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THEOLOGIES IN PROCESS:
THE ROLE OF GODDESS-TALK
IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Volume 2 of 2

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R This is Amy, 30th April 1999. Thank you ever so much Amy. So could you just give me some idea of how you became interested in Goddess Spirituality?

A I met someone in the house I was living – just moved in. There were whispers going round this house that she was a witch. I thought, oh that sounds intriguing, and so I came out with it and asked her. And she was really, you know, quite happy to talk about it and it led me on from there. I was sort of curious to sort it out. And I met other women. I met Deborah and other women who were really into it and there was this whole new world opened up with this new idea of how to celebrate, sort of, life, if you like rather than the other sort of dogmatic ways that seemed to be on offer. It just sort of grew and I suppose it grew for me because I was never really feminist and I didn't always consider myself a feminist now, but I just... It was a way that I saw that women had been oppressed through their spirituality.... you know. How can you repress someone's spiritual nature? You know, that's really the ultimate repression. It's not just oppressing politically which is enough, or economically ... but their whole spirit. And it seemed a way of celebrating being a woman as well which was something in those early years I had difficulty with being. You know, I was a bit, I think growing up was a bit odd for me and stuff like that. So it opened up a whole new way of expressing womanhood that was quite ... it was celebratory rather than you're oppressed and you're a woman and men have done this to you. We were actually celebrating being a woman rather than just thinking, 'I've been oppressed for years, blah, blah, blah'. You know, it was another dimension to feminist that I'd never seen. It sort of opened my eyes to that making me aware. So that's – then it sort of grows.

R And so how long ago was it when you met this woman? When would that be?

A I was about 27. I'm 35 now so 8 years ago. So it's evolved as well. My sort of attitude has evolved.

R In what way would you say?

A I used to do things by the books, you know. And through friends who knew more about it – who knew what went into rituals and stuff. And then I started practicing on my own and developing my own style, if you like. I ended up doing hardly any rituals unless we were in a group but I'm very aware of the seasons and very aware of the different festivals in a kind of more subtle way. I don't really feel the need always to go out dancing in the woods, though it's lovely to do that. I have done it.

It's interesting – and I might be backtracking a bit here – but I moved away from Brighton and lived in Surrey for a while, for a few months. And I contacted Pagan Federation which is men and women rather than a feminist thing. And I sort of worked with them for a while in a Pagan Federation group. And that was totally different from the feminist Pagan sort of activities. It was much more structured and far more ritualistic in the old fashioned sense, if you like. They weren't personal rituals. They were very much staged and there were costumes. It was all very dramatic. It was quite interesting to do it in that way but when I came back I found there was an easy, free and easy way of expressing whatever, or who they were, or whatever. It was a lot more spontaneous and on the moment, like, 'what do we feel like doing now?' you know, which was nice.

R And less self-conscious?

A Yes, it was a bit more arms waving the swords in the air. And also, I think, with traditional sort of Pagan things there's the Holly King and the Oak King so that's all brought in. If it's men and women in a group that's brought in whereas with feminist spirituality it's more centred on the Goddess and the Holly and Oak Kings, if they're ever mentioned at all, are very much sort of brushed away. So it's sort of, it's not the same as a straight down the line Pagan which probably

celebrate the male and female. It's more celebrating just the female aspect of deity rather than the male – even male and female.

R Yes, so in the Pagan Federation there is this idea of the God and the Goddess?

A Yes

R And did you find that helpful?

A It was very interesting to learn because it did have its place. I think it's actually what I'm finding now with woman's spirituality. It's nice to go through a stage in my development which explored the feminine but now I'm feeling more the need for a masculine and feminine – God, Goddess, divinity – whatever it is. The two aspects or the no sort of gender aspect about it at all. It's genderless, you know what I mean?

R Yes.

A But I feel the need to swing back to the female side of things before there can be a balance.

R So there's a sort of compensation for being exclusively male?

A Yes

R Were you interested in spirituality before you met this witch?

A I had been. I'd been more interested in sort of Christian things. I'd never been a sort of Sunday church-goer or anything like that but I'd always been looking for something, I think, or being aware there must be more than bricks and mortar to this life, or, you know, flesh and bones. There's something greater and more, I suppose, just greater than what we saw, you know with their naked eye. I had always sort of been aware but I'd never really had a concrete expression for that. The women's spirituality gave me a concrete expression of something which also I was aware of – like the seasons change, cycles in myself and things like that. It linked body and spirit together, if you know what I mean.

R Yes. So when you joined the women's group and you started doing the rituals, what did you understand the rituals to be? What did you think was happening? Because it was very interesting when I came to the ritual and you call on the four quarters, and refer to individual Goddesses. What do you understand is happening there? Who are you talking to?

A Well for me, you know, five elements. We acknowledge the four physical elements and their power and their contribution to everything, and how they ...When you're creating a sort of, I suppose a magical kind of space you're using tools. And part of these tools were fire, water, earth – even without realising it, do you know what I mean? Because they're so much a part of what's around us. And for me it's just acknowledging in the circle that they have an influence, a power that we can use, if you know what I mean. And just bring that sort of energy into the circle through ourselves. You look towards the, what is it, the West when calling on water, but water – what it represents on a spiritual level to you as well as actual, tangible element if you like. So, you know, it's representing emotions and it's ever changing, it's a fluctuating sort of element, it's fluid and it's cleansing as well. You're acknowledging sort of, that kind of element into the circle. I don't know if I'm explaining it right.

R Oh you are. It's just that, to an outsider, it sounds as if there are some sort of supernatural being out there that you are drawing upon but from the way you are talking it doesn't sound as if that's going on.

A I think for some people they would probably say, 'yes there is a Goddess' – I'm not very good at Goddesses – but Goddess of whatever represents water and perhaps they are calling on something they see out there as a Goddess, but for me it's much more elemental – do you know what I mean? It's only symbolic of what you're calling in, like lighting candles and things like that. They're symbolic. They just help you focus on the energies – do you know what I mean? It's something to focus on.

For me it's not anything real. So for me, I find I'm moving away from actual Goddessy type things and more nature in itself – it's you know, natural sort of properties rather than sort of focusing on ancient Goddesses even though they have a place and they have their value to each of them in some respects, but I don't feel that having a whole list of Goddesses in my head is going to make me a better person.

R I agree (laughter). Another thing that I think, sometimes people ... There's quite a debate in the goddess movement about 'The Goddess' and different Goddesses. So if you talk about 'The Goddess' what do you mean by that? How do you understand the term?

A I understand it as the female aspect of God really. To me it's just, as I said, about the elements, a way of focusing on a female energy, a creative energy, a nurturing energy, an energy that's very powerful. But then some would say 'Well that sounds just like God', you know – just giving it a dress. But I don't ... For some people it's very real and they sort of exclude God and put Goddess in his place. But for me it's just female aspect of God, or what ever God is. To me it's like an energy but I'm not interested in the technical side of knowing all about Goddesses and I do find it difficult sometimes coming to terms with there are Goddesses for so many different things. And it kind of gets a bit more academic. I find that gets in the way of the actual feeling of the ritual. You know, the sort of, the emotion or whatever it is that you kind of feel when you are in a circle that's going really well, and you can feel it going well. It sort of becomes academic. Goddess for me is just a female principle, female energy.

R So when in the ritual somebody was calling on a particular Goddess – called on Artemis to help the woman who had breast cancer. Do you understand Artemis to be a separate supernatural figure or not?

A No, personally I don't. I understand that they're calling on perhaps an aspect of the female divine that happens to represent issues of any breasted Goddess, and it's a symbol for focussing on. So

you can focus healing energies say on someone who has breast cancer and call up – it's all symbolic and it's sort of highly ritualised, you know what I mean. To call up a goddess that existed in the minds of people thousands of years ago to help with a modern day problem. But sort of, it focuses, I think, on that aspect of the divine that Artemis will represent at the time.

R So would it be fair to say, or am I reading words into what you are saying, that it seems as if the language and the images operate at this powerfully symbolic level for you – symbolic of something beyond that. It's symbolic language and visual images which focus that for you, embody it. Would it be fair to say that that's what's going on?

A That's, yes, I mean, if I were to do something on my own, a ritual on my own, I wouldn't use the Goddesses at all. But because I'm with other people who like that, and I understand why there's a need for that, especially with a group of people who have different ideas of ... like they might do something personally, they might focus on something different – have their own personal, like focus on a candle to sort of give healing energy out to someone. If you're in a group of people it's good to have a common thing to focus on we all understand – you know, we focus on that together. But when you're on your own you have your own personal kind of symbols and language that, you know, that's powerful for you.

R May I ask what yours are or would you rather not say?

A It varies actually. I mean I use lots of, um, I use things like plants and stones and things like that, like crystals. I use candles and sometimes I draw my own symbols on pieces of paper with special paper and special pens. And sometimes I might seal those with wax, you know, or bury them or whatever. I sort of make things up as I go along sometimes. I keep spontaneity even though I may have fixed ideas about what I want to do. Sort of, when it comes, I'll think of symbols that I'll draw to represent different elements.

R On what sort of occasions would you do that?

A Usually for personal reasons really. If I'm going through something emotional, to deal with it in the safest possible way but gaining knowledge through that experience. I'll do a ritual to ease me through the experience and it gives me a feeling that I'm doing something positive to help me at that moment in time. Some people think it's really cranky but even if it works on a psychological level, it still works.

R That makes absolute sense to me, especially as I admit one of the things I'd find more difficult than the ritual is understanding that it's going to affect something inside. And I've read Starhawk, and that, and I can understand that, but the idea that a ritual is helping you cope with whatever is happening

A Well that's what I find. I don't want to meddle with anything just in case it goes wrong. And you know, I think you have to understand at the end of the day that you could be dealing with very powerful kind of energies. If you're playing around with them they can backfire on you anyway. But they might do harm. I mean, at the end of the day, most Pagans will say 'and it do no harm'. That's the sort of phrase they put at the end of a ritual or spell or whatever. But I'm more interested in self-development things.

R So in the light of that, how would you explain spirituality? What do you mean by spirituality? Do you think that people have spirits that are inside them other than their material bodies or...?

A I think that when we physically die there is still something left that reminds us, that's alive but in a different dimension. And I think we have, I think when you're alive people have sort of dimensions about them that are not separate from them but kind of, what are the words? Sort of an aspect we all have, I believe, that people are connected to something greater even when we're alive in the conscious and we're doing our daily things. There's a part of us, I mean some people might say

it's the unconscious, there's a part of us that's connected to something greater and we're connected to it whether we realise it, whether we acknowledge there's anything spiritual in life at all. But we can, if we are aware, that we can gain nourishment from, sort of spiritual nourishment. But I don't know about sort of spirits wandering around houses and things like that. I don't know what that is. It's another phenomena. I don't know what that ... it could be all sorts of things.

R But that's not what you're thinking of. That's not what you mean?

A No, no. It's like an energy that, that we all got individual energies about us. You can tell when you're with someone that they have an energy about them that you either find uplifting or you feel down around them. And I think that energy doesn't disappear when we die.

R Right. I mean, you've used that word a lot.

A Yeah.

R That's the key to it all for you, these different energies?

A Yes. And they can work harmoniously with each other. Hopefully we can get them to work harmoniously but sometimes they just don't work. I'm interested in astrology as well which to me is about energies, interplay of different energies in someone's chart, but I think one day the physics of spirituality will come up with some conclusions, if you know what I mean. One of them will end up by explaining the other. Because they already know we're made of electro-what's-it impulses and things like that, you know. And I think it's only a matter of time that science will catch up or spirituality will be explained in scientific terms.

R Right. That this energy...

A Um... I think it's all to do with energy. Actually you've just made me really think about it. There are things I've thought but I've never had to explain them to anybody.

R But that does sound, forgive me if I'm reading into what you're saying ... that does sound a very ongoing, fluid state, rather than a spirit being something which is fixed and eternal which is what a lot of people would understand a spirit to be. And yet you seem to be talking in terms of something, which is dynamic and changing. Energy is something that is moving.

A Yes, nothing, everybody I mean, I don't think ... I think we're here to evolve spiritually, so we are going to change, our spirit is going to change. I feel our spirits or our essence, whatever, will feed off what we experience in our lifetimes and evolve through experience. So I think people do change during their lives. Nothing stays the same. I look back on myself, you know, a few years ago and I've changed.

R Yes, that was one of the things that helped me come to terms with this idea of a fluid self because I actually found that quite difficult because when, as a woman, you've had yourself or your soul denied, personally and for centuries, to finally come to the terms 'I have got a self, I have got a soul', for various feminist theorists to come along and say 'well, actually, there isn't a self, it's all in flux'. I found that quite difficult. But then I started to think 'actually my self changes.' I'm not the same person I was and I'm beginning to become more comfortable with the idea. But the way you were talking, you were talking about many lives.

A But I think even within one life you change. I was talking yes, many lives. Perhaps ultimately there won't be any need for human beings to be alive because we're so busy being spiritually evolved we won't need to be reincarnated or whatever, but I think in order to survive we have to change really because nothing in the world, in the material world, the physical world stays the same anyway. We've got to evolve and change with it or we, I think we have a really bad time of it. I mean this is just talking about on an everyday level. I mean if I hadn't changed to certain

circumstances in my life I think I, you know, I would just sort of have given up hope. But it's the thought for me that I can change and evolve and I'm able to sort of face different situations that pop up in my life, and I've got the wherewithal to adapt to that. But I also learn and grow. Growing is evolving to me rather than, you could say, changing.

R Again that's interesting and again it would fit in with this idea of process – change and process are very much part of what you understand spiritually to be, and that your identity is something which is changing all the time as well.

A Yeah

R May I just stop for a moment? The area that I wonder if I could just ask you about now is because you said that when you were interested in women's spirituality you didn't consider yourself a feminist and you were not sure whether you would consider yourself a feminist now.

A I wondered if that would be appropriate to your research when I'm not really. I don't really know. I've met many women who say they're feminists and they're all different. And I don't see them as being that different from me but I don't really have to call myself a feminist. I grew up with a strong mother figure. To me women have always been strong so I've never had to be told by anybody else, if you know what I mean. But ...

R And are you uncomfortable with the term feminist?

A I feel as though I don't live up to the title as someone who's very dedicated and, I don't now, very ... I think of being a feminist as being someone who's very intellectual as well. It's got lots of connotations for me and I don't live up to quite how I think, you know. Feminists I've met are all very well read, loads of Women's Press books and Virago. I don't read much, you know, so I'm not so knowledgeable. I'm not a very political person.

R Right. So you don't see your spirituality connected with sort of any political dimensions?

A No. Because if you look at people all around the world and the political situation they've lived in they've always had a spirituality that's been repressed. Even though, then it becomes a political situation. Being repressed, you can't worship whatever. But it seems to me it's such a personal thing and I always think, I'm always suspicious of politicians and governments and that anyway doing what they please and giving us an idea that we're living in a democracy anyway, but they'll go ahead and do what they want anyway, you know. And I think, if people want to live in a society like, say, the one we live in, I don't think true democracy would work because I think there'd be so many different demands that they couldn't do it successfully and keep everybody happy, if you know what I mean. So I think there's a lot going on behind the scenes that we don't know about.

R And you don't want to change that, you want to just sort of opt out of it?

A No. it's just that I feel powerless. Like whatever I vote for – it's like the anarchist thing saying whoever you vote for will always get in. But I wouldn't say I was an anarchist. It just seems something beyond my control really, even if I vote every election and get really involved in politics. And my mum was quite involved in politics on a sort of small scale when I was younger, and I think that she came to the conclusion that whatever she did it didn't matter because the government will do whatever they want, whatever they see fit at the end of the day anyway.

R Yes that's a depressing thought isn't it.

A I suppose it is, but in a way perhaps, perhaps it's something that people, people have sort of created anyway because of the society we seem to live in. People have created a government that they can't really control because they want the sort of videos, hi-fi's and holidays abroad and that kind of thing.

R You said that one of the things that made you interested in women's spirituality was this idea that women's spirituality has been oppressed.

A Yes, yes. But that had been oppressed by men – men's spirituality. If you like, a male dominated, I would say, spirituality. That women weren't allowed to freely celebrate their own experience, their own spiritual dimension.

R And you like the celebratory side of being able to do that?

A Yes. But that's, I think, to do with more – that's to do with, I mean, I had a breakdown a couple of years ago and I've been going through a sort of process of change. I think I've noticed it more in this past few months. I've been going through a lot of changes – how I want to express myself – not just spiritually. So that sort of – I don't know what I'm going to change into. (Laughter).

R Exciting

A Yes, confusing as well.

R And the women's ritual group that you belong to, do you see yourself staying there or do you think you'd move on?

A At the moment I feel I'd like to move on.

R And if you did that would you sort of leave Goddess talk behind you altogether. Would you use the term Goddess any more?

A Um, probably. I don't know what I'd use in its place though. I mean it's sort of like, people sometimes say they believe in God yet they don't really know what they believe in but God's just

a handy little short term name they use for the moment. Everybody recognises it. It's spiritual, you know God. But Goddess is a bit longer name but it's sort of another handy way of saying 'I believe in something out there, something that's part of us', which is what I believe in. We're all a part of it really.

R Right. We are a part of the Goddess?

A Yes we all are, or God or the divine, or whatever. We all are part of it. We're not separate, as we'd like to think we are which is quite nice in a way to think that we're all connected. We're sort of, we are individuals, but we're still connected. Do you know what I mean?

R Yes, I think so. So when you've been using the term 'Goddess', what was it about that term 'Goddess' that, for a while, was more attractive than the term 'God'?

A Because it was, to me it was a wider thing because when you go to church and they talk about God, they talk about someone that's up in heaven and there are angels. And even though Christians would probably say 'No we don't think that', it still seems to be something that's separate. The Goddess seems to be something that's wider, I must admit, because it involves nature and observing the cycles of nature and the cycles within ourselves and it's more encompassing. Is that the right word, encompassing? So I think to me, for a while, it did play a part in sort of celebrating a lot more than thinking when I die, that's when all the action's going to happen.

R So it's very much here in the material world?

A Yes. Yeah the physical world. I sort of like to define material things as things that we've made and the physical world as like nature, do you know what I mean?

R Right, OK. So there's a physical world that you are a part of and you're connected to and a material world that we have constructed.

A Yes, that we've manufactured.

R And you're not so happy with the material world?

A It's alright. I'm not complaining. But I think sometimes we've constructed this material world which is out of touch with the real physical world and from our spirituality, do you know what I mean? It's sort of they're obstacles in the way sometimes. It's nice to have things. I'm not, you know. I'd be living in one little room if I really believed that. I wouldn't have a television, you know. I wouldn't have these things. It's nice, but it's sort of, when the only goal in your life is achieving those things at the neglect of other things which are equally important I think.

