I was. Still, a fifth woman will be initiated in replication of the Crone Ceremony, as depicted by Cynthia Eller, late next year, in that liminal time just after Halloween but just before it's really winter (Eller, 1995). We meet for a few hours at a time, monthly, in our "Moon Meetings," which give us access to female energy and comradeship—and a needed reprieve from our husbands, boyfriends, jobs, and children. "No boys allowed," we joke, "but men could come, if any worthy enough could be found." We'd show them a really good time, but we've never found one we'd welcome. A worthy man could come to our quaint candlelit Womb Room, but we're starting to half-doubt they exist. Our husbands and boyfriends, when we keep them, just call it "girls' night." You'll notice they're never welcome.

In *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, Zsuzanna Budapest offers a series of rituals to mark bodily events in a woman's life, including puberty, menopause, conception, motherhood, abortion, miscarriage, gynecological surgery, middle age ("queening"), and cronehood. ... Menstruation is marked as an opportunity for women to connect to nature, and particularly

the moon; to recognize their own divine life-giving powers; to exercise psychic powers that are supposedly heightened during or before menstruation; and to experience death and rebirth on a monthly basis. (Eller, 1995, p. 85)

Our monthly Moon Meetings are about this, even if the magic we achieve is only our sisterhood and an escape from quotidian existence and the seemingly endless underappreciated toils of womanhood, wifehood, girlfriendhood, and motherhood. We celebrate menstruation at every meeting, as is naturally fitting, even if only a handful of us is menstruating at any given time. Those who are honored and given a ritual mixture of spiced red wine and tincture of motherwort sweetened with port, emblematic of the menses (and surprisingly delicious), and we raise a toast to womanhood and female strength. We gather around our Vulva shrine, which is covered in carven ornaments depicting or evocative of the site of womanhood, shout our tributes to ourselves, one another, and to womankind, and drink deep and long to our bleeding pussies before raising a second toast to the crones who bleed no more. Thus, with two heavy quaffs, we open our Moon Meetings by honoring all womanhood, symbolically and *in vivo* (cf. Eller, 1995, p. 93).

Our Moon Meetings are a celebration of our sisterhood and sisterhood around the world, inspired by need as much as by the Feminist Spirituality Movement which has informed them (Eller, 1995). They are, for us, poetry as it is lived. We encourage each other to write. We read. We laugh when it's funny. We cry when it's not. We shout when we need to. This is our jam, as we say.

There is a bridge between raw poetry and effectual scholarship known as poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry is a means of simultaneously capturing the affective essence of a phenomenon, place, time, or experience, seeing it more deeply for what it is, and effectively conveying it to others. As Debbie McCulliss (2013, p. 83) writes, "Poetry, perhaps more than any other approach or discipline, gets to the essence of qualitative methodology." This is because "poems employed as catalysts provoke insightful responses, allowing for a more in-depth and holistic understanding of the ethnography and perceptions of a particular group or population" (McCulliss, 2013, p. 83). Poetry captures something beyond what statistics, facts, and arguments can capture, something "ineffable" (Reale, 2018, p. 2), something related to "actual experiences, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures" (Reale, 2015, p. 30). Indeed, as Reale (2015, p. 30) notes, "Sociologically, lyric poems are important since, as Denzin (1989, p. 30) says, 'people organize their sense of self around and through such epiphanous moments.'"

As a bridge between scholarship and experience, poetic inquiry "describes the use of both poetic and creative thinking to analyze and draw conclusions in research, as well as a way of understanding and communicating the subject matter being studied" (McCulliss, 2013, p. 83). It is a "formidable" task to be both poet and ethnographer, to capture the very essence of a moment or experience in a way that is emotionally moving yet scholarly (Reale, 2015, p. 30). The poet-ethnographer's tool, which uniquely taps the affective within the scholastic, is poetic inquiry, which allows us to "connect empathically and understand more complex psychosocial processes" (McCulliss, 2013, p. 84). It is for this reason that we turn to it to chronicle our Moon Meetings ethnographically, so that their essential character is not lost.

