



Reflection

With Woman Retreat: Reclaiming Birth as a Rite of Passage, a workshop organised by the School of Shamanic Womancraft, December 7–9, 2018

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The School of Shamanic Womancraft was founded in 2009 by Jane Hardwicke-Collings as a way to create opportunities for women to learn the skills to facilitate transformation in themselves and in others. It focuses on providing space for people to discover their own inner knowing, using the power of feminine rites of passage (menstruation, pregnancy, birth, mothering and menopause) to gain deeper self-awareness.

Recent work by Reed, Rowe and Barnes (2016) recognises the birth process as a rite of passage for women and our role as midwives as either supporting these rites of passage or enacting rites of protection, which often tend to the needs of the institution rather than supporting women. This workshop brought together 45 varied birth-workers, doulas, midwives, students, body-workers, mothers and activists in an opportunity to gain both intellectual and embodied experience of rites of passage and how we can support women through our work. I was drawn to this workshop because I felt that there was something missing in my work as a midwife – a lack of the recognition of the sacredness of birth, lost in a sea of clinical surveillance and documentation. I wondered how I could bring a deeper level of awareness and a bigger perspective into my work with women.

For three days we secluded ourselves at the beautiful Karuna Sanctuary in the Blue Mountains to get to know each other and the terrain of the weekend. On Day 1 we set the stage for a sacred ceremony, recognising the importance of setting intentions and creating a space of safety, things we would recognise as essential parts of preparation for birth. We delved into the cyclical nature of what it means to be a woman on this planet. From a single day, a year with four seasons, the stages of life, and our monthly menstrual cycle, we drew parallels between the ways our bodies and energies flow with the cycles of nature. The recognition of the overlapping cycles that influence our lives was profound as it helped place our journey on this planet in a bigger perspective of life and death and rebirth. We continued a deep dive inwards through sharing our stories as women and birth-workers. We were guided in several exercises to trace the patterns of our “red thread”, the lineage of our female ancestors that have passed on stories, trauma and wisdom, that may influence the ways we see ourselves as women in the world. This work recognises that we are the latest repository for our ancestral “herstory” and it is our opportunity in this life to heal what we can of any past traumas that may be with us rather than pass them on.

On Day 2 we looked at fear. We started with an exercise

where we called out fears we have as women working with birth. As we all added our thoughts, it was incredible to realise that not a single person had said they feared birth itself. Many of the fears we have are centred on the institutions and culture in which midwifery is placed. Fears came up about the future of midwifery, the future of midwives to practise in alignment with women's needs and desires, the increasing limitations of choice for women to birth when, where and how they want to, fear of legal and institutional bullying and repression. As we dug deeper into our fears, we were encouraged to peel back the layers of the fears that were strongest for us, individually. With our deepest fears written on pieces of paper in hand, we burned these fears in a sacred fire ceremony as a symbolic gesture of our willingness to look at these fears and work towards lessening their power over us.

Day 3 we spent integrating our new knowledge about ourselves, our fears and our intentions in our work with women and families. We shared skills and tips for bringing deep awareness and sacredness to birth work, whether in the community, home or hospital. Many of these suggestions were entirely simple in their method: learn from women, gentle touch, be kind, asking permission, encourage the sisterhood between birth-workers, consider our presence a privilege. We spoke about the place of midwifery within the patriarchal medical model and how we can step up as women and as feminists to reclaim our ability to work with and support women in a holistic model of care. In full recognition of our conditioning as "lesser than" women/midwives/birth-workers, there was mutual acknowledgement of the opportunities and challenges that we face in shifting the systems in which we work and live.

This workshop was profound in so many ways. It gave me tools through which to explore my own womanhood, my stories, judgements and patterns. It reassured me that birth is sacred and that there are many strong women working to hold this vision and intention for women to be

able to birth how, when and where they choose without judgement or restriction. I felt profoundly held in a circle of women, in safety and love, which is how I want women to feel when they are in my care. This workshop gave me not only the opportunity to learn different ceremonies and rituals to use in my life and work, but also an embodied sense of how transformative it can be to use these rituals and why they are important. I felt a deep respect for my calling as a midwife and the kind of inner work I do to be present and available to hold women during their rites of passage. I felt empowered in my vision to make change in the culture of midwifery as it is now, by seeing the ways that I contribute to the status quo and being courageous enough to acknowledge and change those ideas and behaviours in myself.

I couldn't recommend this workshop and this kind of sacred feminine work more highly for those of us working with birth and with women. It provided space and safety in looking deeply inwards, to recognise the strength and power we all carry in our journey as women. If we want to offer that opportunity to women on their birth journey, we have to be examples and be courageous in doing this work ourselves.

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References

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