R And the physical world, your spirituality is linked to that physical world. And that's where your spirituality is centred?

A Yes, rather than, I mean I do like looking at the stars, but rather than thinking everything's up there away from me, it's within my reach, if you know what I mean. It's happening all around me. You know, the trees in the park and all this. It's all. I feel connected more to that than I do to someone who's in heaven waiting for me to die.

R yes, yes. If I could just ask you, what about the objection that some women would make that part of the oppression thing has been linking them with nature and with motherhood and with nurturing, and therefore saying that is their role and they can't play any part in more public aspects, and they can't be as intelligent or as rational when they're linked to this nature/nurturing physical world. How would you respond to the argument that the spirituality that you're talking about doesn't put us back as birth and earth mothers?

A It sounds like a very sort of masculine view to me in a way, because it's like saying that qualities that women have through perhaps motherhood, or through, I don't know, gardening or something like that aren't valuable in themselves. It's like putting the rational mind and the career women

and all that – someone who's living in the material world, successful in the material world, it's putting that above something actually that – to me motherhood is a very precious part of being a woman in a way. You know, you can't. I don't know if I'll ever have children but I've always thought that for a woman being a mother is the most important job in the world. You can't get more important than that – than creating and raising people, you know, and creating the future. As a woman who doesn't know whether she's going to have children or not, I don't feel any less. I don't feel inferior because I've got a spiritual dimension or anything like that. I mean, sort of, it seems to be a very masculine view to think that having a rational mind and being masculine is better, you know, might be considered being female, feminine traits. Do you know what I mean?

R I do, I do. What about men? I mean do men, do you think, possess these nurturing qualities and a sense of connection with the physical world? Are they as capable as women or do women have something which is distinctive?

A I think we're going through a period of time where women are quite able to lead the way and I think there are a lot of younger men who are quite open to sort of following – not necessarily following blindly but sort of like taking their cue. I've got a younger brother who's 30 now and I can see him quite happily sort of not necessarily going on protest marches, but in a garden, doing his garden and being a good father, and having – you know, I see that in his friends as well – a lot of younger men who are much more, sort of sensitive and aware, self aware and probably look at women in a different way than perhaps men in the past have looked at women. And I think they've been brought up by women who were perhaps feminists in the 60's so perhaps there's a different way that mothers are bringing up their sons.

R So feminism can be quite good thing then?

A Yes I'm not against it. I'm not saying it's wrong. I think that any group of people who are oppressed, for them to go to an extreme to get out of that oppression. You know, there were

ridiculous stories you heard about burning bras and Germaine Greer doing all sorts of things. You know, when you hear about that, that has to happen. Do you know what I mean?

R That's a sort of extreme?

A Getting the balance, yeah. And I think women have got more power than they realise because I think a lot of men are actually lost now. A lot of perhaps older men don't know how to behave with women because they've got all this, 'oh no, is she a feminist, is she?' They've still got an extreme idea in their head about how women are, you know, and how they're going to behave, and how do I have to behave? And I think we're reaching a time when perhaps men, it's time for men to look at their feeling threatened by strong women or being, expressing their more feminine sides without the threat of being called wimps or whatever. Do you know what I mean?

R I do but you talk in terms of a feminine side and a masculine side. Do you think that certain qualities are feminine and certain qualities are masculine?

A I think psychologically. It's interesting because I would have said that beforehand but I've been doing this psychology sort of O level and we talked about this, and we did this psychological test about whether... We're all a different mixed group of people and we did this test to see who was more psychologically masculine and who was more psychologically feminine and I came out as being quite masculine. And I thought, 'oh, that's quite interesting'. And some of the men came out as being feminine and some of the women feminine, masculine – they were all different. So I think – and that made me think about that there are certain masculine and feminine traits but we can possess them. You know, we don't have to be big and macho or long dresses and long flowing hair. They're different expressions of masculinity and femininity but there are, I do feel, feminine traits and masculine traits, but men can have them, you know and women can have them. It's not....

R But you would still identify them as feminine and masculine?

A Yeah.

R And Goddess as you understand her, does she just have feminine traits or does she have feminine and masculine traits?

A Well if you look at some of the Goddesses that it mentions in the groups there'll be some quite ferocious Goddesses so in the sort of ... If you look at the historical, sort of mythological sort of terms, there are quite macho Goddesses, but I think for me the Goddess has gone, is too much one way. And I'm thinking for more the balance, more the middle for me.

R A middle between what?

A Masculine and feminine. Something that encompasses both.

R So you think she was feminine?

A Yes, for me when I was in my late 20's, to explore my femininity through something like that was very powerful for me. But I think I find I wouldn't mind doing ritual groups with men and women if I was to do it in a group again.

R And if you had these ritual groups would you use the term 'Goddess' in such a ritual group or would you not envisage doing that?

A Well it wouldn't be up to me. It would be a sort of mutual thing I think. I think I would go along with it but I would prefer to find another definition.

R That's interesting because one of the people who's works I'm very interested in was, she died in the 80's, but she felt that the Goddess, the Goddess would put herself out of business. That the

whole point of the metaphor of the Goddess was to move ideas forward so that eventually the term Goddess wasn't needed any more. It sounds very close to what you're saying.

A I feel a bit guilty about saying it because I feel I'm betraying all my friends, but I just, it's how I – you just happen to have caught me at a time in my life when everything is changing and I 'm sort of reviewing everything – and you're asking questions that I haven't really thought about for a long time and I'm thinking, 'yes I'm finding ... that's what you said about it moving along.

R I really empathise and sympathise with that. Would you at some time, do you think, care to sit and talk to some of the women about these ideas to tape a sort of roundtable discussion or would you rather not do that?

A I don't know really. Yes, I suppose I would but I sort of feel defensive already because I think a lot of women I know are very much into the Goddess.

R And you get this sense of betrayal?

A Yeah, I find that they think that but it's not that at all. It's just me moving on. It's interesting because I went to the Goddess conference last year and it was brilliant, it was really lovely but ...

R I hear a 'but' coming.

A But. I'm glad I went and really did enjoy it but afterwards felt it was very women orientated, well obviously, but it was too woman orientated for me – that it would have been nice ... I mean there were a few men there ... but it would have been nicer to have, sort of, a male opinion on it.

R Were there any other aspects of it you didn't feel too happy with? That is interesting, that is a situation I empathise with very much. I've been to two Goddess conferences and there were aspects of it that I found very problematic. So I'm very interested that you said that off your own bat without me saying anything. And actually another person that I've interviewed said the same thing as well, although maybe for different reasons. So if you could just elaborate a little on what you found – felt a bit uncomfortable with.

A I just felt, I felt it for a while actually with women's groups, that I felt it was kind of almost ghettoising. It's almost sort of, the world's full of all sorts of people – men and women, and a few in-between people – and I think, I think it's good to have women groups for women who want to be in a very, live a very sort of women in a women's world with as little to do with men as possible. I think some women are like that. But I think, I think it's because I just like men. (Laughter). I like their company and I like to hear, I'm always interested in male opinions about things. I don't have to agree with them, I don't have to disagree with them, but it's nice to get another perspective on something which is, you know... And I find sometimes women only things it's a bit of a false kind of thing going on really. Everybody's pretending to be sort of really sisterly and I sometimes have a sense that it's all a bit put on and it irritates me. I'm not saying any particular thing but I find that I think there's a sort of, there's a bit of a thing to live up to.

R Idealising a lot then?

A Yes. Women can fight amongst each other just as much as men or women and men. People have to get on with each other at the end of the day as each other not as this kind of umbrella of all women have to be sisters. I always found that bit difficult to tolerate really.

R Interesting, interesting. And the speakers, some of the speakers? Did you find them helpful or inspiring or not?

A I went to, oh who was it speaking? Julie Felix. She was quite interesting and her music was really, really powerful. I almost burst into tears at one point because it was so – one song she sang really got to me and it's times like that I feel all very womanly and I'm glad I'm part of it. It hits me sort of emotionally, but sometimes ... I can't remember many speakers. I went to more workshops. I went to a singing workshop which was quite good. I quite liked the organisers. I thought they handled things well. I do remember going to a speaker and thinking, 'oh God, I wish

she'd hurry up. I want to get something to eat', or something like that You know, I just I did find it interesting and for the most part I did enjoy it, it was just...

R There was another sort of critical edge to what was happening you felt?

A Sort of, it would have been nice to celebrate something like that. It feels more of a community if it's mixed to me.

R Thank you

ANNIE

Interview with Annie 18.5.99

R Thank you so much for letting me come and talk to you. The first question that I would like to ask is – What do you understand by the term ‘Goddess’? You made a wonderful analogy about chocolate cake last time I heard you talk, which seemed very enlightened to me, but you might have moved on since then!

A So...banoffee pie now! I can't remember the chocolate cake thing but it was a while ago, wasn't it? I suppose, and all of this is all very personal, it is just my sort of opinion, but I am not really a particular type of Pagan. I mean, I'm not a Wiccan, or a Druid, or any of those things. I prefer to be much more broadly based in my approach to Paganism so I don't tend to think of deities very much any more. I did in the beginning but I don't now.

But the one enduring image which has always stayed with me is the ‘Goddess’, and I do find I tend to refer to her as ‘the Great Mother’ in fact. So for me, I think the idea of the Goddess is more about the earth, nature and that kind of thing. And so, in that sense, I mean, she's around and within us all the time - every tree, every blade of grass, every animal, every human. It is all part of the Goddess because she made it all, if you see what I mean. And so, although I use that kind of terminology, Goddess as the Earth Mother, I use of she when I refer to it – I don't have an image of a goddess. It's much more a sense of energy or source of all things or something perhaps, you know, less focused, I suppose, than what a lot of people would think of. Brigit for example or Bride is a very popular goddess among Pagans and I think people have quite definite images of her and there is some sort of iconography about her, I think. So you have got to have a picture of her in your head. Whereas, for me, the Goddess is just ... it's like saying ‘life’. It's the same principle to me. So saying “Do you believe in the Goddess?” is like saying “Do you believe you're alive right now?” It just doesn't work for me. It is just a fact of life that she is there. The Earth is there and we are here and she's within all of us.

R And so when you say that you don't really go along with deities, do you have an idea of this immanent life force also being some sort of metaphysical being out ‘there’ or ... what?

A No. I don't see it as a focal point. I see it as being everywhere at once, like the air that we breathe, sort of thing, on this planet but throughout the cosmos, throughout the universe and however many universes there are after that from, you know, atomic level right up to universal level and however many levels there are. It's just there, everywhere, holding us and having a good chuckle really at what we are doing on this particular planet. Because although I see it in that kind of broader, general term, I nevertheless feel that there is a definite personality.

R I was just going to ask ... You talk about 'her' in personal terms. So she is personal but not metaphysical?

A I guess so. Yes. I find it difficult to kind of explain. I am not really sure. I think I just know her in my heart so I don't think about it very much. So I don't describe it very often and that is why I am trying to find words or phrases to describe what I believe because it doesn't feel like a belief to me. It feels like a fact of life, I suppose.

R And so is it very experiential? Your own experience, in other words, as the source?

A Yes. Definitely.

R Because that seems to be a feature in a lot of women'-centred spirituality. That experience is important. Rather than doctrines or something coming from outside.

A Yes. Absolutely.

R And would you describe some of what you are talking about as spirituality? Do you use the term 'spirituality' or not?

A Yes I would. Paganism is my religion. For a lot of Pagans it isn't a religion but for me it is. I am a priestess and I'm ordained and I work within a religious framework for Pagans and non-Pagans alike. So yes it's my spirituality, it's my faith, it's my way of life, it's my

religion. So it's very bound up with who I am and what I am doing and why I am here.

R When you talk about spirituality, do you understand spirit to be something separate from the body, from physical being?

A No. I see it as immanent really. Someone once described the interpenetration of spirit and the body as like water in a sponge. I think that that is quite a good analogy. I think it is like that. I also see our bodily life as very temporary but not in a sense that denigrates it. One of the things that I really like about Paganism and Goddess spirituality is it celebrates the body, its sexuality and all those sorts of things whereas patriarchal religions don't. They say it's bad and it's sinful. But as far as I'm concerned, you've been given a body by the Goddess, you might as well enjoy it. That's the whole point. I think that one of the aspects of Paganism, and again Goddess spirituality, is that you're here to enjoy life. It's not about penance and asceticism and forcing down your natural desires. It's about being who you are. And if your path is to transcend bodily whatever then maybe that happens. But, I mean, to me it's not the important bit. I feel it's a joyful universe out there. She wants us to be happy. She wants to give us everything that we want. That's how it is I think really.

R I agree that there is a life affirming side to women's spirituality which is very appealing. But perhaps someone hearing you say that would then say that there is obviously no ethical aspect to this which I am sure is not the case.

A Yes. It's funny, isn't it, that people equate being joyful and enjoying life with having a lack of morals? I find that quite interesting. (Laughter) And again that somehow morals are a Christian preserve. I think that people who enjoy life to the full certainly do have a moral sense because they try more, if you like, than a lot of people who kind of lace themselves into a moral code. And again it's about suppression. I don't think you can ever really know about something unless you have experienced it to some degree. I am not saying that you actually have to go and climb a mountain but you have at least to experience

something of its physical presence because that is what it is on this planet. It's about physicality. Again to refer to sort of Pagans in general, the importance is coming to your own moral code. You are responsible for everything that you do. It's up to you as an individual. It's like that old, well call it old, 'Whatever you do will come back to you threefold'. – I don't really agree with that I think it is rather trite idea that someone made up when witchcraft was becoming popular. Because why should the laws of karma be different for Pagans than they are for anybody else? All the pagans I know are very moral people. And it's not because somebody has told them to be or that they have read it in a book or that that is what everybody else does. It's because they feel that in order to live in harmony with the universe, you treat everything with respect. So you wouldn't force yourself onto another living creature, in any way, whether it might be mentally, sexually, emotionally or whatever it might be. But you just have respect because you want respect back. And so it is a kind of symbiotic thing that goes on in this ...- that morals are just part of who you are and what you your'e doing.

R It does sounds gloriously consensual.

A It does, doesn't it? If I ruled the world!

R Could I ask you how you came to be a Goddess follower, a Pagan? Would you mind?

A No that's fine. I think, like a lot of Pagans, I have always been one but I didn't know that there was a word for it. So when I was growing up in a very average working class/middle class kind of family, the only religion I knew about was Christianity. So that was what I though you did, you know. And while I was a college I did Religion Studies – which meant Christianity. There wasn't anything else. It was 'Religious Studies', yet was Christianity. And it was mainly the New Testament. And I found it fascinating because I had always been attracted to the life of the spirit. And I did try very hard to get on with Christianity

but the first thing that really rattled me was - and there we were mainly a bunch of teenagers doing our O and A levels for religious studies – and there was a little old guy who joined our classes because he was very into furthering his knowledge about Christianity. He was a practising Christian and he was a tiny little old guy who had been a civil servant. And he was very small and neat in his nice suit and he hardly every said a thing. And then one afternoon we were having this debate about conversion and, you know, missionary stuff and our lecturer said ‘How would we feel if there was somebody who we were trying to convert to Christianity – and again there was the assumption that we would actually do that – and this person wasn’t interested in becoming a Christian, would we feel justified in turning to violent means to make them change their minds?’ That was listening to it and I was absolutely staggered. And then this little old guy who hadn’t said a dicky bird for about six months said “I would. I feel that anything is justified in saving the souls of the damned.” I thought “Oh! Oh my God, you know, this is really weird.!” Because it was the first time that this had come up in what we were doing. That really made me think about what I was getting into, this weird Christian cult. I thought ‘This could be dangerous - I think I’ll go off and be a sensible witch!

So then I began to go off to the library and try and find out about other religions like Buddhism and Taoism and all those sorts of things, which thought were brilliant . But again you don’t get much emphasis on the feminine in those really. And I think that that was what struck me when read my first book on witchcraft. I can’t even remember what it was called or who it was by but I suddenly thought “Ah! This is a woman’s planet!” You know, It was that kind of an idea. It was a women’s spirituality and they do all these wonderful things. And it’s nature and the stars and the moon. And that really, really hit home in a big way. So that was when all of that started and that was when I realised that I was a Pagan.

And then when I came to Bristol about thirteen years ago, I began getting heavily into Pagan stuff. I did a course on Celtic shamanism which was run by Caitlín Matthews which was brilliant. I began to develop an interest in the ceremony side the things and I was asked to do a hand fasting for a Pagan couple and it just kind of snowballed from there. I got into the ceremonies – and I do a bit of prison visiting and stuff like that – and I thought 'Well, this is like what your local vicar would do in a village or something' and I like that idea. So I kind of felt a calling to become a priestess and become ordained. But I wanted to make sure that I was doing what the Mother wanted me to be doing. So I thought that if I go through an ordination process she will let me know. And she did and it was fine. It was about three years ago.

R Did that happen fairly recently?

A About five years ago

R That female imagery and the idea of women's spirituality – that was important to you?

A Oh hugely. It never occurred to me before. I think that this is part of the sad thing of it that when you are brought up with particular system or religion or whatever it is because you don't meet any other type of input you never range beyond it. You just think well that is how it is. And to suddenly discover a spirituality where women are important – it was like, it was amazing. I can't really describe the effect it had on me because ... ,I don't know,. It was like discovering life on another planet or something. It really was quite staggering. It was like a click, opening a lock or something like that and I just suddenly began to realise what the possibilities were really.

R So would you describe it as a feminist spirituality or would you not use that term?

A My own in particular do you mean?

R Yes.

A I think just by its very nature it is but I wouldn't describe myself as a feminist in the sense that I believe in feminist principles but I don't always agree with how they are put into practice and spoken about by certain people who want to 'earnest', if you like. I think there has to be a feminist element because we have to get the balance back. So, although I think ultimately there should not be a masculine or feminine bias in any kind of spirituality, there should just be you as an individual coming to spirit in your own way, I think at the moment we do need to have that to counteract the centuries of destructive energy inherent in men's spirituality.

R So the language, the symbolism and the metaphors – they are interchangeable or do you feel that the female needs to be emphasized because the male has been emphasized for so long?

A Yes I do. It is about time she had her say. And it is about time that women knew that they can have their say in spirituality and things like that. We have come a hell of a long way in, what is it, the last twenty years but there is still a long way to go. I suppose it might be a kind of an ideal situation that may never arise in which we live in a society that will allow people to be who they are. It may never happen and probably won't but it would be lovely.

R I'm conscious that your tea is going cold, have you been able to drink any?

A Yes, I'm worried about the time, really. We haven't got much left before I have to go, have we?