Poetry is one thing that connects us, both in life and in our sisterhood. Sandra Faulkner (2016, p. 44) remarked that we "use poetic representation as a means to evoke emotional response in leaders and listeners in an effort to produce some shared experience between researcher, audience and participant." This we bring to life in our Moon Meetings, and here I put it to page to honor them, engaging them with poetic inquiry that gives a glimpse of womanhood and the Feminist Spirituality Movement as it comes to fruit in practice under real and ineffable bonds of sisterhood. As it is put by Lorri Glenn (2008, p. 139), "the pursuit

of the hypostatic—and underlying substance or reality—is an important pursuit; however, the pursuit of the ineffable is equally necessary.” So we pursue it in our Moon Meetings; so I pursue it in alternating verse and prose.

Here, interwoven with short vignettes from our Moon Meetings, I present a series of poems I personally contributed to the group over the course of a very rocky two years with my ex-husband, which culminated in an overdue divorce. These are poems about love and life and pain as a young woman married to the wrong man, and I have renamed each here for a phase of the moon. They were read aloud in their raw forms during our Moon Meetings, and my sisters helped me cope with my failing marriage, pain, and misplaced sense of failure. They are presented here then as a testament to the timbre of the rawest aspect of our Moon Meetings, hoping to depict the ineffable realities of a mournful woman amongst a handful of sacred sisters who find their spirituality in feminism and each other.

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Waxing Crescent

*Flying high, so high
Risking everything
To feel like I do
When I'm with you,
When it's good with you.
Though I cannot live
Standing tall and proud
Because in my hand,
We hold what we remember.
We came closer.
Hold me near.
But to open this
Is to close a door.
There's life,
And there's this plain machine.
The thing is,
It really does it for me.
The sun comes shining through.
No one can see it,
Not like us, in the water,
Tragic, but not for me.
Today, I see your face,
And you feel mine.*

*Sometimes I wish
That people could see.
If only because so many
Of us are alone
And helpless,
Like we're lost
Out on this little road*

*In the woods
By this lake
In a bind.
Love puts us in the water,
And I swam to the very end
For you,
But it was for me too.
There is grief and pain,
And there is a stream,
Purified innocence,
And it's love.*

*

Sara owns and keeps the comfortable home in which our womb room resides. Her home is where we have our Moon Meetings, and for that time, her home is our home. Sara walked this path before, and she heard herself in my poems.

Sara's vulva shrine is *our* vulva shrine—all of ours. It merely lives at her house, but it is of all of our energies. Presently, we have thirty-three and a half vulvas on our shrine, these mostly being made or found objects resembling or fashioned to resemble that most powerful center of feminine magic. The vulva is that which is lusted after and thus a blossom of power and intrigue, and it is that which opens to bring new life into the world, which is the deepest magic of human existence. It moistens to allow entry to the worthy who can arouse it and desiccates itself to prevent access for the unworthy who wish to. It also bleeds, almost like clockwork, month after month marking the end of every moon cycle that did not produce an offspring, making it an object of (male, thus cultural) abjection, horror, and disgust. Our shrine celebrates all of this. It celebrates womanhood. It is our sisterhood symbolized and made sacred.

The half a vulva on our shrine represents the newest addition, the unfinished thirty-fourth. At our gathering just this week, Mary brought a new vulva to grace our shrine. It was a found piece of split rosewood which Nature had contoured to a nearly perfect likeness of a gently sprawling pussy opened in awakened desire. Mary works wood in her spare time, though, and carved at it, accentuating its shape, fashioning clearer folds, fashioning a clitoris, carving wider the cleft evoking an opening to the worthy. She has it nearly complete, and this week she brought it for our help in finishing. One by one, ritualistically, we took our turns rubbing it smoother with fine-grit sandpaper, inside and out. We all took our turns touching it like the men in our lives won't touch us—or can't. Of course, this was cause for much laughter throughout, and like usual, it was of a particularly sisterly kind. We mock the boorish sexualization of male perception and celebrate the feminine, mystical, and erotic. So, next month, it will become part of the shrine, once Mary has stained it, varnished it, and polished it. She plans to add a dribbling drop of art resin lovingly between the carven folds and running down. The sheen of her dew. A holy nectar.

