
FROM DOULA TO WISE WOMAN

By Trella Dubetz

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I would like to see a world where everyone has access to circles. I would like circles offered in hospitals for nurses who give so much and get so little for themselves; I would like circles offered for veterans who have returned traumatized, and have very few places to tell their stories; I would like circles for mothers. Because we are in a state of what I call heart-starvation.

Mother Theresa said, "You in the West have the greatest form of hunger. A hunger that is not so easy to satisfy because it is the hunger of the heart and the soul." I would like to see circle gatherings everywhere so that people can know they can receive healing, support, rejuvenation, and encouragement.

—Jalaja Bonheim

Dear readers, as I grow “Notes from a Doula” to “Wise Woman Recipes,” I invite you to come with me. Let us peruse life’s apothecary and give ourselves permission—ask ourselves out loud, singing, screaming if need be—to joyously call one another out to share, support, respect, admire, laugh, cry; eat, rest, play, work, and dance through our lives. Let us allow our imaginations to wonder and weave where they will, and I have a hunch that we will land amongst a great reservoir of solutions, connections, and adaptability. Let us tend to one another tenderly, so that we may have strength and clarity to use our resources wisely and to tend to our world.

As my personal and professional life has evolved, wellbeing and self-care have played into both small and large decisions. Since my mid-teens, health challenges (including Lyme disease, herniated lumbar discs, and intense food allergies) have been present and influencing my life. They have impacted what jobs I was able to work, when I could enjoy a succulent morsel, and how I could enjoy life, let alone function in the day to day. In nearly two decades, throughout the pain, challenges, and confusion, I have been blessed, time and again, with healing, loving, and nurturing moments. They were more often than not instances when I had to make a “wiser than my years” decision, but it is from these experiences that I have gathered an internal medicine satchel that I cherish.

The most powerful poultices in my medicine bundle are faith, courage, self-love, and integrity. These four unconquerable medicines, I believe, can help to heal anyone. I do realize, though, that the mortar and pestle of each of our lives holds a number of other ingredients that change the tonic and texture of who we are, and when we heal. The appearance of how we each heal is also vastly different. There are costumes, cloaks, patterns, and practices of healing that are outrageous to some, while being second nature to others. It is from this vastly diverse medicinal kitchen that I want to share recipes for

healing with you—a pinch of this, an ocean of that. My training in bodywork, birth, and art has served me well, but it is the space between worlds—between spirit and science, between art and economics, between earth and the ethers—that I want to explore, to offer sweet tinctures to your being, to touch you, encourage you, support, and motivate you to believe that you can heal and live the life you dream of.

In that dreamlike space between waking and sleeping, this call came to me from our elders, the nearly forgotten Wise Women, Medicine Women, and Grandmothers:

*“Give voice to the Wonder and Mystery of birth, life, death, and the female body.
Stand on Our shoulders;
Solidify yourself and your Story.
Become the next boulder upon which the Earth is built and which the future rests;
Shine the light of Possibility
Instinct, Tradition, Cycles, Rhythms, and Transformation
On that which is your glorious, wondrous body and spirit.
Assist others to do the same.”*

Currently my post is here, with AVALON, sharing the beauty and brilliance of wise women, wise men, gatherings, practices, and surprises that have somehow significantly shaped, nurtured, and transformed my life, and have reverberated in the world in a deluge of positivity. I smile thinking of you all, scattered and sown throughout the world, keeping your posts in your lives and communities, while exploring and creating the work and healing that you’re called to.

As we ponder dreams this issue, I am exhilarated to share wise woman, Jalaja Bonheim, Ph.D., with you. The devastating impact of war; having grown up as a Jew in post-war Germany led to Jalaja’s life-long inquiry into the causes of human violence and set her on a journey of healing and transformation. Her work, a part of my heart for over a decade, has guided me through some very dark days as I explored the sexual abuse of my childhood. Her books, *Aphrodite’s Daughters: Women’s Sexual Stories and the Journey of the Soul* (Simon and Schuster 1997) and *The Hunger for Ecstasy* (Rodale Press, 2001) were manna to my young traumatized soul. Through the gathering of circles that she calls Circlework, and through the Institute for Circlework that she founded in 2001, she is lovingly and positively affecting the lives of women and their communities around the world. Jalaja is a shaman, medicine woman, and spiritual midwife who is birthing the dream of peace. The ambiance of her spirit is irresistible and gently formidable, and I believe you will fall in love with her and her work as I did years ago.