R No, I know and there is so much to talk about! The two things that I have come to be very interested in, looking at feminist/women's spirituality is, firstly, this idea of the Goddess. There is one woman whose work I read that I find really excited me. And she understood Goddess as a Metaphor and that the whole idea about metaphor is that it is changing and in process and that it is not static.

She said that one of the problems with the term 'God' is that it had become static. It now symbolized the status quo. It didn't go beyond it and therefore for her it couldn't function any more. But she said that she understood Goddess as a transparent metaphor so that she was actually putting herself out of business. It wasn't 'Goddess' that was important but actually moving beyond that. And I found that a very exciting idea but I haven't met that many Goddess women who would seem to go along with that. One of the women whose work I was very influenced by, Carol Christ, she completely disagrees with that and says 'No, Goddess is a personal presence in my life and I don't see her putting herself out of business.' And I wondered, how do you feel about those ideas?

A I think that that is a really interesting idea, actually, because I think, I don't know.... What springs to mind is the idea of evolution, that this planet is going through evolutionary processes. It's gone through a lot of physical evolution and we have as human beings but we are very young animals on this planet, us humans, and there is obviously a long way to go. We can't possibly imagine where that is going to take us because we are still right at the beginning. But I think that possibly we have done this kind of physical side of our evolution and now we are having to start our emotional, mental and spiritual evolution into more mature creatures, in a sense. And my feeling has often been that part of the destiny of the human race is not to be on this planet any more because our bodies are a temporary part of who we are but our spirits are eternal. And my feeling is that we are going to move on into a place where there is no longer any distinction between human and deity. And I think there is a twofold thing that will go on there that a), we will achieve the status of deity but b), it will also be achieved by deity achieving the status of human. So it's like, you know... From my inner world teachers it is the kind of impression that I get. Now this could all be rubbish, of course, but it's what I believe, so it must be true! (Laughter)

So I think it is possibly true. I think the Goddess will put herself out of business and so will God and so will all of it. One day there shall just be 'being', sort of thing.

R Is that 'being' with big B or being with a little b?

A I think that would have to be a little 'b'.

R When I was doing theology, there were these long sentences referring to 'Being' with a big b and 'being' with a small b which could be very confusing! But 'Being' with a big B suggests a big 'being' 'out there' while 'being with a small b is 'everything', do you think? .

A Oh, too confusing I think I need a grounding trip to IKEA! Well, I think it is 'being' with a small b in that it's all encompassing.

R Right! But the other point, the second thing I wanted to talk with you about was this idea that there is an eternal soul or spirit – I think you said spirit? ...and the temporary body and that seems to be such an important feature of so many religions and yet it also seems to conflict with what we were saying earlier about the body being important. It seems to devalue the body and it also seems to suggest that what is really important is not in the here and now and in this relational world but somehow out there in some other eternity. It all seems to go back to Plato's ideas that the world isn't important and that everything is split into the good and the bad and that the body and women were firmly on the side of the bad. So I am interested that you still have that dualistic eternal soul, temporary body and yet a very different world view. How do you reconcile this?

A Yes. It is a good point. A lot of Pagans would not agree with me because they believe that Paganism, in its celebration of the physical and sexuality and all that, brings importance back to celebrating your body. And they are absolutely right. We have to do that. It's a bit like what we were saying earlier about we need a Goddess at the moment to counteract God but ultimately one day we might not. And I think that it's good that Pagans do put a lot of emphasis on the physical body and all of that, physical life, because I think we do need to. And I totally disagree with the whole thing of trying to overcome the earthly passions and subjugate the body and all of that because its very rude if someone gives you a nice body and a nice planet to live on and you start abusing it. It's just very rude, full stop! But there's also the thing of needing to live in the now. We have to live with who we are, where we are now. And now we're in a body and we've got this most gorgeous planet to live on and there are so many possibilities for us on this planet.

We really have to make the most of it. It is really important to celebrate it.

So I think the fact that the body is temporary is just a fact of life because we all die. And so wherever we go after that, we don't take it with us. We have other finer bodies which are not material which we have when we are dead. This is my belief anyway. And you use them as you would the cycle of space that goes between death and birth, if you like. And you have to celebrate all of it because, I don't know, it's a strange idea to me that just because your body isn't permanent you shouldn't look after it. And just because it's not permanent you should kind of see it as secondary or not treat it very well or that kind of thing. Because I think what life is really all about is being totally ourselves in every moment. Where we are right now is a person in a body. So we have to look after that and ...and enjoy it. There is not point in trying to transcend it because we have been given it to live in. Its like saying I'm trying to transcend my car. I'm trying to grow wings. It just doesn't make sense. Again that is my personal feeling. A lot of Pagans, as I said, probably wouldn't agree with that.

R So would some Pagans say that once you die – that's it – you die with your body? Or do most have some idea of reincarnation as you do?

A I think most agree with reincarnation. I don't know any Pagans who think, you know, you just switch out the light when you die. Which is why I wonder about them getting stropo when we talk about eternal souls and temporary bodies because I think 'Well, then where are you going?'

R Well, yes, that's it. I don't see how you can have reincarnation when... I know Buddhism has the idea of no-self and reincarnation which I suppose might have some parallels with the idea that there is no eternal soul and yet we can carry on with different lives but I am not a specialist in Buddhist thought. I have explored these ideas with one woman who is a Buddhist and a Goddess feminist. I just find it interesting that you have this very positive view of the body and yet there is this idea that that is not the 'real' you. Your body is not the real you. You still have this eternal bit that has lived before and is going to live again.

And I wonder if that doesn't set up a mind set in which this is not really me, we are not our bodies.

A I suppose for some people it might but for me personally I don't see any contradiction in it because our bodies are a reflection of who we really are. And I think that is why we have to look after them because they really are part of us. But they are a part that we are going to lose. Just like childhood is a space we move out of. We never lose it but your'e not in it anymore. And you always carry elements of it with you because it made you. And I feel the same way about our bodies. That they are all with us in that sense until with we actually die and leave them behind. And if you believe in reincarnation then you must presumably believe a) that bodies are temporary and b/ that there is something spiritual that carries on. And so therefore I do not see that they are a contradiction. They have become a contradiction obviously in some religions and mind sets but I don't see they have to be.

R May I ask why you believe in reincarnation?

A It seems like a sensible thing really. I think that the universe is incredibly logical – not in a necessarily left brain rational way. But it is. Nature doesn't waste things. She will always recycle. All energies are part of all other energies that ever have been and ever will be. So I don't think that reincarnation is as simple as 'you die, you spend a bit of time floating around doing what your'e doing, and then get born again'. I think that when you reach a certain stage of awareness about how the universe works if you like, you have a choice about whether or not to come back or when you come back or how you come back and all that kind of thing. I don't think it's such an automatic process necessarily. Because that is too tidy. I mean, humans are very fond of tidying things into systems and so there is this Idea that yes if you reincarnate then we just keep on doing it but I don't think that is necessarily true. I think that it all hinges around free will. And we definitely have free will as part of our being. We have to learn how to use it which is why of course we tend to abuse it on this planet. ...

What I always find interesting is that question, 'if there is a God why does he let all these terrible things happen?' It's like saying 'if I had a Daddy why did he let me be naughty?' And of course any sensible Daddy or Mummy is going to let you make your own mistakes until you find out by stop putting your hand in the fire or whatever it is. You know, there is a maturation process going on here. We've been put on this planet to learn so it is not up to God or the Goddess to get us out of trouble we have to do that ourselves.

R That sounds eminently sensible. The only problem I personally have with that is that there is some of these New Age ideas which seem to take those ideas further than you are suggesting, that everything is a matter of choice and so you choose to come back as a child who is being abused because that is something that you have to go through. And there I find that sort of approach objectionable. Again, Carol Christ, whose work I have been focusing on, she takes exception to that and I do as well. Because it does seem to suggest that a) it's a sort of fatalism and there is nothing that we need do about it and b) I just find it morally obscene.

A Yes, I mean, you could actually have a scenario where someone was saying: "Well it is all right that my uncle abused me because it is helping me to fulfil my destiny."

R Yes.

A Which is just obscene.

R Exactly. Or ...its all right that I abuse my niece because that was part of the bargain.

A Yes.

R So how do you feel about that?

A Well by saying 'you don't abuse people' I should imagine. Its one of the problems I have with all this New Agey stuff is that a hell of a lot of it just sounds like a cop out. 'How do we deal with abuse?' 'Oh well perhaps its part of your karmic thing and you don't have to deal with it you just go through it and it will be dealt with later..

R How do you deal with that and the idea that people have free will to choose their path through life?

A It is a mixture of both. I think that there are patterns that resonate throughout our lives. I mean that in a cosmic sense not just in an earthly sense and I do think that we decide the things that we want to learn for when we reincarnate, the situations that we want to go through. I have difficulty accepting that we might, therefore, choose to go to a family where we know we will be abused.

R I should think most people do have difficulty with that. But if you are going to say that there is a choice that we make to go along the path that we are going along, which is a good healthy thing to say but ...

A But how do you reconcile it? Yes. Well I think there is a certain amount of, lets call fate, when you have to have that pattern set up. But it's like a path but at any point you can use your free will to get off that path and go and do something else. And if you do, it doesn't matter. There is no one up there in the universe saying "oh you have taken a wrong turn that is terrible and you'll suffer karmic awfulness for ages". It's just a question of your choice. And if you choose to be born into a family and abuse happens in that family I don't think it is because you have chosen to suffer abuse, I think it is because somebody has decided to be an abuser.

R Exactly. With children who are being abused or others who are being abused it seems that they need to be protected. It is not something that they have chosen to experience, it is something that is being done to them against their will.

A Yes and it is somebody else's will that is being imposed on them. Because free will works in all those different ways and if somebody decides to oppress somebody who is physically weaker than them or whatever, in any way, they have chosen to do that. Maybe they have chosen to do that because they were abused, whatever it is in their history. It is a choice and we all know inside that it is not a good thing to do that. So if you choose to do that you must be aware that you are making that choice on some level I think to be an abuser. And so it is nothing to do with someone's karma it is just something that you have been doing to somebody and it needs to be addressed in those terms, I think.

I could never find acceptable that idea that you choose it.

R I mean, personally, have difficulty with the whole idea of spirit and reincarnation. I find it hard to reconcile truly embodied spirituality with the idea of reincarnation but I'm very much in a minority there. Most people's understanding of spirituality involves a spirit which seems to be eternal as opposed to mortal and that is one of the things that interests me - whether it is possible to have a spirituality without having this concept of an eternal spirit or an eternal soul. Reading some of the feminist studies, secular feminist ideas, some feminist writers have argued that the whole concept of an eternal soul is part of that dualistic way of looking at the world which devalues the material and devalues women. And also the way in which the concept of the soul has developed is very much from a male perspective and the soul is very much a male projection. And the more I reflected on that, the less the idea of an eternal soul became attractive to me. I can remember being young, lying in bed, being very scared by the prospect of eternal life even though, as a Christian, I thought it was going to be wonderful and blessed and marvellous. I still felt that the idea of going on and on forever and ever was absolutely terrifying. And by giving that up I, personally, have found that very liberating. But that seems to be very rare and somehow even it has been suggested that to talk about spirituality if you don't have some kind of concept of spirit is a misuse of the term. This is one of the things that I want to explore and in view of what you have said I would be interested in your views on it.

A It is interesting. I've never, kind of, thought about it really in that sort of sense. For me, I think, there is so much evidence that we do have spiritual life that goes on after the end of the body that it's... I couldn't imagine not believing in that or agreeing with it. I have also had experiences as someone who works shamanically, for me there's evidence that there are many dimensions beyond this one that we can go into them. Some of them are the ones that we go into when we die and all that kind of thing. So the idea of a spirituality that doesn't involve a spirit or at least not an eternal spirit is intriguing. So if you have a spirit that does it die when we die in the body, then?

R I would say so yes.

A So that is the end of it?

R Well, it's the same as your idea of energy, that nothing really goes, that hasn't been here before. That you become part of the energy that is everywhere. When one Christian feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, discusses this she believes that any idea of life after death is part of a projection of the male ego. And I have heard of her idea of life after death described as compost. You can have cosmic compost. And for me that is fine. That doesn't bother me at all. but not many people seem very happy with that idea.

A Well I think ... yeah, the thing I would take issue with is that I think human beings do have a particular part of play in the universe, if you like. I think all creatures do. All animals do, all life forms and all forms of consciousness. And I think that one of our special things as human beings is this idea of consciousness and knowing that we exist and what we are about. And in a sense, I suppose, I see all of life, in whatever form it is, as a kind of progression towards, or maturation towards, something. And that involves everything that is. And it is all moving and changing and developing and growing. So, as a human being, I am having certain experiences and learning certain things while I am here in the body. And when I die that knowledge needs to carry on and learn and grow a lot more and that is what I can see, I suppose, in the idea of the spirit carrying on. Also that I am an individual and I know it is me and I know I carry on as a personality but that that is one of the reasons why. So that my experience, added to the other experiences of consciousness, will continue to *grow and develop and add to the sum total, as it were.* So I think that that is a sort of valuable thing that needs to happen.

R I do find that whole idea of process and development very attractive and, in the way that you describe it there, would make one of the most attractive prospects anyone has ever put to me, that that process is so important that it needs to carry on. Because, as you were saying, you are who you are and yet you are a completely different person from the person you were when you were a child. So this idea of a eternal unchanging real 'you', again, doesn't seem to fit in with the emphasis on the importance of change and process.

A Well I think that the eternal you is still certainly not unchanging. It changes all the time. It's a bit like, I don't know, if you took ...

Well, let's look at iron oxide.

R Please do! (Laughter)

A It is there in the earth and it's in a form and it's there. That is the way it is made. Now at some point a human being might come along and mine that and turn it into a ingot of pig iron. So it has changed form and, you might say, it has progressed to something else but it is still what it is. And then you might take that pig iron and make a sword out of it. So it has progressed again but it is still what it always was. And then, at some point, according to certain beliefs you might take that sword and beat it into a plough share and it has become something else again. But it is still what it was in the beginning. And I think of our spirit as being like that. Whatever it was in the beginning, molecularly, if you like, it still is. But because it's alive and consciousness, it is growing and changing and learning and all of that. I would never say it was unchanging because that goes against all the rest of the universe I think.

R Yes. I suppose that's one of the difficulties I have reconciling this idea of something eternal with an emphasis on change and process. It is reconciling those two things together that I find very difficult. But the points you make try to address that.

A Um That's how I see it anyway.

R But I do find that in women's spirituality there is this emphasis on change, on flux and on finitude although, as I say, you feel that our death is not the end of us but that there is an emphasis on cycles and that things do die and do come to an end and it's process. I'm aware that time is running out, so if I could ask just one more question. We have spoken about women's spirituality and the emphasis on the female. And I'll just ask where do you see men fitting in this process? Do you think men benefit from Goddess spirituality?

A Oh yes.

R In your work, do you work with both men and women?

A Well I have to say that in most of the workshops that I have ever run, you know, that were open to anybody - I have had very few men on them – and I think that that is a general pattern in a lot of this kind of thing. So it is obvious that men are not as comfortable with – I mean it could be the way these things are presented – it could be the fact that they are there at all. I think it is probably true to say that generally if you live in a society which favours you have not got much incentive to change. And I think that men are in that position and have been for a long time. So I think that they need a lot more incentive to, you might call it, discovering their inner feminine or whatever it is. Getting in touch with the more creative and softer side of themselves really. I mean there are so many ways to put it that I don't want to get into it really. But I think that men have suffered from suppression of certain elements that are perceived as feminine. Just as a lot of women are suffering from suppressing of the masculine. I mean, I did a course in cabinet making years ago when I first came to Bristol which is, you know a 'male' thing and the attitude that I came across there was really quite interesting. And I think that there is a lot of that still going on. I know that feminism has made huge strides in huge areas of the planet but there's still things that men do and things that women do and you don't cross over. If you do you are weird and not part of society. So there is a hell of a long way to go and I think in spirituality it's the same. And even though, in this country, we hear about men's groups and men's workshops and all that, there aren't many. And I'm not even sure that that is the right way to go. I mean, some people have said that this may be a feminine way of approaching the problem so it may not be particularly attractive to men to go off into the woods and bang drums for a weekend. On the other hand they may love it. I mean, I've never been on a men's workshop. But I think there are a lot of problems still to be addressed in how we can encourage men who are still in positions of power in society to start letting go of the power in order to actually achieve something more valuable which is self knowledge. Because it seems to me a lot of the ordinary blokes that I know don't have very much self knowledge in a very deep sense. And it's simply because they've not

really been bothered with it. It is not that they are ignorant or anything like that. They just haven't given it very much thought.

R And society, as it's constructed, doesn't encourage them to, does it?

A No, not at all. I mean, you know, if you are in a position of power you are not going to change it are you? I think you'll find in Anglican situations, or Jewish, It is mostly the women who go to the workshops unless it is something to do with management, and then it's all men.

R So the mindsets are still unchanged, aren't they?

The whole business about masculine and feminine opens up a whole area of discussion ,as does essentialism and how far it is helpful to women to align themselves with nature and Mother Earth. That's another whole area that, as we've come to the end of the time, we haven't time to talk about now.

Thank you so much for giving me your time.

CESSY

Interview with Cessy 8.8.99

R: Cessy, thank you very much. Perhaps if I could just ask you how you got into some understanding of using Goddess symbolism in the first place?

C: Well, I'm a Franciscan Catholic sister

R Which is rather remarkable!

C Yes, yes. And my community has been on a path of empowerment for women and solidarity with women for a good number of years, and in our community vision statements we have seen ... we have articulated the need to stand with women and to be women of the church. And in discerning what that means for the contemporary calling, I have been challenged deeply by some of my reading by feminist writers who are on a spiritual path, and it occurred to me that in the literature our sisters are not identifying themselves with the Goddess quest. There's a lot written and there are a lot of women who are seeking ways of finding the divine female within themselves, and using the ancient images to release energy that has been trapped, perhaps by patriarchy, over all these years. So I reflected on that in a theoretical kind of way. We, as a religious community, are living lives of the spirit. We are into spiritual practice and spiritual disciplines for years and how is this able to serve a broader community? So it kind of challenged me personally.

I think, kind of in the background, I had thought that working in Latin America for about 20 years – first in Central America, in El Salvador, in the pre-war years, working a lot with Liberation theology motifs, and the energy coming from base Christian communities and the empowerment of people who are oppressed by economic structures.

I was not at that time so conscious of the feminine but we began to work with the empowerment of women in 1970 by creating a centre for consciousness raising- women's issues, women's sexuality, women's right to choose to cultivate friendships, to know themselves and know others on a deeper level rather than getting into these kind of traditional relationships which really don't have meaning.