*

Waxing Gibbous

*Your bad day bursts like a bubble.
They all eventually pop, don't they?
And there's no reason,
But to us, it isn't hard to see.*

*His eyes deceive, so his lips might receive,
Should I keep myself all for me?
Could he be my savior?
Saving me, keeping my soul,
Filling my heart full,
Or what?*

*Filled with holes
Left behind
Religion lost
And naked—butt naked
And lifted
So all his friends could say
What he has in me.
And he can say goodbye.*

*What question could I ask?
What would make this feel better?
There's something about friends
Who tell all your secrets.
Through all this noise
I keep looking up into his eyes
His arms open, and I open up
My heart for a kiss goodnight
From fate, from life in this world.*

*There's always something in the distance
And the sun will come out
So we can have another day.
Longing becomes pain and tears
And the person inside always comes.
She doesn't know forgiveness.
Her world is beautiful.*

*

We drank to that one. A lot. And then we cried before we laughed. It is so good, so important, so necessary to have sisters.

Historically, women were the brewsters. Men—brewers—do it now, mostly, but it was properly a woman's work (Bennett, 1991, 1996). We celebrate this. Kahren and Freedom both brew beer, usually dark and rich. Mary, Zolli, Fern, and Raven make wine—good, heavy, and rich. Roonie, our wildest and dearest crone, distills her own 'shine. I'm not so adventurous yet; I make kombucha and bread kvass, tart and refreshing. Sara mixes the ritualistic Blood Wine from Roonie's motherwort tincture, which she prepares in her own moonshine and her home-grown motherwort. We're not wholly sure, but Roonie might really be a witch. She's magical enough.

It is believed that ale was a female invention, and there's reason to think it gave birth to capitalism (though no fault for this should be laid upon the brewsters), which, of course, men claimed and took control over. Hopping beer to preserve it was the invention of St. Hildegard of Bingen almost five hundred years ahead of mainstream society, which discovered it in the sixteenth century (Delyser & Kasper, 1994; Nurin 2016). Of course, men took control of the brewing then, set up trade guilds, and applied law and custom to keep women out of brewing (Nurin, 2016; cf. Baugher, 2013). Brewsters became witches. As Tara Nurin (2016), official historian of the Pink Boots Society notes, "Although no one can prove a connection, some historians see clear similarities between brewsters and illustrations selected for anti-witch propaganda. Images of frothing cauldrons, broomsticks (to hang outside the door to indicate the availability of ale), cats (to chase away mice), and pointy hats (to be seen above the crowd in the marketplace) endure today."

We drink mostly our own brews at our Moon Meetings, enough to get drunk and rowdy, if we want. We aren't nice women. We're fierce and free. We're the witches of brewsters past.

*

Luna, Full

*The earth has her oceans
And flowers in bloom.
Spring is the good life,
When it pulls up hard.
I have my heart
And you talked.
You spoke of a laugh
And the way I look,
And how you act.
But when you left
It was not so long
Until I saw:
The Earth is beautiful
Even when I'm shattered
And in the dark
Held away from love
By death, by harm.
It's love that holds you
Forever tight.
Love is my name,
And yours a sweet death.
You know, it's painful
All the trouble we got into
Together.
I'll always wish for what
We didn't realize
We were throwing away.*

*

Things were getting bad. My sisters held me. Our beloved crones spoke calming wisdom to me and for the others. We chanted and invoked the Roman goddess Diana, goddess of the moon, the hunt, of nature. She's goddess of the wild, and of wild women, and her influence was sorely needed.

Many of our Moon Meetings involve chanting, to Freya, to Isis, to Diana, to the great goddesses that inspire us. Sometimes its embedded in a ritual, Wiccan or otherwise, and sometimes it's just the emancipatory chanting of wild activist women wanting to be free. The rituals came from Roonie, who says they're from old Hoo-Doo, but we've lovingly retooled them all to our own sisterhood. They're all rooted in mythology of course, as all goddess worship must be, and we don't take them too literally (excepting for Roonie and Freedom, that is). They're metaphors and symbols reflecting ancient wisdom and worldviews, celebrating the power of woman.

They might be silly, who knows in today's world? But nevertheless, these rituals, these chants, maybe the goddesses themselves have the power to bind a sisterhood and heal its wounded sisters.

*

Waning Gibbous

*Eccentric and complicated.
That's me; that's us.
I pretend that I love you, too.
I wish I loved you, you know,
The way you love
All the things I do.*

*I'm sad I'm going away
From you, and angry too.
It's a full-hearted stream
That's too tender to be full.
It gives me chills because
I have wishes and dreams.*

*And I'm not all that,
Neither am I what lays behind you
Across this old mattress hoping
You'll find me within
My secret hiding place,
Beneath the earth of routine.*

*The first time you kissed
Me, I longed for you more,
But I began to wane,
And harsh death lies
On the other side of falling in love
Day after day, always the same.*

*

It's true, though, isn't it? Looking back on it now, this poem brings to mind an evening in which Claire, our youngest sister, first revealed to us—to anyone—that not all is perfect in her marriage. That pretense is heavy on a woman, and Claire's bravery stuck with us all.