WISE WOMAN JALAJA BONHEIM AND HER RECIPE FOR ECSTASY AND PEACE

Trella: Ten years ago I read both of those books, so you and your work have been a part of my heart; and my life for quite some time. I would love to know about the evolution of your work.

Jalaja: The experience of studying ancient Indian temple dance in India was a real catalyst. It was my first encounter with a tradition of women who were equally spiritual and sexual. The temple statues radiated such dignity, beauty and self-esteem, and I wanted to know about that.

Trella: Do you feel an affinity to any one lineage through your work?

Jalaja: I believe that we all have so many ancestral strands within us that we can draw on. But it was that lineage of the ancient Indian priestesses that opened the door for me, which I wrote about in *Aphrodite's Daughters*.

I was blessed by a very old woman who had been a temple priestess. It was in an old, old Indian house, and in the corner was a cot, and the priestess's sister; who was even older, was laying on it dying. The priestess was ninety-two, and she could no longer walk, but when she heard that a woman had come from Germany to study temple dance, she did a dance for me. She did it with just her face, hands, and arms. It was one of the most beautiful dances I've ever seen—the dance of the lover, calling Krishna to come to her. Through a translator she told me that I was to carry on the tradition. I had just started to learn Indian dance, and I had no clue what she was talking about, what it would mean to carry this on in the western world, in the twenty-first century.

Now, I would say that through my circles, I am carrying it on, even though it looks completely different. I came to the United States in 1981 and started leading circles with an intention of creating a space where people could reconnect with their sacred essence.

Trella: Did the circles focus on the unification of spirituality and sexuality?

Jalaja: It's broader than that. It widens into the question of how we all relate to life force, life energy. I think that our culture has a problem with that, and sexuality is one of those areas where it becomes evident.

Trella: How did those first circles unfold?

Jalaja: I remember thinking the first time I advertised a circle, "What am I doing here?" Yet, I knew it needed to happen. From the start, the circles focused on movement and connecting with the body, but also from the start people began to share stories. There were strong emotions and there was a sense of sacredness. All the elements that are in the circles now were there, although the focus has shifted somewhat.

Trella: Is movement still a focus?

Jalaja: Yes, because a lot of people are out of touch with their bodies when they come to the circle. When we're not in touch with our bodies, it's very difficult to know what we're really feeling. Movement is a good tool to connect us to our inner experience, and from there, to what we need to look at in the moment, ether it's our sexuality our relationship, our work. You mentioned that you are a doula, which I was struck by, because many women have called me that. Although it's not something I've called myself, I have in a way midwifed them. A number of times in the circle, a woman will suddenly say she's having pains in her abdomen, then it morphs into, "I feel like I'm giving birth!" I understand now that this is the body's way of reflecting the soul's journey and the soul's way of saying, "I'm arriving here!"

Trella: As a trained doula, one of the first questions I ask a mother is, "Can you describe your relationship with your body? Can you describe what it is you love to do with your body?" Because I also believe that the body is our portal, that it aligns us with the creative forces of birth and life. So it doesn't surprise me that you have women going through the spontaneous process of birthing themselves.

Jalaja: I believe the processes of birth, sexuality and death are the three portals that we all go through, that make a bridge from this world to another world. They are very sacred. I've

heard women say that giving birth was one of, if not the, most spiritual experiences they've ever had. And I'm sure you've experienced that too.

Trella: Yes, certainly. Do you feel that *Aphrodite's Daughters* birthed Hunger for Ecstasy?

Jalaja: It did so in very literal sense, because after I wrote *Aphrodite's Daughters* I wrote about the themes in a magazine article that I called the "Hunger for Ecstasy." Then the publishers at Rodale approached me to write a book about it.

Now I'm finishing a new book, which came from a realization that because we are in a planetary crisis, we need a shift in consciousness—and not just people who are already involved in spirituality or personal growth, but people who aren't. The working title is *Heart-Centered Living: Sixteen Essential Keys to Inner and Outer Peace*. I think heart-centered living needs to be taken out of the realm of personal growth and shift into living from the heart. What I teach women to do in the circle, especially when I'm working with Jews and Arabs for example, is if we can really learn to listen to one another from a heart-centered space, we can make peace. We can live in peace.