So that part of the work was in place when I came to Mexico in 1990 and here I began working again with social-economic-political consciousness until one day, one day out of the kind of blue, I found this newspaper article which described a new exhibit on the Goddess of Teotihuacan. The beneficent Goddess, the Goddess of the generous hand of Teotihuacan. And, to tell you the truth, I was just absolutely taken with the article and very astonished that there was a more maternal, generous female divine in this part of the culture that I had seen so dominated by Aztec language Aztec mythology, and then the whole aftermath of the Spanish conquest.

So I had not thought much of the empowerment of women through Goddess language, to say the least, or that it could be found here in Mexico.

I was rather unattracted to the Mariology of the Guadalupe, thinking that there you've got the passive women and you have the submissive Mary who had been used by the church and the state for their own ends and people are encouraged to continue in this passive way. So it hadn't really attracted me and I was just very unfamiliar with the richness in the pre-classic tradition of Mexico.

I was just so energised by it, I had to see this exhibit. I wanted to find out about this. And so I began to explore. The exhibit was actually in San Francisco. It was not in Mexico TA all. But the person who put the exhibit together, and her name was again in the article, was Esther Pasztory, Dr. Esther Pasztory of Columbia University, who laid out the reality of a hidden Goddess, a masked Goddess, who only in recent research has been recognised at Teotihuacan. And that led me to move further.

By the time I went to the States at the end of Fall that year I really wanted to find out where the literature is and start learning about this. And I asked Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether because I know she has a great interest in Latin America Liberation Theology and feminist issues and critique. So I thought she might put me on to where I could study. And we had a very interesting phone conversation during which she said, "I don't know anyone who is really studying, any place they're offering courses in the States. You might want to do that research yourself." I laughed, me! At this point in my life with a job etc. I'm going to do a study of this!

Well, from that moment, things were in a synchronistic pattern to push me into a doctoral programme. And one way or another I found myself into a programme offered at the Union Institute at Cincinnati which is self-directed Bible learners. You find a way to fit your doctoral committee together. And I had Rosemary Radford Ruether to be a scholar who would mentor me in ancient Near Eastern Goddess literature, and also at college Consuela Todez who, happily, lives very near to where I work here in Mexico City. She did mentor me in the ancient codices and the ancient literature, well what literature is available, on this topic.

So after five years of research I have finished a doctorate in women's spirituality which is, my thesis work, is called 'Through the Goddess gate: a spiritual pilgrimage in search of the Female Divine in Mexico.'

R Oh yes, and has it been published as a book?

Well this is a video. We, our work was here and in the Union Institute. I designed a programme which would invite women to come together to become familiar with some of the literature and the myths of central Mexico which involved the Goddess tradition. and the journey is not one of just sharing the information. The journey is one to invite these women, whom I know in the States, not personally but the movement in the States, by undertaking this quest for the Female Divine – getting them to come to this part of the North American continent where we have found such a rich tradition that is ours – ours meaning people who live in North America.

The spirituality, I believe, emanates an energy, a certain kind of energy that bypasses time and place. The ripples of that energy are all around us.

Coming to Mexico City, you get captured, or captivated, maybe, by not only the dynamics of the contemporary world but the images of the past that lift up some of the issues that women struggle with today.

So the project in the dissertation was to create a video which actually shows women in a Goddess Gate going to the sites and then reflecting back on their own inner spirituality, and, through ritual, and through ceremony as well as through engagement in conversation with other women, including Mexican women, come to a sense of integrated spirit. It released both the power within them, I think, to let go of those hurts of patriarchy. We don't continually have to reflect back on patriarchy and terrors of the church or the way that we have interpreted that reality. But what we find is a joyous empowerment of women who can say "Well the church is maybe to be let go of now, or to be pitied", or "We need now to choose – to choose what part of it we want to take with us and what part desperately need sour renewal. and the question is...-Am I going on too much?"

R No, it's lovely, No. This is what I find when I interview women. All I have to say is to ask the question and out comes the narrative. And it's story...wonderful...I'm drinking it in.

C OK. I didn't know if you wanted me to focus on certain things.

R No, no. I'd rather hear your narrative the way you want to tell it. I don't intend to structure the interview. I would rather let people say what they want to me.

C OK. I was going to come back to the whole symbolism of the religion of Guadalupe. Guadalupe comes to us from the ..., for 1531 when she manifested to a poor Indian who was on his way to catechism class. He entered a Christian church, the Catholic church and she appeared to him in his own Nahuatl language speaking to him in the idiomatic language of familiarity.

"Dear little Juan" you know, "Where are you going?"

He would respond "My dear daughter, I am going to see the bishop."

'Dear little Juan', 'Juansi', 'Juanti', you know, it wasn't just 'Juan', it was 'dear Juan, you know. "Don't you know that I'm here. I am your Mother."

The conversation was very tender. And going back to the myth we get to understand more deeply that the site she chose to appear in is the site of the ancient Goddess, *Tonantzin* which, in English, would be translated 'Our Mother'. It was the shrine of 'Our Mother'. So there was the Christian Madonna, appearing as 'Our Mother', and she says to him, "Go to the bishop and tell him that I want a temple built here"

And here on the mount of Tepeyac was a place outside the city, outside the place of power, outside of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, but also outside the Spanish centres of power and the centre of the church.

But she said "A temple out here on the fringes where the old religion is. Where the Goddess was worshipped."

And he said, "Well, you're asking the wrong person. I can't talk to the bishop. He's not going to listen to me."

And she said, "You are my messenger. Will you do it?"

I'll be telling you the story, you know, in the programme, but now as I reread this and see the connection that the Divine Mother, the Female Divine, is of the time of her manifestation. She is appearing, inviting many people in many parts of the world. This moment, this epiphany on the hill of Tepeyac, it was not accidental that it was there at the shrine of Our Mother.

In a cave there, there were, carved in stone there, two images – both female deities equated to – what I've read – one was the image of Chalchiuhtlicue, the Goddess of the deep waters. Next to her, standing like sisters, was the image of Cihuacoatl, the Serpent woman. That image was so strong, here in these crevices and cracks in the rock in these caves, the poor peasants would come to offer their little sacrifices of flowers or a chicken to the Mother, and let

a lot of those animals breed on the earth to nurture the earth – very distinct from the mortification of bloody human sacrifice which was happening in Tenochtitlan which was such a pain, was such a grievance for people, though they were pretty silent about it.

So this image of Mary, speaking Nahuatl, a language that the Spanish did not understand, did not know how to interpret, she used a name for herself, *Coatlalopeuh*. It wasn't 'Guadalupe'. It was something very similar to Coatlicue, '*Coatlalopeuh*'. And when Juan Diego told her name to the bishop, because he asked who her name is. And he said the name '*Coatlalopeuh*'. The bishop heard 'Guadalupe', who was a Spanish Virgin Mary, who appeared in an area that Cortez was very familiar with. And the image over there in Spain, I think the name meant 'in the crevice of the rock'.

R So 'Guadalupe' doesn't actually come from Mexico?

C No...you talk about 'appropriation'. we could say a lot about that. But have the names of the Virgin...?...it's used a lot of descriptives which are very typical of the Nahuatl to say 'this is the Great High God or Great High Goddess'. 'I'm the Mother – the Great High God'.

So, the bishop, in the end, was convinced that there was an apparition and that the Mother of God, in his terms, Mary, the Mother of God, wanted the shrine. And he agreed. And they built the very simple chapel. It had a little image. When the Spanish community heard that it was 'Guadalupe', they went there in great numbers.

Juan Diego had to tell the Indian community that here was 'Our Mother', *Tonantzin*, or '*Coatloapeuh*' or whatever name he called her. He probably called her by many names. She appeared as an indigenous woman.

So I have found that this image of Guadalupe releases so much energy and it synthesises so many traditions that if she has been manipulated in the course of history- and she has- it is now the time for women to claim her. For women to name her and find out what her message is for today. And in my work with women's groups in the last five years, we've been offering the Goddess Gate two or three times a year for the last three years, last five years. Women are finding such healing in that image and in that place, whether it's the image or the place, because there's something that does happen to the spirit when they read the words of the woman that says, "Do you not know that I am your Mother? Do you not know that I hold you in the folds of my garment? Don't worry. Don't be anxious. And is there anything else you need?"

Those were her words to Juan Diego. It's the concern of the Mother, of Our Mother and lots of us need a Mother. And we need to bring forward female qualities that are generous and caring. Basically the world would be a lot different if these qualities would come forward with the assertion, the security that we see other qualities coming forward. Other qualities we've also got. The world, right now, needs a Mother. We need to care for the earth as the earth has cared for us.

R May I ask you how you reconcile that with being a nun in the Catholic Church. I mean it's remarkable that you keep those two things together and

that you do actually see a link between them. And I find that the history of your Order and their political involvement and their Feminist involvement to be fascinating. How do you manage to balance those things?

C We're gonna be good on this one?

Maybe I'm very naïve in my reading of the scripture and in my tradition. We are the church. The church is the people of God. The church is all of us in service to promote the Kingdom of God. That there is a... it's here and now. It's within. And it is not exclusive to any hierarchical body. They offer service. Sometimes I can say, "Yes I need the hierarchy to define those issues of justice and to stand up with a voice for the poor, or to say in a time of peace making or a time of crisis in political unrest or war that someone can't speak authoritatively for peace". That I have no problem with. But on the ordinary day-to-day living of my Christian, Catholic, Franciscan commitment I see that I must integrate this into my heart. And my first call is to the spirit and to be faithful to what the scriptures tell us. And I don't see that there is a conflict here.

We use language that contemporary, that is Feminist, that speaks to the suppressed Female Divine. And for every time that we call on Our Father, I have the duty and the right to call on Our Mother. And if we have overplayed the gender qualities- this is all metaphor, of course- we're just talking, trying to

create with our poor language, this immanent divine who is working within us and is inviting us to the next step.

R: That's very interesting. So you do look at the divine as immanent rather than transcendent, or both at the same time?

CC: Probably both at the same time. The Universe is so immense that I believe there is a force, if I want to divorce ourselves from gender terms, there is a force, there is an energy, there is a call in the Universe. And it's for a formless diversity. A formlessness inter-related to a dependency and for community. This is the whole mystery of creation. And this goes on deep within myself, and with the groups in which I sit and the forests in which I walk. There's a sense that we walk in oneness with this universe and you can get to think about the transcendent when you think of the complex or vast powers or energies that hold the thing together and challenge everything to move on outward. So I really come back to who I am as a woman now and try to be faithful to what I value and the way the gospel, or the good news, comes to me.

R And this work that you've done with women and with base Christian communities on political empowerment which I find so inspiring. Do you see that linked with what you're trying to do with the Goddess Gate programme or do you see these two as separate things?



C That's a good question. My entrance into Latin America was through the Liberation Theology and working with the empowerment of women in a social sense. But now I find, and maybe it's about age, that the transformation of the world needs more than political commitment and social commitment. More than people who will march in the streets in protest and knock on doors of the political powers and call attention to structures of injustice. I just find too much burnout in that and I have found, having worked in El Salvador and Guatemala and through to Nicaragua, and having seen the deep frustration of the revolutions, the social, political revolutions that have taken place in the 80's and through to the 90's, the amount of bloodshed. And when I look where those countries are today, it just grieves me immensely. I don't see that they are any better.

There is a different place on the wheel of life but, for all the blood that was shed and all the talk of the blood of martyrs birthing this new El Salvador, it's going to come very, very slowly. And I've moved to the point where I will support that as much as I can but I think that if we went about our inner work of integrating and liberating our human person, the challenge that we have as women in the world today, I don't think our political actions will be effective.

R That's fascinating that you've moved from the political to the inward rather than the other way round.

C Well, I started on a very intense inward journey as a young woman. For years in my religious community we were in pre-Vatican theology in which

I was formed. It was more a 'Jesus and I' kind of spirituality. But this one, I find where I am now – how to say it exactly. It's like if I don't do my inner work, I can't become energised and alive and authentic. The marching the streets and the political transformation just can't happen.

R So do you, do you hope that by having, and do tell me if I'm reading too much into this, but by having the Gate programme, are you hoping that by starting with a few people it will, people will tell other people and then that sort of changing in the way that we see the world will happen?

C I have witnessed with the Goddess Gate a surprising thing. It's like it's not my programme. I'm just a very simple woman doing a simple thing that I feel, because I grew up in Latin America for a long time, I know the language, I can read the literature, hopefully I can dig it out. And I have this passion for the Goddess, so I think when people come here and we who facilitate the programme go with the flow. We step back. We have designed a few things. We have some experiences to offer. We let the people bond in a safe environment so they feel comfortable and I believe that the spirit works within that and a lot of healing happens. It's not, we don't have a proof of where, of when or how, but there is a way that people let go of the hurts of the past.

It's kind of remarkable. It may be barren relationships, it might be the mother, it might be the husband, it might be some broken relationship with a son or a daughter, or the church or a job, or something. People come for, well not always full of anxiety, but everyone has a wounded, a woundedness that they

carry with them and what is the way to come to healing? It seems that here, in this environment, the dynamic happens. Goddess is present in some healing way and when people go back it's in their blood. Some of them come in the Goddess tradition and in the Christian tradition sisters come, Grandmothers come, college students come. I mean, they come and in the end they have some very deep meeting with the Divine Female. We find that they are transformed in some way. Not that a person stays transformed for ever but it seems like everyone gets back into their own communities wanting to talk about this. That's why we designed the Goddess Gate video and an essay that accompanies it so that people can share it in some way.

It's so foreign to us, these images of the Aztec Goddesses and the ancient classic and pre-classic images are not ones that resonate easily with us who have been trained in the Western mindset. But maybe because they are so strange, they open up a meeting with this which has been denied, with the deep part of the female, with the passion for life-giving, the cycle of renewal that is so characteristic of the female. And all of this just makes all the more sense. It's an intuitive knowing.

R I'm just wondering whether there is any way in which that somehow feeds back into what is going on in Mexico because being here, the contrast between the richness and civilisation of the ancient cultures and the appalling poverty and degradation of the majority of people actually living in Mexico City. I have this terrible sense of helplessness that we've got the Coca-Cola and the McDonald's and you know that to do something about it and to tackle

these huge, capitalist, patriarchal structures – is there any way in which... (side of tape runs out)

So you're talking about meeting these Mexican women.

C Their courage. They are women, you know, scholastically we would say that they are uneducated women, but they have been educated in the base Christian communities over ten and fifteen years and they have brought their own critical reflection to the reality that they're living. They are very discerning and they are passionate for transformation. And in Mexico the call is for political transformation. And so if there are demonstrations in.....the centre of Mexico in front of the national palace, the women in the first communities will organise to bring water down to these people. I mean, they don't have the money to buy something special but they will try to find some pure water to bring to these people in the hot sun. And sometimes they will get together to prepare pots of beans and rice to support the protest. Or they will help and shelter people in their homes, to let them use their showers and their bathrooms, something like communities, so that those who have marched across Mexico to make a point before the President will have the support of the community that is standing in solidarity with them. It's pretty awful.

R It is. And the tiny bit we've seen is absolutely chronic. I wondered, what would they make of what you're doing here? Or do you know?

C Well I'm beginning to know. You know, I know that among the intellectual people, academia here, many, many women have left all identification with the church and are involved in a humanistic social struggle which is admirable. Their critique of hierarchy, or the patriarchy, like so many women around the world, there's no way to work within the structure.

And among the working class and the poor, there's more a sense of liberation through the work of the base Christian communities which has brought critical reflection based on the gospels to their communities and they are in that path. It has been so fascinating in my work, I kind of thought, well they would not be into Goddess search, Goddess language, so I didn't start with them. But as I would describe that we are going to have women coming from the North on a spiritual quest, I would like an afternoon in which we could share as women, they're right there. And every time they come, and we do this once during the programme follow-up, they're hungry for this and the first time I was describing what the women are coming for and we would want them to come in for an afternoon, and they said, "When are you going to do this for us. We want this."

And so two years ago I got a grant and I did the Goddess Gate for a group of women from the berries and they just ate it up. They just ate it and it was fantastic. And now I'm beginning to cross into the more professional community and finding they are astounded that this work is being done and they are very, very interested. So I want to do a programme for them. Now with the present group of women who are here for the Goddess Gate, I just

went out and made four or five phone calls to different communities. Would there be a small group of women who like to join us for an afternoon, and we are going to have 21 women coming in. It's a large group. And sometimes it's 10 or 11. It's usually about 12 respond. But as they get more familiar with some of the se links that we use as a starting point, they are beginning to see we want this and we want the dialogue, we want to sit down together as women and share.

And, you know, the metaphors of the myths, it's just a tool. What's important is we talk together as women across the boundaries of language and social class, educational backgrounds. And we be here as women. I'm ready to, as soon as I can get it scheduled, to do another Goddess Gate for Mexican women because they are so eager for it.

As I said earlier, doing the women's guide to the museum of anthropology, I needed someone who would be open enough that I could train this person to do the museum tours, though I don't think the person would identify as Feminist but she's been enriched every time she takes a group through and sees this perspective that's hidden. This is the hidden side of the museum. Nobody talks about this. It's not written. And I'm hoping that I will be able to get something written that would be available at the museum for women.

R This is wonderful and it's so good of you to take time out, and I know you're so busy.

Two other questions I would like to ask and if you haven't got time that's fine. One, I would be interested to hear your definition of spirituality and Feminist spirituality, and the other is this issue that's come up quite a few times within this group – just this concern that focusing on this nurturing mother idea, especially perhaps with native women who are so easily identified with that, and you said yourself that in your earlier work you were actually trying to help them move outside those very male identified of seeing women. What feelings do you have about seeing the female divine in these what some would call essentialist ways of motherhood? Is that, perhaps, disempowering them again? Obviously you don't think so, so I'd be interested to hear how you engage with those ideas.

C Well let me start with the feminist spirituality. First the spirit. The spirit is the integrated person. To touch that part of us that is fed by the intellect but also is nurtured by the heart and is empowered by passion for life. So when I talk about spirituality, I'm talking about a life-giving force that transcends, if you will, the small parameters of my life and integrated with what, I should say solidarity with women – that we're in this struggle together. The Feminist part of my spirituality is that I as a woman would define my relationship with the powers that be, whether they're hierarchical, patriarchal, institutional or those powers that oppress with the life-giving powers of the Female which are more nurturing, more egalitarian, more participative, more communicative, more sensate. I celebrate these elements, essentialist or not.

I think that in being empowered, and being assertive, and being unafraid that all of this that gives us life may move us into death - I mean the style of power that Rosemary was indicating - it's so obvious in all of our, that we move also in the path of death and regeneration. So that Feminist spirituality is one that accepts that whole integrating life cycle

The other question.