Claire's husband works a lot, and he thinks for this that he deserves to be taken care of while he comes home and plays video games late into the night, as though Claire is a proxy for his mother. Dutifully, ever dutifully, Claire has been there for him, cooking his meals and keeping the house as though this role were as natural as bleeding to her femininity. She just never questioned it, but for three years she went ignored, serving that man of hers, while he plugged in and tuned her out. She was lonely, and she believed it was hers to suck up and deal with, as a woman and a wife.

She opened up to us on one of her bleeding nights, and we heard her like she had never been heard before. And not a one of us sisters said a bad word about Chad—that's forbidden. It would backfire, you know, and we don't need to say anything about anyone else's man anyway. We all have our own, and our own stories tell the story that our hurting, angry, frustrated, lonely sisters need to hear and work their magic that way.

Most of our meetings go this way because, frankly, for the same reason we need feminism: men are still being men. In a sense, then, calling them "Moon Meetings" is even more significant. In them, we celebrate womanhood, including our menstruation, but their purpose is symbolic womanhood, including symbolic menstruation of our emotional frustrations. The Old Testament of the Bible, it's said, wants the women to leave the men's camp when they bleed (Selvidge, 1984). Well, we say, *what a great idea*. We can have our own space in our womb room, and we'll have our Moon Meetings. They're better anyway. So let Chad play his games, and we'll help set Claire free. Then, and only if he's lucky, he can see if he can keep her.

*

Waning Crescent

*You'll become disenchanted.
Please understand.
It seems so far away,
But something you've always wished
Goes like the world:
Washed down like the rain
Along with everyone that
Was in it.*

*You'll brush the snow
To meet loyal friends,
But friends are like wishes.
You'll dream and you'll hope,
Nothing could go wrong!
But once you feel the same,
You'll wonder
What life would be with him.
And it goes,
As to depths below.*

*When you look to heaven
And finally know
No one hears your cries.
You dream about what is
About what matters
But what for?
All you'll want leans over
Bends away to hear
What everyone else has to say.*

*You'll wear what they say
Is not there.
You'll say what they say
Is not heard.
You'll talk when he comes
And think then you can feel.
But the truth is,
You do not want to bleed.*

*

So much of life is about being controlled, but so much can't be controlled. We lost a sister two years ago, and she wasn't even a crone yet. Breast cancer. Forty-seven.

There's so little to say about it, but so much to feel. She was a wonderful woman, Jaimee, and a wonderful sister. She was a child of September, so our September Moon Meeting is always dedicated to her and her memory. We call it Jaimee's Night. The first one was sad, but we made it through, and the last one was a party. We'll make a tradition of this, when we lose a sister: to raise her memory a toast, and to share our favorite stories about her, together. Then we play her favorite music and dance. We just dance until it's time to stop.

To us, that's sisterhood, because Death doesn't care if you're a goddess or not.

*

Luna, New

*All that is isn't
Living for us
To find a way
To our grave.
Life is one thing
When we truly connect.
To some it means
Everything, but
It's a terrible
Commotion.*

*To say long life
Is love, without love,*

*Is to be a dreamer
To be filled of hate.
Some think it mean,
But the earth doesn't care.
It's shattered.
Destroyed.
Torn under the rain.
And it goes on,
Leaving me
Cold. Wet. In Pain.*

*We stand in a stream
Looking through a window
At leaves that fall
Endlessly down.
The land takes them in
And takes them away
A new arrangement
Every day
But it's the same.
We sing our song
By the sea;
Past the horizon
We smile as we
Pass in the hall.*

*I haven't anything
To reach for now.
It's actually done with.
I hope you'll love
As I look up
Into the depths
From below.
Our hearts will heal
One day.*

*

In the end, I divorced. My marriage of seven years ended. The moon goes through all her phases, but I did not fail. And much more importantly, my sisters did not fail me. As it turns out, I was right: our hearts *will* heal, one day. It doesn't even take that long.

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