Trella: Are you still working with the concepts of sexuality and spirituality or is your primary focus on Circlework?

Jalaja: Right now I am not. As I mentioned before, I work with all three portals of birth, sexuality and death. Both of my parents are close to death and live in Germany so I've been called upon to be that kind of priestess at this time of my life. It's a very sacred, but consuming process. I know I will come back to workshops on *Aphrodite's Daughters*, because I love it so much. The stories we have to tell are amazing and we won't tell them unless we feel we are in a very safe space.

Trella: When I first read *Aphrodite's Daughters* I had just started to explore and come to terms with the sexual abuse of my childhood. As I read through the women's stories, I realized that I could accept my experience, and that I would be whole again someday. I also realized that there is an underbelly to the female experience, and just because you go there once, or any number of times, you don't have to stay there. It was a powerful realization.

Jalaja: In circles too you see that so clearly: Whatever I went through, it is not just my story; it's all of our stories. There is a collective healing process. When you're dealing with abuse, it's so easy to feel isolated, different, or cut off. It's liberating to come to: No, that's not true, we're doing this together.

Trella: The bravery of the women in those stories and your bravery to publish such a book gave me a sense of freedom and inspired me to be courageous, to keep walking through it knowing that there would be something wonderful on the other side for me.

Jalaja: Recently I've been thinking of women in the Middle East, and the level of oppression there, and of the plight of women internationally. There is so much abuse, and not much support for women to heal it. There is much more work to do before women will be revered as they deserve to be. I'm focusing on training the leaders so that they can carry on the work in their own communities, in their own cities, and in their own language and culture. An Afghan woman who did the Circlework training last year is now leading circles in women's prisons in Afghanistan. It's beautiful to see this global sisterhood of women who understand that violence is not the answer and that there is another way.

Trella: Were you thinking about the international non-violence when you founded the institute? Or was it more about women healing themselves, their lives, and their communities?

Jalaja: The nonviolence aspect was always present, but it came more into a conscious focus with the realization that we are in a planetary crisis.

Trella: How do you compare the earlier gatherings to more recent circles?

Jalaja: The image that comes to me is a pool of healing water: it was there in the first circle, and it's there today. But it feels much, much deeper now. It was infinitely deep from the beginning, but I didn't know it the way I do now.

Trella: Your website describes your experience of the work; of the circle, more in terms of its presence or spirit; so the "Circle," as an archangel and guide. Are you in rapport with the circle in that sense all the time, or only when you're in a gathering of women? And how do women respond to that energy?

Jalaja: I'm reluctant to talk about the circle as a presence or an archangel because I don't want to sound as if this is some woo-woo New Age thing. But at the same time, it is absolutely true for me that it is a presence, a guide, and teacher that has been with humanity throughout history. I was interested to hear that the earliest evidence of a manmade fire pit goes back hundreds of thousands of years. If there was a fire pit, it's a pretty safe bet that people sat in a circle around the fire. Gathering in circles is not just a modality for holding workshops, it is an ancient and incredibly powerful resource of wisdom and consciousness and healing. Once the industrial revolution occurred, we forgot the circle, and now we're starting to remember: We can call upon this ally, welcome it, and say, *Yes, we want you here*. Show us! Carl Jung had it right on when he spoke of the circle as the archetype of wholeness and oneness.

Trella: This age of being able to connect at the speed of DSL raises the questions of how we are handling it and what these lightening fast connections are doing to our circles, our community.

Jalaja: Yes, it does raise the question, How do we protect ourselves from overload? But I think it's done so much to awaken people to a sense of planetary community. When you can immediately see what's happening in the streets of Libya or Egypt, you feel a sense of power and connection. The connecting of women across cultures is incredibly important. It's especially important for women who are in dire circumstances, be it a war zone or a health epidemic, to be witnessed.

Go to www.instituteforcirclework.org or www.jalajabonheim.com for more information about Jalaja Bonheim and her work.

Trella Dubetz is a trained massage therapist, Reiki master, doula, visual artist, and poet. She has been studying mind-body connection and related healing modalities for nineteen years, with a focus on CranioSacral Therapy and Reiki in her bodywork practice. (<http://douladonna.blogspot.com>)