R Well, you've partly answered that. This concern about focusing on Goddess as Mother - that that is again identifying women in male identified ways that they have always been identified by within patriarchy. Is there a problem there do you think?

C We have had so much focus on change - male, lord, ruler, supremacy and father that goes in there - that now when we call on Mother or we call on the divine life-giver, the divine who rests and feeds and nurtures and sustains and all of that, all of a sudden we don't want that language. Our language is very limited. I think they're like that courage of warriors, women who are like warriors giving birth. I'm not particularly attracted to that sense of the warrior meeting, taking on the accoutrements of the male aggressive stance. We have an internal strength that comes from our passion and our desire for life. And by that I'm not thinking of reproducing children. I mean all of life that is integrating. That we're living the people who are here, we're loving the plants that are here and looking for the seed plant for the future. You know, how do

we protect our forest and our waters, you know. Someone has to be there as the one who nurtures and the female, and someone who's going to stand up against war and use of resources for defence. I mean there's a place for us, for everyone. So we don't have to be so defensive. If people are, I don't want to be naive about it either, I mean there's a certain role for defence, but I mean these arms of mass destruction and mines and things that are hurting innocent people. Yes, we need to stand up with our female passion against that.

I think some of this, you can say the language of essentialism, it's disempowering but when you meet these Mexican women and you see their process a little bit closer, and how they have come to their own liberation, it is in claiming their power as females.

R Would it be fair to say that perhaps this concern about essentialism is a luxury of white, middle-class, rich, well-educated women?

C Well I think it's, in the academic discipline it's an interesting academic question but I think we learn something at the grassroots that I wish for myself I will give my attention to. Somehow, whether you call the female divine The Great Mother or the Eternal Female, or whatever, it's again a question of semantics. But it's the language that is understood and everybody knows that it's more, it's not aggressive. I don't think we need to...

R But it's power?

C It's power. It's true power because a lot of the aggression is coming out of defence, from a weak core that needs to be protected. Where we can liberate that, we are more generous and we are more compassionate

R Thank you very, very much

EMILY

Interview with Emily, 17 7 2000

R Emily, thank you very much for agreeing to come and talk to me. We've had a look at my research proposal so you have some idea of what the research is. And so, really, I would like to just journey with you in conversation to explore Goddess talk.

E Right

R So if you could just start by telling me what you mean by the word 'Goddess'?

E Right. I suppose by Goddess I just mean, Oh dear. I think there are many different layers of this. I think of it as an energy that is in me and outside. And I know that some people think of it as symbolism as well but I think for me, I suppose I'd have to go back to my spirituality in the beginning, because I can't. I'm thinking about me and I could ... without referring to books and things, and everybody's position it would be difficult.

I suppose I've always had a vaguely spiritualist way of looking at things, not because my family are spiritualists but my religion of origin is Christianity. And the way that Sunday School would work would be that Jesus loves you and he's up there and I think as children we kind of just related to whatever was around the feeling for that. I think for me, discovering a Goddess for me was like becoming disaffected with the Christian church and discovering that it was very much male orientated. But that process didn't really start. I mean I really enjoyed Sunday School at the time. When I was about 6 I moved to a village and I lived on a farm near a little village, went to the local school and we were Methodists.

By that time I disapproved of the local school because the children were a bit unruly and giggly and they didn't like me because I was a stranger and I didn't think this was proper behaviour at Sunday School. I was very much, the Methodists got me when I was very small, and I wouldn't go. So I had to go, I had to choose. I had the choice of two Sunday Schools and I was told O had to go to one – so I went to the other one which was Church of England but we had a very lovely Sunday School teacher.. And she was very, very good. And it was very story telling and Bible stories and that was great. So I had a mixture of early Methodism, and kind of spiritualist learning of my own.

R That just came from you?

E Yes it did, yeah. And then I think I found the Bible class a bit difficult. We didn't have proper answers. I didn't get enough answers.

R But you asked lots of questions?

E I did. But I went ahead with it in the end. I nearly didn't go ahead with it , this confirmation in the Church of England when I was about 13 or 14 or whatever. And after that it was downhill all the way really. I was in the choir as well and I was a bell ringer as well, but I found that then came in the prejudice and I was brow beaten from the pulpit about ridiculous things like 'women are the devil's gateway'. I remember that one.

R You actually heard that from the pulpit?

E Yes, and women used to say it as well! One woman tried to, you know. Very patchy. I just felt the ritual ... The other thing was, because of the village thing there was always the pagan element in there and it was lurking and tolerated, just not spoken about. Then we got this new vicar, the one I had trouble with.

He set about eliminating everything 'Pagan'. I was very, very upset about this because I enjoyed the – when it was somebody's birthday we'd do these folk dances and I was really looking forward to the maypole dancing, and I was – it was my turn. And he banned it because it was pagan. So I had this growing resentment about all things pagan being You know, I looked it up in the dictionary. It said 'of the village'. I thought, 'well yes', you know and that's what it is.

So I was very, all this resentment about this and it got worse and worse. I'd sit in the congregation getting more and more angry about all this stuff. In the end I stopped going but it was a bit of a crisis. It was a crisis. And I read the Bible at home and that was it. And I kind of ... anonymous saying this, it's going to have to be anonymous. I'm going to come out with it I can see. I sort of paced up and down my room shouting, 'God if you're up there, you know, you're a bag of shit! Go on, what are you going to do about it, zap me with a thunderbolt?' I was really angry about all this and I really paced up and down and said everything. 'Well don't think if you exist you want me to have a clamped mind and this is what's happening at church. So I'm going to leave the church and I'm going to go off on my own and explore blah, blah, blah.'

And then the astonishing thing was I got the answer. It must have been a spirit guide but I'd never heard a spirit guide before. He just said, 'alright'.

R You actually heard it?

E Yeah. And ten of course, I wanted to ask lots of questions. But it was just I got the answer and that was it, 'Alright' and no more than that. And I have heard spirit guides since but it's always very brief like that when I hear them. Usually it's just through dreams or something.

So off I went on my thing and education became the way I explored. And then it wasn't ... and then feminism as well. I was a feminist.

R Before or after you left the church?

E I suppose always vaguely. More afterwards, I think. yeah. But it was on the socialist side.

R So was your feminism political or did you see it as part of your spirituality?

E No political

R They were two separate things, your spirituality and your political feminism?

E Yes. Yes I think in a sense justice I wanted feminism and stuff. But it was when I went to University before, and I wasn't happy there and I left, I wanted to explore. There was all the spiritual I wanted to explore and I thought that the way was through art, so I studied History of Art and I was interested in culture and communities so I was in the School of Culture and Community Studies. But it was all very much Marxism and all the ideas I wanted to bring in, it was 'Well we don't talk about that here'. There was just no place, and I just felt even more of that cramped feeling of the oppression. It was almost like a continuation of the church. Only first of all, I didn't realise, first of all the female had been banished, so you just got the male. And then you go into the secular or the Marxism and so on now the males are banished as well.

So that's how I felt about it and it did lead to a big crisis. And it was then I started getting I touch with, when I was studying History of Art, that I started getting in touch with that female energy and images. And I was told ... I went on a study trip to Florence and she said, 'You must' ... Amanda she was called, and she said, 'You must go and see Massachio's Trinity' because I was always saying how ugly it was and I couldn't stand it. She said, 'you really must.' You know. So I did. And tat was when I had a vision. I had the first vision I ever had there, that I can remember anyway.

Actually, because loads of people have had visions with that image over the centuries and, you

know, now they read it as, 'oh that doesn't really happen'. And it was. It just really came to life. And I was stuck here you know. And I spoke to various people about this and what it might mean. If it truly was a vision or not. And it could be that there is so much energy there of people having visions that it's like a thought form where you just get into it. So I didn't know. there are different theories about that kind of vision that you have with a painting. It's a very, very powerful image.

R Of the painting just coming out as real or was it a change?

E It was, it was the painting as real, yeah. And it's like very much in the Renaissance mode, the Massachio's Trinity where you've got these large figures and smaller figures in mediaeval style but with the technical virtuosity of the Renaissance coming in. So you've got that. It gave its power to me because you've got the different realities and the symbolism and that reality, you know, the realism, combines to give its powerful effect. And er, but what struck me was this typical vision of, Christian vision with God the father looking sternly at you and Jesus on the cross. But it was the Mother figure who was actually the most powerful to me because she was the one that was pointing. And I wasn't looking ... And then she spoke and said 'Look at my son'.

R The vision spoke to you?

E Yes. And so I had no choice but to look and I felt really depressed at the time. I think that what the mark of a true vision is, that it changes you. I felt very depressed and I looked and I saw this image and I could feel it. It was almost touching me. It was so powerful. Then I felt, 'well all my problems are just so silly. Pull yourself together.' And I did pull myself together. And I went off and that was the end of the vision. And it was Mary, supposed to be a representation of Mary in her later life. She was an old woman in this image. Well I nearly went off to be a nun after that, but for various reasons, I didn't.

So anyway I didn't become a nun, I came back to England.

But that started this process of exploring the female images and so on and I wrote really good essay about, and I'd no idea about Goddess studies then. Early this was, about 1983. But it was all about this mother figure coming through the history of Roman altar pieces and how it had been suppressed. Because, you know, when you go in these churches there's all these amazing images of all this, that and the other and people are lighting candles around a plaster cast of Mary. I was writing about that and what it might mean, and that's what started me off. So it's always been these layers of politics, you know, shared religion and private spiritual of the slight mystical. There's always been that there.

R Fascinating, absolutely fascinating. But this vision you had, this was a powerful figure? This was before you got into Goddess images?

E I didn't know anything about it. It started me searching for that.

R So does Mary still function as a Goddess image for you?

E Not that way no. It was an older Goddess that was coming through the image of Mary. But you have to remember that my background was Church of England and so I wasn't used to image of Goddesses or anything. It was all this very blank walls and images you don't have, and Mary played down very much. It was an explosion of Mary for me.

R Yes Florence must be. So where did you go then into your exploration of female images?

E That came much later. I had a very bad time and I was unwell, and I had to leave University. And it was very much a spiritual crisis for me. But it was, out of it came that I moved to Hove and then I was having more contact with spirit guides by then. I realised, you know, that these things are spirit guides, and I joined a healing foundation which I'm still a member of which trains me with that mystical aspect, so that I'm not ungrounded with it. I can get, you know, sort of metaphysical exercise.

R You have to explain. I'm not quite sure I'm with you.

E You know, like the chakras and things. You get trained in theory but also practice in how to look after yourself, to ground yourself. Make sure you don't become, you're third eye too open and you can get exposed to other people's energies or stuff. How to look after yourself and still develop your awareness and your connection to spirit.

R And you use that to heal other people? Or is it more self-healing?

E It's ... I am a healer. I have got healing ability but I'm not trained because nowadays the government expects you all to have, you know ... If you want to practice. I'm good enough for family and friends but I haven't gone in for taking the training and then...

R Get all those letters after your name.

E All that lot yeah. So I haven't done that but I am in a healing foundation and I'm still a member and I do some writing for them, editing rather for them. And they do spiritual healing, all sorts of complimentary medicine. And they also do, a woman there does trance channelling.

R What's that?

E That's when, you know, mediumship.

R Sort of spirit voices come through her?

E Yeah. So she is the vehicle. She leaves her body and then they come in, the guides. So those are spirit guides, yes. It works that way. Which is totally, you have all these compartments but it doesn't matter. They do overlap at times but it doesn't bother me if they don't quite fit.

R I was going to ask you about that bit but we'll leave that till later. So you left University and went through a bad time and came to Hove?

E To live, yeah.

R And was it meeting people here that ...

E No, no. I knew I was being very guided because I was getting more in touch with spirit guides. It was around about the time when I went and joined Seaford, the healers at Seaford. And it was then that I knew – I started having very powerful dreams and I do believe that dreams are soul communications so I'm very motivated to listen. I think the more you listen the language gets clearer.

And so I had a dream that I was given a baby ... I didn't understand all of it but I said, 'well what is his name? I've got to call him something?' And it said, 'His name is John, meaning he will come forth.' so I interrupted that this was available as a new project. So it was a new project and it was one that would lead on to other things because it was John meaning, 'He who comes before' like John the Baptist or something. I was still in that mode.

R It sounds as if it was feeding from that sort of Christian imagery.

E So I knew then that I needed to go and study something. And I got the Friends centre brochure and I was looking down and there was one on John the Baptist blah, blah, blah, . And I thought, 'oh, maybe that's what I'm supposed to do.' And then clear as a bell I heard a woman, she comes to me in dreams usually. And she said, 'No, hats not the right one.' And my finger went further down and I got to this one and it said 'Biblical Studies from a Feminist Viewpoint by Asphodel Long'. She said, 'That's the one dear, go to that.'

R She called you 'dear', she was that familiar?

E No, I'm probably making that up, but that's what it was like, you know.

R Right. So you went to Asphodel's?

E Yeah. And that was that really. I started to meet people there. We studied and it just came one. That was when it all started coming together – the spirituality and the politic and the study. It had all been separate aspects of my life. Then it all started coming together. We had Asphodel's classes but some of us in the class got together and started meeting for spiritual groups. So that was about 1988. Something like that, or 9. About that time. So that's where the threads started coming together for me.

R Right. And if those Goddess images became important, again, how do you think the Goddess images work? Did Goddess take the place of this God who you said was a 'bag of shit'? Is she sort of ...

E I felt a bit unfair to him actually. After listening basically to all my rantings and then just said, 'Alright, you know, go off and do ...' you know. I really don't know. I suppose Jesus would sort of come more into it somewhere. I would see him more as somehow connected to the Goddess.

Yeah. Somewhere. I mean, it doesn't bother me, but, that he ... you know, I don't actually think of him – well it's something for the future. I haven't worked it all out.

I would say though, within, what do you call it? The Magnificat. That bit where she says, Mary says something like 'he' . I would change it to 'she' and say ' she has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts and the rich she has sent empty away.' And I always think 'well in that case I think Jesus is probably from the Goddess' ... probably.

R Right.

E Especially as we now know his ministry was more or less funded by women and he had women around him like Mary and Martha and all that. I'm not an expert on all that stuff but it would seem to me quite probable that that was part of all that and there's not necessarily a But it doesn't bother me that I don't know that.

R But it's just interesting. I've not heard anybody before who had Jesus as an important figure in their sort of Goddess world view.

E Well it's not the Goddess world. He isn't. He's sort of somewhere on one side. He's sort of like ... because of my childhood experiences, you know ... there was a kind of that connection with that. And it must have been through spirit guides who were working with Christian tradition with the Methodists that had that feel of connection. And God the Father was the one I was shouting at, it wasn't really Jesus.

So it was him I was angry with. When I got the answer he told me to go away and get on with it then because I'd actually said what I was going to do, you know so. So I'll leave Jesus... I mean I know my cousin has spoken to me about that. She did a degree and her minor subject was theology. And she said to me, 'you haven't dealt with that vision. You haven't gone back to Jesus'. And I said, 'I know, I know, I know, I know'. I'm just not ready, I don't know what. It would

take a long time for me to look at that. It doesn't bother me. I mean, sometimes when I look at some of the things that jump out in the gospel, that must be true. He did that bit. And I really like that figure. I like him. That's when I like him. And other times I think, 'Oh you prat. You got that wrong didn't you?' I don't see him, as this divine God, son of God chappie. I just see him as an advanced or reincarnated. Did a job, not exactly sure what he was doing but he was here to make an intervention and it all got ... I don't know. I think perhaps they tried to cover up the intervention and then he got what Schussler Fiorenza called, you know, constructed into this resurrected Lord after the event to minimise what he was trying to do.

R Because Fiorenza talks about him as Sophia's child.

E Ooh right. I don't know a great deal about that.

R I just wondered if you'd come across the idea because, it doesn't matter if not. But Fiorenza has the view that he understood the divine as Sophia. It was a Sophia movement in which case it is possible to see Jesus and the Goddess as being connected. But the way you talk, you know, when you say you put that to one side for the future gives me the impression that your spirituality or reflecting on spirituality is very much an on-going process. So you don't see it as ... you haven't arrived...?

E No

R Just journeying?

E Yes.

R Do you find that unsettling? I mean, would you like to get there?

E No, that's fine. I'd like to get there but I don't think I'll ever arrive anywhere.

R So it's still a process – making sense of things?

E Yes. I think I've got my foundations secure, my ethics, my basis, which has come primarily from Goddess studies rather than theology. Gives me somewhere to stand from where I can build.

R Right

E So yeah, and having to, you know, if you take away, if you just take away the church and God then you have to say, 'well what are your values, what are your morality? Somebody just gave me a book on 'Goddess Now' by a Scottish bishop, apparently. I'm looking forward to reading that. It's his view and he's apparently having a go at these fundamentalists who bang on about male god and all this, and god said that. And he says, 'well hang on, you can't quite do that'. So what do you do if you, I mean but I'm a bit worried that he's going first you get rid of the female, then you get rid of the male. What are you left with?

R Does that worry you?

E Yeah. I think we've got to put the female back, looking at bringing the two together eventually. But that's coming more from the fact that we are humans, male and female and in the metaphysical, with the charkas and everything and the kundalini – all those energies in the body that we've learned to handle – they are made up of male and female. There's the – do you know this stuff about ...?

R No, not in detail.

E Well there's three energies in your body that travel up the spine like this. The, I always get mixed up, there's Ida and Pingala – those are the male and female but I forget which – I think Ida's the male. And what they say is that the middle one's called Shushumna. That's really exciting for me because it's pure Goddess energy. The whole thing about it is you've got the pure Goddess energy in the middle. You've got the male and the female and when you're doing it right, and you've got to learn to handle the energy and integrate your male side or your female side, or whichever, they're going like this up your body.

R That's interesting. Doing that on a

E And that is what we've got to aim for. If it gets lopsided in either direction you get all sorts of imbalances. I see that in my life I've got to integrate my male and female energies – learn to work with them but I find feminist theology is a way of bringing back the female into talk about the divine. So it's trying to get those energies in balance.

R Right, so there's been an imbalance in that the female has been completely suppressed. So you feel it's important to bring the female and reintegrate it. But presumably you think the ideal is when the female and the male are completely integrated? So you're not looking for a sort of ...

E Not in my lifetime, no.

R But you're not looking for a sort of female ascendancy?

E Well I suppose we're getting, when we talk like, you know, men are afraid we want to take over. Some people have used the matriarchy word as 'we are going to take over'. That's just thinking in

male terms because we haven't escaped that paradigm yet. But, I mean, I suppose the word the feminist theology would use would be matrifocal. And I think it has to be that way. We have to avoid power-over. If we can do that then I think the female probably would be in ascendancy but not dominating. I'd hope not dominating. It would be more like the Goddess and her consort or something.

R I mean, I'm very interested in different ways in which Goddess feminists use Goddess talk and express Goddess in different ways. And there is a huge variety of meanings. And yours is individual and unique although obviously you share aspects with other people. But could I just press you a bit further on what you mean by the Goddess and God? Are we talking about different ways of expressing some force outside or do they exist as two separate metaphysical beings? Or are they just language?

E Well I think all those and more probably.

R typical theological response!

E But I can only draw on more of my experience really. You don't want me to talk about other people's. But I think I have had experiences of Goddess energies. In ritual I've evoked them, experienced them in various ways through dreams, visions, rituals and so on and the way that I have my house, the way that I work there, and also energies as well are bringing the Goddess energy in. I would say that I think there are beings out there.

R Beings?

E Yes I do. I know that, like the Green Man, like you've got male energy. There's a legend, I think. Ronald Hutton told me it. About the Green Man, that he comes to Christians and takes them off somewhere. They don't remember it because they're Christians or something. But I had a dream

of the Green Man and I'm sure it was real. You know, like astral dreams. You can go up and ...
He's some kind of nature spirit – green skinned and green hair. I'm sure he exists.

R You have very vivid experiences. I mean, I find that quite difficult to imagine. I don't have experiences like that. So when you I mean like you say 'he exists', he exists quite independently of you?

E Yeah. Absolutely yes. I think the most wonderful thing about meeting him was the experience of unconditional love from that maleness. That I found very profound – these beautiful brown eyes looking deep into mine and feeling that he could see everything about me without any judgement at all. You know, it was total, unconditional love. It was a very profound experience for me. And I think very healing because I'd got a lot of sort of negative? of the male really. Sort of all men are, well not all men but most men are all crap and all this that and the other. Really I began to mellow in my feminism after that and to really understand just how awful patriarchy is for men.

R That came through your vision of the green man?

E Yes.

R How interesting. And you say it wasn't Jesus who gave you unconditional love?

E No, no. The vision was Mary and Jesus was more, it was more the authority figures. Because that's how ... what I'm saying, it was a good experience but it was in the context of that Christian imagery. It was a very ... Which is, may mean it was that thought form thing that there's so many people's expectations around there and I'm still sensitive to those vibrations that, you know, that I had the same vision that they would have had which was all about authority. And it was all very much a 'come on now, you're suffering' you know. But I got the message that I needed at that time so it didn't matter.

But with the Green Man it was that feeling of, of understanding that to me, that men, if they're achieving their masculinity, they are emanating that energy of the Green man and the measure of how good a man they are would be how well they're doing that. And having met him and seen what he's really like, the potential that men have, it's very sad to me that so few of them have a chance to do that or have the role models to enable them to achieve that.

R So it gave you sort of an image of maleness?

E Yes.

R Fascinating. But as my proposal probably indicates, my, what I'm exploring, the problems I have with relating Goddess talk to the world view that you're talking about – this is my problem not yours. My research is about my problem and my journey and my sorting out, that I am trying to do it by being in conversation with others about Goddess talk. One of the very positive things about Goddess feminism for me is the idea of embodied spirituality and challenges to dualistic ideas which I think have been extremely damaging to me personally and I think they've been very damaging to the planet. And what I find difficult to reconcile is this emphasis on embodied spirituality and this challenge to dualism and also the sort of challenge to a hierarchical supreme being. Nelle Morton said that if the Goddess is out there as a female god then we still have the mind set of hierarchies and you sort of hinted at that – decided there's somebody out there pointing at you as if you should do this and you should do that.

E That was the Christian version, yes. That was why I felt I went on and wrote about it, there was a Goddess force trying to get through these images and it was constrained by this Christian ... that was just my theory. That it was still coming through and that was what connected people, why there were so many Mary images and plaster casts everywhere was important to people.

R So for you Goddess energy isn't coming down from above and saying you should do this and you should do that, or would that still be appropriate?

E No not really. I wouldn't see it in that way. Not above but all around and on different dimensions and all sorts of stuff.

R But you still, if you have spirit guides, you ... there is still some sort of dualism presumably – a spirit realm other than this physical, material...

E Oh yeah! There are different realms to this physical realm. This is just one. Yeah.

R So for you Goddess isn't entirely embodied in the physical world presumably?

E You mean just within me?

R Well within you or within the earth. I mean, some women speak of the Goddess as part of the Earth.

E Gaia, yeah.

R And as affirming the physical, material instead of sort of projecting....

E Oh I think, yeah, that's part of the antidote to, you know, Christian asceticism.

R But only as part of it? Is the Goddess is still 'out there' in the spiritual world as well?

E As well, as well. Yes. Really with ... I suppose I see it as, it sounds funny but we're all made up of star dust. You know, our little solar system came out of an explosion. I can't remember – one of those big stars that went pssshh. Part of it became the sun, then some became the planets. We're all made of stardust. And like that, that's just on the physical level. And yet we've got, you know, we've got our emanations that we're in charge of and we have the projections of Goddess that, you know, just look at Greek mythology and you could say that that is maybe a projection of

human nature. It may be that then human nature is also divine because we've got part of us that isn't entirely physical and we're here, I suppose, to learn how to handle that energy better. I see the earth plane as a school – a school of experience, learning how to handle energy and the fact that you are divine because if you, you know, you create your own reality. What you believe actually can dictate your experiences and part of being here is learning that that's what you're doing.

R Right. So here, this physical, material world, is just a learning place. It's ...

E I wouldn't say just. I'm not sure about that. That's from the spiritual, spiritualist background that I've got that I would learn that way, I would think that way. But that comes from a lot of religions as well like Buddhism and so on. And I do practice Yoga as well. So also, it's not. I mean it's not ... I don't see it as anything less valuable because it's somewhere we come to learn. I think we are evolving which may mean we don't need to incarnate any more. We go through a cycle. We can choose to come back again but I think that's where I come back in again with the Jesus thing. He probably was advanced enough not to need to come back but he chose to because he had something to do. In theory, I mean I've no proof that he even existed. I have to say that.

R But the whole idea of reincarnation is very important to you?

E Yes, it's very important to me, yes.

R So how would you react to the idea of someone like Ruether who says that to see the material world as a learning place, to project, as it were, validity to a spiritual realm ... For her that is just buying into the whole patriarchal, dualist way of seeing things, and for her, she says, 'this is it, this is life and when we die our material form goes back into the matrix'.

E Oh yes, I'm sure it does. The material form does. But ...

R For you there has to be something else. For her that's it. There is nothing else. I mean, do you find that wanting as a way of seeing that?

E Yeah, I would. But it doesn't bother me that people think that way.

R What do you think is missing from that?

E I just think that there are other realms. And I can't prove it. But I've had experience. I'm experienced you see,

R So is it very much an experiential certainty?

E Yes. And that the people that I train with on that side, the metaphysical side ... Um, yeah, I've proved it, I've done things that prove it for me. On that level that's all I'm interested in, you know. That kind of stuff isn't what I'd bother bringing too much into my academic work. It doesn't bother me. All that does bother me, I suppose what I'd like to go on and research really later on is that people who do have mystical experiences aren't persecuted, because I think there is a great tradition of that from the patriarchal religions coming down and the atheism just carries it on so that people who do think – not all people but people in positions of power who think 'there's a material world, that's all there is. And if you think you've had this experience you must be mad'. It's a small step too start persecuting people and saying, 'you are mad. Never mind, we'll give you drugs and you never had those experiences, because what we say goes. Our version of reality is the only one'. And it's very similar to any other kind of monotheism: 'There's one reality and that's the one that we've got matey, and you've jolly well got to go along with it'.

R Right. So it's still quite a political issue then?

E Yes it is. Yes.

R That experiencing the spiritual world is your right?

E Yes.

R But you say there might be lots of different realities?

E Yes. Well, different consciousness I think. You know, people think, we still think in that patriarchal mode. Universe when we know there are multiverses for a start. I think it's the same with consciousness. I think it's the same with different types of people. Not everybody wants to be a teacher. Somebody else might want to be an engineer. You need to respect other people's modes of consciousness.

Maybe with the Oracle of Delphi there were people who were more specialised in different consciousness and people would go and consult them.

R So sort of hierarchy of consciousnesses?

E Well there if you've got the, you know the patriarchy coming in there – the inevitable corruptions coming in. I think the basic concept that you can actually have a specialised consciousness isn't necessarily hierarchical. It's like a gift and other people have different gifts. It's the value of these gifts I think.

R What you were saying earlier suggests that part of your Goddess feminism celebrates diversity, so you see plurality as something that's important?

E Yes I do, yes.

R It does seem to me that an emphasis on process and plurality are things which Goddess talk enables.

E Yeah. I think that's important, yeah.

R Yes. In a way that God talk perhaps doesn't. As you say, wanting to make everything unified and eternal rather than changing and in process?

E Yes.

R Right. That's fascinating. But if I could just ask one more thing about what you mean by Goddess. Given that you have this respect for plurality and diversity, you feel that you are in contact with different forces, it's interesting that you still talk about Goddess rather than Goddesses.

E I do, yeah. I don't think of one Goddess. I do have experience of different Goddesses as well. And it doesn't bother me whether they ... I suppose I do ... I'm not clear. Some days I might think in terms of archetypal forces and that we know about them because the Greeks told us. And there are ways that people have behaved and so on. And I would read perhaps quite a lot of Jungian feminist books about that and apply it to myself and work with those energies. But other days, if I was doing a ritual, I might experience the Goddess. Or if I went to a sacred site I might experience the energy of the Goddess there, or even a male God.

R Now this idea of invoking them, I do find that interesting and, I confess, quite problematic. If you invoke a Goddess, are you asking her to do something for you?

E Oh no, I don't think so, no.

R So they're not interventionist?

E No, no.

R You don't get them to find you a parking space or anything like that?

E No. I know other people do. they wouldn't ask a Goddess to do that. But they'd use... I think it's going into alpha. There's these different brain waves – I can't remember the name, I should know them. There's four isn't there?

R I don't know.

E Alpha, beta, gamma and delta – that's it. One's for sleep, one's for dream sleep, normal waking state and alpha. And if you're in alpha that's the time when you can change reality and do spells and that sort of thing. And some people do that through meditation and some people do that for a ritual and that would probably evoke the Goddesses as well, but mainly to witness the rites or just to be with you. But they would be there anyway probably.

But some people would claim that they're driving along and they go into alpha, 'now I want the parking space'. But I've never actually heard people talking about it because I've never done it.

R I mean, I find, I find that quite difficult because, coming from Christian background myself, one of the aspects of God symbolism that I find difficult, if not offensive, is the idea of some Christians that God will find them a parking space when he doesn't have time to stop millions of children starving to death. And I find that sort of quite morally offensive. So I find it difficult really to reconcile Goddess feminism with this sort of interventionist understanding.

E I think it's just playfulness that really and I think it's not about asking the Goddess to do that. I mean I don't think you would, would you?

R I don't know. I think some people do.

E I think the only thing I've ever done like that was a time when I had a dedication ritual. I was thinking I ought to start studying seriously again and it was when I started doing the I think various details might have to be obscured, you know, because you're identifying me with this.

R You're doing the describing so it's up to you, as you wish.

E When I started doing the certificate in feminist theology I thought, 'now am I going to get myself all upset about patriarchy' and I didn't want any of my work to go into, inadvertently going into the patriarchy and making it better. So I thought, 'what do I do about this?' So I worked out this complicated ritual and pointedly I consulted our mutual friend in Kemptown. I asked her and she looked up something for me in a spell book by Z Budapest. So I built on this, and it was for good studying.

So you got these herbs and you burnt the candle and clear your mind, and you'd study. But I built a whole ritual of dedication around this with incense and candles and so on. And it was a very nice ritual and everything. And I dedicated my studying to the wisdom Goddesses. So I lit the candles to ask them to be there and burnt incense. And it worked, I'm sure it did. I felt suddenly very calm and I know I was alright and I could trust that I would be guided. And after that I was alright.

R But the guidance was coming from outside. It wasn't you?

E Yeah, it was coming...(side 1 of tape ran out)

All of it together – the ritual, the invoking Goddess, the spell – it was a dedication that I was making that commitment. It was like a vow that I would do this studying and it would be for the Goddesses, the wisdom Goddesses. So I would be wise and I would be guided to do things. I could trust myself. I'd made that commitment and then I know that ... I think it's sort of like the whole of my personality was in agreement about it and I was marking the occasion, so you could say that it had a powerful psychological effect. But also I felt there was more than that to it.

(Excerpt removed from transcript at the request of respondent)

I can give you the other example of a ritual that worked when I had to have breast surgery. For the second time it was coming up and I didn't want it. It was a suspicious lump and I just thought, 'I can't go through this again'. So we all got together and it was a full moon and we were all laughing. And we did this spell to heal me. And we all did it together, everybody's mind focussed on it. We did this very simple thing. We used candles and things and did this clapping and chanting. It was all going like this (claps) and going 'healing breast, healing breast' and we went on and on.

(interruption for phone call)

So I think how that happened, it was very powerful and it was perhaps even a hypnotic effect really. You know, it was just so like a chanting and so on. And I actually felt the energy change and it was just, literally I felt it just lifting off, and it was gone. And then I just forgot about it and all the anxiety went away. By the time I went to see him the lump was gone.

R That's fantastic. I'm sure a lot of illness is psychosomatic...

E The atheists would say, 'oh well, it was just a lump that was going to go away anyway.' But to me I felt whatever it was go. And it was gone. It was such a relief.

R And how lovely that you have a community of women to work with on something like that. The first ritual you were on your own?

Yes, that was a private thing about me and my. I think with writing and studying it is a private thing when you're on your own and then you share it later.

R But the second one, there was obviously a very strong sense of community which is excellent. And would most of the women in the group understand the sacred as female in some way? Most of them?

E Yes, yes in different ways.

R Well thank you. It gives me a lot to think about and as I say, I still find, I personally have difficulties thinking of those Different sorts of levels of existence and Goddess spirituality at the same time. That's my problem. That's something that I need to get sorted out.

E It's fully. I think that we do incarnate to do different things which is, in spiritual healing we call the atomic blue print which is your subtle body level. It's all here in your aura but not particularly as manifest as this kind of matter that we can touch and in it you have all the blueprint for what you want to do with your life – what you've come here to learn and do. Also your genes – the genes that you'll need to do it. So if you came here to be a healer, maybe, or in previous times a witch or herbalist or homoeopath or whatever, you'd have the gene to taste bitter things. And some people do have that gene and some people don't. And if you do as experiment in biology with litmus paper on your tongue. Half the class are looking perturbed and wondering what's going on and the other half are holding on to their mouths and going 'err' because the taste is so awful. But you need fine tuning if you're going to be working with herbs and getting the dose right. Sometimes if you haven't got measuring equipment it's your tongue that's going to be doing the measuring, If you see what I mean. So people come with different genes to do different jobs.

R I wonder what sort of job I'm supposed to be doing? But thank you very much anyway.

E I'm sorry, I'm going back to the idea of diversity again but I do feel that if our consciousnesses are different, different beliefs or whatever, we're all part of the human community and all valuable.

R Yes. Thank you very much. Thank you.

GINA

Interview with Gina 28.3.99

R Shall we start with how you came to think about the Goddess, to use Goddess talk, what Goddess means to you, then, now?

G Well, I think when I first came to the Goddess that was through your course and I didn't use Goddess talk or language. We did a Feminist Study of Religion wasn't it?

R Female.....?.

G No it wasn't the Female Face of Religion it was a Feminist Study of Religion, it was a module or something. That's when I first discovered or really came upon this other aspect if you like, and talked about patriarchy. It had never entered my mind before because I didn't consider myself oppressed or any problematic issues regarding gender roles at all until I had that switched on, because I felt quite liberated, I was really, you know, a liberated woman and I used to go up to the monastery... Buddhist, very patriarchal, and even Eric, my husband, used to say, "it's very sexist up there," and I would go, "we transcend all that, we transcend it". And then I came across this course, did this course and had my consciousness raised, eyes opened and thought mmmmmmm. So I did keep going up to there and having those long chats, and they were actually beginning to be very difficult because they weren't just chats in the end it

started to me more like battle, internal battle in the end as well because I couldn't reconcile these sort of, if you like, feminist leanings and this patriarchal religious tradition that I still felt attached to. I still like going there, it is meaningful to me and yet I see all the pitfalls and flaws.

R I empathise. I was like that with Christianity.

G Yes, it was terrible. It really was quite hard and so I talked about it with nuns and the sympathy I got was with the abbot who did say to me, doesn't it make you feel angry? And I thought yes, you know, he'd opened the lid and taken the top off, shouting away about all my anger. And funnily enough he did leave but in the end I did feel I couldn't go back. I did stop going, I distanced myself totally. I still feel great there's an attachment there, it's a beautiful place, but I still cannot go up there without seeing the nuns come second. This idea of it's symbolic. It's giving out a very powerful symbolic message so feminist studies and I can't say it was Goddess talk or worship at that point really changed a big part of my life and then I started self reflecting business looking at the past. And then we were meeting at the end of the first year we did meet with the Goddess groups and I would say that was where it began proper. That was a really empowering time but that was Goddess centred wasn't it? I don't recall, there was no 'worship' of the Goddess

R For some it was centred the on the Goddess but,...

G Yes the idea of the Goddess was there and it was for me, because suddenly I had grown up in a Christian, Anglo Catholic tradition and you can laugh at saying, oh the big man in the sky with a beard, but it really was for a little girl it really was a big man in the sky with a beard and it's easy as you get older to say 'but that is an image'. To a certain degree that does stay with you and even after years of Buddhist practice when I didn't put the man in the sky, there was always that, oh just in case, you never know, but as I grew older it wasn't a man in the sky but if you think deity went with male, maleness, so the idea of a Goddess redressed the balance. I didn't think of a woman in the sky, I didn't think of these floating deities, female deities, angels or whatever they were. It wasn't a deity as such but somewhere almost subliminally working on the unconscious. It was shifting, this idea of linking of deity with masculinity. So it worked on that level and what was most important to me were the groups of feminist spirituality meetings with women. That was just wonderful, the ritual, the place to experience women's talk, women's lives, acknowledging rights of passage just being able to articulate those things in a safe place where whatever feelings you had about other women stayed outside the room, we all came together and did our thing and then stuffed our faces full and it was generally social. And I really looked forward to those and missed them. I thought that was empowering, very empowering.

R It was wasn't it? I've heard people argue that ritual isn't important and detracts from the feminist political agenda, but I don't think that what we did did that.

G No, when I was involved in them I wasn't thinking, oh this is political it was just well, this is great and I'm enjoying it and the particular women that were involved, you could say it was very synchronistic. The work we did afterwards was incredible and I used to actually think if you could see this as an ancient myth it was almost like the gods were up there moving us all together, and here you come together, meet and do all this work, and then we all fell apart as it were. But it was empowering and so the whole of the experience, looking at feminist theory, academic feminism, applying it academically in my life looking at the patriarchy was phenomenal for me, was an incredible shift in my life that I wish I could turn off sometimes. It's very hard, it's very difficult, but I then began this very long journey of going through my life actually looking at it from the time of being a little girl with this new insight, if you like a feminist insight or whatever and that has been again just an incredible experience, very difficult, very hard, but instead of feeling that a lot of stuff – well yes I do own my experiences and things were my fault but instead of believing some of the awful things that were happening was me because I was just an awful little girl or as a horrible woman, I see them for what they were. I came from a very patriarchal family, a very patriarchal time and that's helped me look at it, analyse it and start to come to terms with a lot of my past experiences, and I've been able to share that with a lot of other women. And that has been really important, it just gives me a lot of strength. Once again it's not been easy, there was no Goddess in the sky that was helping me do that, this is real women so it was like a shifting consciousness.

R Was that through Women's Studies or just people that you'd met?

G What? Do you mean talking with other women?

R Yes, the feeling that you'd helped other women.

G Yes just talking with other women, to begin with it was just women at College. I think we were all having these retrospective views of our lives then and exploring ourselves, because it's new and you used to think, I'm a liberated woman, but you think, no I'm not. You actually then see these restrictions so yes initially with those women and then gently you bring these things in with friends when it's appropriate, you can tell some people are not really into it. So yes, it was 1991 when that big shift happened and then the group fell apart, disintegrated into really very nasty little pieces and it was a source of great sadness to me because it was a shattering of the sisterhood myth. And that group will never come together again because there's so much ill feeling, but again it is still a teaching, you've got different human beings, just because they're women doesn't mean they'll not have their antagonisms. But the actual group wasn't strong enough to keep it together and I feel very sad about that. I miss that dreadfully and I think it began a time of disillusionment with this idea of feminism and sisterhood. I just thought what a load of rubbish, it's just women coming together, forget feminism and this sisterhood, they're just like everybody else, they bring their problems, their bitchiness etc. etc. so I think then I actually moved away from Goddess talk symbolism. I didn't go back to the Buddhist community but was a lot more cynical about those things.

R Did you still have an idea about spirituality?

G Oh yes, I still had my idea of spirituality but I had moved out of Buddhist practice although the practice was still there, I still employed Buddhist practice. I never felt within the Goddess group or the Female Spirituality group that it was a spiritual path for me, it didn't provide that so I could never say that it was a religion for me, it was a spiritual experience but it wasn't a path. It's never been able to be a path for me because it couldn't take me to where I'm trying to go.

R Where are you trying to go?

G Well I don't know until I get there. For me meditation, Buddhist practice, it doesn't have to be just Buddhist, you can do it with any tradition, but it's the path beyond, beyond this realm. I have a belief or some kind of transcendence, it's walking along that path, the path that takes one beyond, the mystic experience if you like and Goddess spirituality has never been that path that could facilitate achieving anything like that for me. I'm not saying it isn't possible I'm sure some women, some men find that they can use that but it never provided that for me and I don't think it ever could. So I still actively sought a spiritual path but then began to feel very much in the wilderness because I'd left this community, I started to go back to Church for a while. I went to the Cathedral. I haven't taken the Eucharist for 25, 30 years. I went into the Eucharist, which is a very powerful experience there's no doubt about that. I thought, wow, this is a lovely rich give me the incense. But there was this kind of phalanx of druids standing out there and there were all these robes and then we all had to stand there and read the creed and my whole mind was going, I don't believe this, but it doesn't matter, you're belonging, you're

part of it. And then there's this voice saying, I don't believe, and I was saying 'I believe in the virgin...' and all this, and I thought, oh god! So I tried to do this for a while and in the end I had to give it up, it's no good. It's very nice participating in this ritual but I don't belong here. Even in this situation it's not my spiritual path, so I stopped going there and decided I couldn't go anywhere. I have felt very much out of the sort of spiritual wilderness. And then I guess, a year or so ago when I started, I had to give a talk or something on the Goddess, that's not that long ago. I started reading about it again and thought, god! It's such empowering stuff, and all those old surges came back, yes, it's wonderful, what I liked as well was this mythic connection with Wicca, well that was just romantic stuff, it was like sitting down and reading a fairytale. So I then found doing Goddess work, if you like, looking at the Goddess academically, looking at it historically again, seeing how the Goddess image, metaphor, symbol functioned, you know, Palaeolithic, Neolithic, was marvellous, it was just lovely to read all that stuff thinking there was this past. And I realised it was functioning as this metaphor, symbol. Not a divinity but as an empowering image, that kind of image that would come up in dreams, the powerful women, the archetype, and that's how, when I came to it, I suppose a few months ago it was this archetypal, powerful women. Jean Bolen's book, how you need to feel familiar with the different Goddess archetypes and how patriarchy functions to suppress some and encourages others. And I thought, yes, that I could get into and I did feel quite excited by rediscovering that image of the women. And then it's kind of flagged a bit and it did make me feel that I wanted to meet up again with other women, but it isn't a spiritual path.

R I was just going to ask you, do you not see that as spirituality? And you don't see that what women do together as part of spirituality?

G Yes. What I did was, yes it was a spiritual experience, it's not a spiritual path. It's not a path that I can follow. I need or feel it's right for me to be working spiritually and to be working on a path, to be progressing and I have not yet found that within Goddess spirituality, because when I was , if you like, a practicing Christian this is my set path. It wasn't a mystical experience I had in Christianity but there was a ritual that one followed and you move on into the mystic path. But with Buddhism there was a path that one followed, a practice you followed that one was working towards.

R An altered state.

G Well yes, but I kind of felt that was a little bit optimistic. But you're working towards this altered state of consciousness and there was a path, a nice, you do this and you get there, you know with flexibility. And I never found that in Goddess worship. There was no, or maybe it was our group, did not sit and do meditation so it never took on that dimension for me which like and I felt was right for my spiritual work. It was a spiritual experience, it was a very powerful experience and coming together with other women was wonderful.

R And you said that you set on a journey looking back at your life, would you say that was a spiritual process?

G Well at the time I found it very difficult, very traumatic going over things in the past. I don't know whether that would be spiritual, I would have to say I don't know. I suppose thinking about it now, no that's not spiritual it's more a sort of psychological exploration, trying to come to terms with things that happened but that came from those groups, that understanding, that analyses of life structure, society, from seeing those things I was enabled to look back on my situated role as a woman in the family, and then marriage and looking at how patriarchy had functioned to condition me, which I'd never seen before. I wasn't conditioned was I? I was quite a liberated woman that had the choice to do what I wanted, but then I saw it anew and it was quite startling. But very, very difficult. And I would say I still haven't resolved all that but I can look back and work through it, and I'm able to do it by talking to other women as well, quite important. Because I always thought, I don't get on with other women, I don't mix much with women. Who wants to go to an all woman's anything? I don't think I'd been to an all woman's anything because I just thought, how boring, and I thought it was bloody great, it's really nice, I much prefer it. So those were all things that came out of that time, it was an incredible time for me.

R This idea about a spiritual pattern, does your understanding of spirituality that it is linear, that it's going towards an end point?.

G I'm afraid so. No I mean I don't think of it as, I don't conceptualise it in any way. But I suppose it is linear, I've started off from somewhere and I move on. I mean I still think is life a cyclic universe. I have this idea of the cyclic nature of everything and this linear

path is still cyclic. It will take me to a particular place and yet it's linear and it curves so it's a sort of curving line.

R So you're going round and round in circles?!

G Well that's the belief I have, I do believe in people's, should I dare say it, rebirth which fits in quite nicely with my beliefs.

R But if it's a spiritual path and you are saying that it's progressive and you didn't feel Goddess spirituality had that then is one rebirth after another getting you towards something?

G Yes, getting me towards nothing in the end.

R Right, so nothing is the goal?

G I don't know, you see I have to say I don't know what the goal is. I mean one can hear what is taught or what others might have experienced, but until I get there or even get past there I don't know because that's all experiential. I would like to think that I am going to go to some wonderful place with angels and it's all going to be marvellous but I'm afraid that's not quite what I think. But I don't know, I have no idea but I do know that there is something else. That's what I feel, I feel there is something beyond more than this. And the Goddess image does nothing to help me to find that out, it just doesn't work

on that level for me, it works as a symbol. I can almost feel Her, this image inside me sometimes, it rises enormously. I think I'm warrior woman today or something, it's quite pathetic.

R No it's not.

G I do, I can see that, or if I'm very angry, I mean really, really angry I have felt this black woman spectre image, very tall, six footish there. So they're very internal images for me, so I think I would say that Goddess spirituality is empowering because there is this concept of an empowering woman. I don't label them with names, I suppose the one I relate to most is Hecate, I like that one, but it's been more about women coming together, or being together. I kind of feel that as really earthy, a real earth experience.

R Any compassionate images in there or are they all anger and revenge?

G No I don't think I'm... I don't act on that, I have to say. I found that the image will come up and I can look at it and I think it's empowering but I don't think it has motivated me to behave in a ... well angry but not what one could call a violent way.

R I can endorse that.

G Yes it's true, just trying to be a bit compassionate. I'm the compassionate one actually.

R That's interesting because for many women, people, Goddess religion is all about encompassing, loving and tenderness, but for you the images don't work like that, they're strong, powerful?

G They're very, very strong women, I see them as like warrior women, like Hecate. Hecate and Lilith, I could get off on those, they're great because maybe that's the image I need to live out or whatever, I don't know, I don't know how tat works, but I don't very often feel these images this wonderful benign Earth Mother weaving and sewing. I can honestly say never, to be honest, perhaps I should work on this? But that and the image of the serpent of course which came up in dreams many times. This is an image that has been coming up for me years and years and years ago so I immediately interpreted it in a Freudian context as being a sexual problem. It might well be, but then of course I read Jean Bolen who said, women start dreaming of the serpent when they are beginning to come into some kind of personal power and I thought, ah, an alternative way of, I mean she may well be totally and utterly wrong but it gave me an alternative that could then see that as, these can be empowering. They were terrifying, but may be it was a symbol other than sexuality linking it then to the Goddess.

R And you actually went to handle snakes didn't you?

G I did, I did because I was petrified of them.

R I really admire you for that. They work for me symbolically but I am not sure how I could cope with real snakes.

G It was terrible because I had just come out of hospital, I'd had an accident and I was petrified of hospitals, petrified of all that stuff but didn't have a choice, I had to go and I thought, we went to this fair and there was this incredible woman with tattoos up her legs. She must have been about 50 something with shorts on and tattoos and high heels and I was quite impressed with this woman, with this bloody great boa constrictor or something, and she'd got smaller snakes and Louise was handling it and it's lovely. And I said "No don't give it to me because I will drop it". And she said, "Oh no it won't let you, it'll wrap itself around you", and I thought, "Oh my god! And then something just clicked. I thought, "Oh for god's sake, you've just been in hospital, you've done this and I went , oh give it to me". And then I did handle it and it was beautiful, quite beautiful and I was then hooked. I wanted a snake, I went everywhere to see snakes and I realised that they are very beautiful but I then watched a programme, actually it was only last week, on rattle snakes and I was appalled by it, I could feel this revulsion and I said, I can't sit and watch this.

R There's a new book about surviving a serpent bite. I heard someone talking on the radio, maybe it was the lady who was doing that?

G But I know this chap who's got them and there's this fascination. I want to go and see it but there's an absolute abject horror, which I think is quite natural.

R Well they can kill you can't they?

G Well even the ones that can't kill you, there's still that ... they've got no legs and they slither and they change shape. I always want to do that when I talk about snakes but I did keep dreaming about them regularly so that it was, I didn't like to go to bed in case I dreamt about snakes, years of it, so I thought I need to look at this image, quite want it's saying. I still haven't quite. But I have an alternative way. I've been coming into my power for years.

R Well your power is just ongoing obviously! So Goddess spirituality doesn't take you on the path but would you call that spirituality a feminist spirituality?

G My spirituality? I don't know that it's feminist at all, I don't label it. I really don't. No. It doesn't have a label, it hasn't even got a place to be any more, I can't even fit it into any kind of tradition. It's just a journey and I see that as quite lonely to be honest, and I would love to be able to be doing it within a particular tradition, and I have recently just been looking at Kabbalah which is why I've been talking to Ben and that again, synchronistically. was coming up and up, books were turning up and somebody was talking and I'd think, well maybe I should be listening to this. Got the book down off the shelf which I'd had for years, read it before but I didn't read it, read it a few weeks ago and thought, this is quite interesting. And then I pulled a book from the library, a novel, and it's all about Kabbalah. So I thought, I'm going to listen to his little one and look at it. But that's very much within Judaism, the stuff I've been reading.

R Yes, which is just a little patriarchal.

G Well there again I thought, maybe I have to compromise here. So it's a bit of a difficult journey really because if you want to be within a tradition it's going to be a patriarchal one. If you want to work with something like Kabala you need a lot of grounding, you need a good structure round you. I've not rushed into it but I'm attracted to it because it's a path to something beyond. I can't find that, sorry ...

R Please don't apologise. So would you say that there was any sort of spiritual dimension to your feminism or do you see feminism and spirituality as being two quite separate things?

G Oh no, I do think there's a feminist side to my, I mean when I read or think about, probably women in Wicca, I don't mean women coming together in Goddess groups like that but I'm talking about real work, I feel quite linked to that. Like you say this nomadic bit, oh I could take a bit of that and could go there and I could slip into traditions and feel very comfortable and I see women, witchcraft if you like, which seems sensible, the balance of male and female, but linking it into that women's side of it is quite feminist, but there again when I'm thinking about that I don't label it as feminist. It's very unlabeled on the spiritualist side of things. Of course it's informed by where I am as a woman, as a feminist committed to womanism and women at work, but the spiritual side the labels drop as it were and I can't label it as feminism, as a feminist path. It's like the structures

aren't there for me, If I go to a church or a synagogue or what ever and of course I'm looking around it's very patriarchal but I may sit there and get off on something that's way beyond tat. I do understand that Buddhist, Christian whatever teaching is that you transcend it. You don't transcend it when you're looking at the actual structure because it's patriarchal but the actual spiritual journey I don't think of it as a feminist journey, it must be informed by where I am.

R Do you mind talking about your Buddhist tradition, the idea of no self? Because we had a brief conversation on the phone. I found the idea of giving up self quite difficult because as a feminist I felt that I had been taught for centuries that I didn't have a real self, I didn't have a real soul and that part of feminist spirituality was finding your female self and seeing that spiritual experience. And when I started reading, especially Braidotti and I was quite convinced by the argument that this whole idea of a unified self, especially in a Cartesian context was just part of the whole masculinist will to power. I was convinced by that but then it was quite difficult to see quite how I could have an idea of a feminist spirituality that didn't have an authentic self I there and I talked to you about it and that didn't really bother you because have this tradition of a no self anyway. And as it being a process because I am now looking at spirituality as process.

G Well I remember when I first really started practising Buddhism, if you like, and it was very hard. I wouldn't say it's an easy path. And at the beginning I went through all this born again Buddhism and reading everything there was and of course the kind of and I nearly went insane, I mean I seriously thought I was going to go mad because, like

you, I thought, well who's this that's reading then? Eventually I put all the books down, which is of course what they say, you don't need the books, and I thought I'm not going to try and even explore this idea of no self because I can't understand it. The realisation of Anata is enlightenment, when you actually realise no self that is enlightenment, so I recognise I am a long way from realising no self but I understand the concept of no self by looking at it in Buddhist teachings the five aggregate that brings us together and then they just fall apart so at death the material part of us and consciousness etc. etc. they just fall apart. The teachings explain it nicely, how there is no permanent self that goes on but at death there is just this impulse for rebirth. So that was never a problem. I'm quite comfortable with this idea of no constant self at all but I'm not so sure that it's right because I haven't experienced it. I tend to quite like this Hindu concept of the transmigration of the soul but that may be because I want to. It's nice to feel Gina's going to be here next time not all fall apart and there's just this spark that goes on. What I want to believe is that Gina will come back which shows how far I am from enlightenment although I don't really want to do it all again, I can't bear the thought, I see these kids in pushchairs being pushed past the market and I remember thinking, god almighty, don't let me come back in Chichester, it's just a nightmare being born to people. But I am quite comfortable with the idea of no self. I let it go for a long time because it was such an issue and found I was quite comfortable with Gina as self, feminist self, or woman. I discovered me in a new way, which was quite nice. But I can go back to this idea of no real self quite comfortably. The Buddha did not actually say in his teaching that there is no soul, he just said through his experience there was nothing that led him to believe there was a constant soul, so it's very much about experience. But I think he's possibly right. I don't know until I find out which is my spiritual path. I

need to know that. But I don't think you should work too hard at that or you can, and it's a realisation to try to talk about it in some ... language, this world language, you kind of lose it, the realisation of what is me, you have to start reflecting on it and thinking about self.

R But it could change your idea of spirituality couldn't it? Because if you think there is a real soul, an eternal you then part of your spirituality is finding that, releasing it, purifying it, whatever, whereas if you think, if you come to be convinced that you are in process, there is no constant self then that's a very different understanding of spirituality.

G It would make no difference to my path, however I understood it, because I still feel my personal path is discovering whichever it might be. I mean I might get to a sudden realisation where I think I see there is no self or whatever or, ah I've left my body and I think this must be my soul, but until I've experienced that I can't pontificate on that and say, well it is or this is what I really believe. If you like that word process fits in very nicely, it's an ongoing process of discovery. What is, and I would truly love somebody to quite definitely say, it is this.

R Would you?

G Well yes, this is where you're going and that's the path, maybe that's for people who stay within a particular tradition find that. From the Buddhist training if you like, it's very much about experience. It is just experience, so it would make no difference really

whether there's a soul or no soul. My path is still the same to discover whether there is or there isn't.

R So the journeying itself is as much a spirituality as what it's leading to?

G Yes. Oh well it is for me. I can't speak for anyone else, it's very much a journey a journey, it has been a lifetime's journey even from when I was a little girl you see. I don't know where that came from. I was a religious little girl, with my little cross or crucifix, that sort of thing but it was at a time when the Dracula movies were out and my brother was considerably older than me and was very into and old stuff and the occult and so I always had this kind of Christianity tinged with Dracula and the dark side of things and I used to try to come out of my body when I was about 8 or 9.

R Really?

G Oh yes, I used to lay in bed and try to come out of my body because of this story I'd read, this chap came out of his body and went to kill his wife in a boat. He'd come out of his body and travelled round into the different cabins and he gets in and slits her throat and goes back in to his body and finds he's gone into the wrong room and killed himself. But there was an idea of very early on that one could come out so I think that informed my whole life, there's a religious part that's also this occult paranormal stuff.

R Have you ever come out of your body?

G No. I still think you can. I've spoken to lots of people who have and I have felt, you know, distanced. I forgot my body was there but I've never come out of it. I still think you can but that sort of faith, stuff I've read, people I've spoken to.

R Shall we stop and have a cup of tea? Thank you.

HELEN

Interview with Helen 31.7.00

R Helen, thank you very much for inter-viewing with me. You have transcribed some of the tapes and you have been working as a research assistant so you're very familiar with what I'm trying to do, so I'm very grateful to you for conversing with me and journeying with me. So I'd just like to start by asking you please, I know that you use Goddess talk so I'd like to ask you how you got into Goddess spirituality and what Goddess therefore means to you.

H I think the first thing that really leapt at me when you said I use Goddess talk is, I very rarely use Goddess talk because I don't find myself in situations where I can comfortably use it. I use more Goddess thinking and Goddess doing.

R Oh that's nice.

H Because, if I use the term Goddess comfortably in my every day language, which I do in my mind, people around me get uncomfortable. So therefore I find myself trying to work out how to walk down A pathway which for me is about Goddessing which is about being and doing rather than using it in my language. So when I do come up against a situation where I can use it comfortably I leap on that with great joy and I find myself wanting to

lavish myself and really talk with abundance, really use it's like I don't know almost like I have a feast, make a feast out of it, almost like you eat junk food all the time and then you eventually find yourself surrounded by salads and the stuff that you really love, you just want to eat it until you're sick of it. So it's interesting that I find what I would like and what I think I'm aiming for is to put myself into situations where who I am and what I say and what I do is normal – not normal because I'm not sure what that means - where it's common, it's the everyday life.

R Well I find the idea of 'Goddess doing, Goddess being' very interesting, I've heard you use the expression Goddessing, so using Goddess as a verb, a process. May I ask how you came to the whole idea of Goddess spirituality?

H Well mainly through you doing the work you do and talking the way you talk made me question everything I was doing but also what made it go as fast as it went, because it seemed to happen over a very short period of time in my life, because of the uncomfortable feeling I had where I was. I did work in the Church of England for quite a long time. I went into the Church of England as my place of worship because I like the vicar, because he was an intellectual and because I liked the drama and I liked dressing up and I liked the language and I liked the rituals. When I was in my twenties, when I went to college I started off Methodist because my mother took me into a Methodist church. It was nice but that's all – nice, and I wanted something to get my teeth into. Well with the Anglican I could, ... my father was Anglican so ... interesting stuff really, that I went from my mother's into my father's so that would be a normal progression anyway in who we are. So I then found that I kept on finding myself uncomfortable and it

was the language as well as the put downs. There was always the put downs – I was a sinner, I wasn't good enough, the man, the big daddy would be there to keep me straight and the one who forgave me. Well I almost want to say, "who the fuck does he think he is?" but I mean really I want to say it's extremes now because it was that in the end that made it such an easy move to go into a natural, wholesome imagery where I was OK, I wasn't something else, where the Goddess image was the mother the woman, the child bearer, the creatrix, the whole female gamut of emotions, ways of being, but then became not just OK but that which I could achieve. I'm trying to find the right way of putting it. It wasn't just OK it was... that became the extreme things, that became spectacular that became the religious experience, that became ultimate, all that stuff that you had to go through in order to discover who I could be. So from that it was like a birthing, it was wonderful, it was exciting, it was leaping into something that I was surrounded by. What felt ... it was a connection, it was connecting. I'm really into connecting at the moment, things that I connect with make me feel alive. And I connected with the image of Goddess as world as me as, you know, as everything and that was really, really an exciting connection. So then I went down a Pagan route and toyed with the idea of Wicca and discovered it was very patriarchal, there were a load of men in it, not just that there were a load of men there, I've nothing against men, I just found it was male language, it was having to do things in the right order, having hierarchies, having initiations, and thinking, 'no, no, no that doesn't feel right for me at all'. So I then thought, 'well, I quite like labels, because I'm quite a neat thinker, so I called myself a Goddess Feminist. So it's been a pathway, it's been a development, a slow unfolding, and not discovering who I am but recognising that I'm on a journey and that I have different needs at different times in my life, so I'm using different language at different times in my life and that's very exciting.

R That's an interesting distinction.

H Yes, because even before today, if you like, but, you know the books I read, the people I talk to affect me and change me. I'm reading Germaine Greer at the moment and she was making this distinction about women being heterosexual and then suddenly discovering the love of a woman, say in their forties and saying, 'I suddenly realised that was who I really was' and that this woman who was a lesbian was just waiting to come out. And Germaine's suggestion that it's actually just the woman changing and it wasn't until she fell in love with a woman that she had this fulfilment but that actually in her twenties she wouldn't have fallen in love with a woman. Now that felt so right for me, so comfortable for me that I can accept that as a theory. When I have to test my theories out I make sure I feel comfortable with them and if I don't then I think, whoops, interesting theory. If I do I sit right in the middle of it and say, right this will do me. And I'm also learning to say, well somebody has a different theory to me but that's fine. So I think I've said this to you before, I tend to go along with everything that everybody's saying but more these days I'm beginning to say, actually I think what you're talking about is not spirituality, and then I go slap bang into the middle of the patriarchy and the male ... the monotheistic, male dominated, patriarchal religions, and I have to say to myself, yes but I don't think that's to do with spirituality that's to do with power and control and organising hierarchy. So that, to me, doesn't feel like spirituality at all.

R It's all very interesting. Very interesting that you have come to this feeling that the

feminist process is not necessarily about finding the true female self, which I think is very understandable that people ... I speak for myself, I was searching for my female self which I think was denied by patriarchy, but it's interesting that you've come to the conclusion that there doesn't have to be the one eternal female self but as you say it is a process and that's very interesting that you've come to that route through Germaine Greer.

H Well I've come to that route through the healing I've been doing and Germaine Greer was a wonderful bit of entertainment and education for me, but no I've come through it to the fact that I recognise that in the healing journey that I've been on in the last year that I have uncovered layers of myself which has enabled me to take on other layers. So instead of saying, 'I've got to the core of me and healed right through to the core and I'm now well and happy. I am deeply happy at the moment, it's a wonderful feeling and it's enabled me to be much more open to other things, other people and other situations because I don't need to be anything in particular any more and I can say, I am extremely, totally, off the wall, horribly feminist or I can say, well I just like women's way of doing things and both of those fit.

R So your identity is multi-layered?

H Yes. And that is very female.

R Embracing plurality?

H Although I'm sure men are I just don't find it in men. It's very female for me because, within my experience, it's the women I experience that with.

R What do you mean?

H Well, to say that being multi-layered is very female is so right for me because so many of the women I know have so many different aspects to their personality and their needs and their desires and their experiences. Whereas with men I find them very much more linear, much more, well 'that's the way I am, take it or leave it.' And I find that kind of statement so often, especially in my sexual journey, men say, 'this is what I'm like, this is what I like doing, take it or leave it.' Whereas women will say, 'well, let's see if I can adapt to that, oh. I'll try that for size.'

R That male way of looking at it as you call it seems to be working in traditional understandings of the self where there is one true self and that's it and it's sort of denying plurality and denying process.

H I suppose so. I don't really know what men are working on. I find I get bored with them. That embarrasses me, saying things like that. I think, I shouldn't be saying that, because I've been brought up to believe men are heroes and we should admire them, not be bored with them. But I'm bored with them. I like men but I don't respect them.

R You said that, if you were going to use any label you would call yourself a Goddess Feminist?

H Yes, maybe tomorrow it would be different, but today ...

R Given that now you're working with that and other things you've said and what I know about you, I know that feminism is a core part of your life, did the feminism come before the Goddess?

H Yes.

R Is there any relationship between the two do you think?

H Yes. I think the feminism enabled me to go over to the Goddess idea. And the feminism enabled me to pursue it and discuss it and look at it. But the feminism enabled me to start to become, no the feminism, ...see what I was going to say there is the feminism enabled me to become myself, but what I say now is, the feminism enabled me to start on that journey.

R Excellent.

H Now are you saying excellent, because you agree with me here or because that was a good statement?

R I'm saying excellent because, yes I suppose I do, because I find that a very enabling way of describing the process.

H I find it very exciting. The fact that I'm on a journey and not, 'I'm trying to get there, I've

done it', so once I've done this bit of written work or once I've made that dress or once I've found a man I'll have got there, that would be awful, because then what? And as far as I'm concerned, I'm on a journey all the time, I'm not going to get there. So when I die I'm just going to be on that journey still. And so death is just part of the same journey. I have picked up some of the ideas from Wicca. I like some of their language, I like some of their images, I don't like their rituals any more. I used to but my rituals are on the same journey that I'm on because I take them with me, so they change, and they're organic. That's why I think they're good, that's why I like them, I'm not bothered whether they're good or not, I know that they're like me and they are very much growing out of experiences and feeling and need at that time.

R So feminism is very important to you, feminism in some ways enables Goddess Imagery to become important for you?

H Yes

R But when you talk as you are to me about Goddess, Goddessing, can you express what it is precisely you mean by Goddess?

H Tricky one. I might have to have some more humus to help me on my way here. I guess Goddessing for me is a way of being, with an awareness that I'm connecting with something. It hasn't got to be a someone but because I'm a story teller and because I love the images I've been building up of all these different Goddesses I'm very comfortable with this other, this being out there, this fabulous, all embracing, all names, you know, big momma, woman type character. But I know that that's part of my story

telling, education, myths, legends stuff. So I don't say, 'this is how it is and I do as I'm told,' I just say I become her from time to time, and by becoming her I am very empowered, I feel very earth centred, very powerful, very strong, and sometimes I need that almost like I plug myself into the mains. I get that from all sorts of things I do now. I get that from talking, especially to women, the empowering is when I talk with women because of connecting with them and we're talking together, whereas when I talk with men I am talking to men and we are trying to find a point at which we can meet. Whereas, on the whole, the kind of women I talk to, which is a kind of peer group that I have around me, that for me is empowering. I find it with sex, only when that sex is a connection; I find it with writing and with creating things like the images. So all those are part of my Goddessing because it's a connection and because behind all that I have this image of the female women connecting all over the place, and me connecting with this lovely image I've got of these fabulous Goddesses – Pandora, Rhiannon, Demeter, Persephone – all those kind of things, Isis, they all become this big, enormous, mountain size Goddess imagery, females. Like them, I like to fill my world with them. But the reality, I don't know what the reality is. I don't know whether they're there or not. I don't mind, I don't need to answer a question like, 'but does it exist?' I don't care. What for me exists is a feeling, is a direction, is a connection and those things are what's important for me. It just makes me feel so buzzy; so alive.

R So, these things that you name as part of your connection; writing, talking, sex, would you define them within your terms of spirituality?

H Oh yes. My spirituality is about connection.

R Your spirituality is about connection?

H Yes. Plugging in to the National Grid, feeling really full of life and energy. That is a really spiritual experience. Every now and again I like to mark it, I like to capture it, and that would be a ritual. Rituals for me would be the marking of something, a rite of passage or, 'wow! that was amazing, I want to focus on it for a bit or do a ritual. A ritual for me would be something that is going to give me strength when there's something I can't handle. I calm down, meditate, ritual and go into something where I can sort it out. Give me long enough I'll sort thing out. The quickest and most effective way is by talking to some friends, with someone else, but another way I can do it on my own is to take it into a ritual and meditate and the answers will come to me, always.

R But you do see it as you sorting it out, not as some sort of sacred being intervening to sort it out for you?

H Yes and no I suppose. Sometimes I don't think so I just think it is that everything comes together for me and my mind sorts it out and another time, I know you're very uncomfortable with this, but kind of the idea of angels and spirits and Goddess helps me out because they're all part of my understanding of the energies around me. So, yes, sometimes I feel I want to say, 'thanks very much, you sorted that out.' And if I say, 'I want something to happen, if you could do that for me', they sort everything out and, 'I need to do so and so, could you remind me',

R You have the angels reminding you?

H Absolutely. Now whether they're there or not I don't actually mind. I'm not really bothered. I don't want to spend my time answering that question. I'd rather spend my time saying, how can I do more of what I'm doing that I really want to do? How can I effect others around me so they're able to do more of what they want to do? Essentially the pathway I've chosen to go down professionally as a person is the healing pathway so I want to say to people, 'you can feel better, you can do more, you can be happier, let's go down that pathway together'. If spirit is doing this through me or if angels are helping me to do it, I don't care as long as I'm getting the effect I want to get which is people saying, 'oh yes, great, I feel better, I can do more.' So I can't answer your question, sorry.

R No, well. it's as you say, most of the important questions you can't answer. It's a process of working it through that's important. I got the impression that this moving away from there being the real you at the centre, moving away from that idea to you are a process, you are multi-layered, you are in process, you are journeying, that that is a very recent, but important shift for you which I completely and wholeheartedly empathise with and I've come to from a different direction. I would still want to ask, and you can tell me to mind my own business, that if you've come to question the idea of there being a real you how that is reconciled to a world where there are spirits and angels, because that seems to fit in a world where there is the eternal soul that goes on afterwards and doesn't seem to fit in with the pluralistic, fragmentary process understanding of identity that you were talking about before.

H I don't know. I think the trouble is I'm not really bothered so I don't put a lot of time into it

so I don't come up with the answers. I like the idea of angels, I like the idea of things floating about with wings and long dresses on so I don't take it that seriously, I just like it and I think I do probably work with that kind of energy. Whether it's me or whether there's angels or not, I don't mind. I know it works, it works for me. I like the idea of filling my world with angels all around me, I think it's lovely. It's not going to suit everybody but I don't mind, it's not my problem. The idea of this wonderful Goddess, Big Momma, I love it and I'm not bothered whether it's there or not I just think it's a beautiful image, and empowering and I feel part of it.

R So you would make a distinction between the enabling, the empowering energy of the Goddess and the disempowering energies of the Christian church?

H Yes.

R I got the impression that what you felt was that you and your femaleness were not affirmed, you were denigrated?

H But there's more than that, because that would be just replacing God with Goddess so that would be the putting God in a skirt bit so that we can identify, therefore men would be disempowered by the image of Goddess. I don't want to go along that line.

R You think men can be empowered by the image of the Goddess as well?

H Um I think in a way men have got to find their own way and I think in a way .. they've

completely lost the plot and think that other women have as well because the way our society has gone the stories we're telling are very disempowering, so therefore I want to change the stories to Goddess stories because they are more empowering, which is this incredible Earth Mother feeding, nurturing, creating. It's a lovely image and for as long as we blame the mothers for problems then men are going to be disempowered and so are women. So if we just could be on a journey and if Goddessing is a way of living that is about nurturing, caring and exploring instead of creating, controlling tidying up and having power over then lets use the Goddess image if it's going to support ... if I see the Goddess as a woman and therefore I'm empowered then men are going to look t the Goddess and be disempowered so it's more than that. I just use that image as a beautiful story telling image but it's the essence of Goddessing which is a way of being which is a way of saying to myself and another human being that I may be with what is the best that we can get out of this situation we're in now, what is the most life enhancing? That's it! 'What is the most life enhancing thing that the two of us can do together now?' Then we would have a very different society, because there would be no rape, there would be no pornography, there would probably be no television, there would be no newspapers etc. etc. because those things are not life enhancing, they are controlling, they are entertaining, they are making money, they are killing. So, yes, so for me Goddessing is that, going along a pathway that works out the most life enhancing thing that you can do in that situation. Now I'm not perfect and I don't do it all the time but I try, damn it!

R So, what I hear you saying is the stories and the images are important, powerful of themselves regardless of any being beyond them, because it's the stories, the narrative,

the images which is determining how we see the world, how we treat one another. So would you say these religious images and stories have political significance?

H Yes. I mean you've got to define what you mean by politics really. If politics is how people behave in community then absolutely, Christ! (or whoever, Pandora!... Isis would be a good one to put there!) But there are all sorts of stories that are life enhancing and have been taken out of context and have become something else.

R Such as?

H Well, stories of Christ. I don't actually believe in Christ but I do believe that there were stories at the time of people behaving in a particular way and that certain ones were chosen, taken completely out of context in order to control the people and have remained for two thousand years as the main controlling factor within that community. Look around you, it doesn't work.

R So narratives are very powerful.

H Very. Yes, hugely. And the language that has been used has gradually, gradually, slowly, over thousands of years made the society what it is now. And we either go on *with that or we change it. If we don't change our stories and our narratives and our myths and our teaching systems then we will continue to go down this road until we are ... until we become like dust, like something crusty, with no life in it and that's what's happening* – it is not life enhancing, the system we're not using now, the nuclear

families, the political with a capital 'C', the education, the housing, the benefits, the inter continental connections, communications, industry, the trade, none of them, as far as I can see, are life enhancing.

R That sounds very depressing.

H Mmmm, let's try and cheer ourselves up a bit here.

R Well lets try and what you are suggesting is that Goddess narratives ...

H Are the opposite.

R They have the chance to enable life enhancing systems?

H Yes. And Goddessing is just that. Is doing what those narratives suggest.

R So although you say it doesn't really bother you whether there are angels or what ever, the images and the narratives are very, very important aren't they?

H Yes, the actions are, what we do as a result of what we believe.

R That the images themselves are powerful because they determine, to a certain extent, how people do behave.

H Yes. And if people are going to go along giving their power away to the idea of angels so they never make a decision then stop doing it.

R Well that's the sort of thing that would concern me.

H Oh yes, but we are ... I don't want to say wounded because that's jargon, we have so much luggage that we give our power away very, very easily because that's what we're used to and that's what we do .. um ... I can't liken it to anything, ...

I just want people around me and I want myself to be vibrant, to be really alive, to really get the juice out of a situation, because I'm passionate, that's who I am. There are those who go around who would like to be much quieter than that, not have to think for themselves and just you know ... But I think we've created a society where the majority of people are like that. We don't need to be like that. And I don't think this is just an intellectual exercise, I don't think |I'm saying, 'well, I am a middle class, intellectual and this is how we talk, this is what turns us on.' I think it's more than that because I'm now doing it all the time.

R Well isn't there a tendency, again in the overriding narrative, to separate the intellect from the doing for precisely that reason and that the way that you are talking, you talk as if you don't recognise a split between the thinking and the doing?

H well I don't, but you'll notice I have to justify that, to qualify it. I have to say that I don't

because it's unusual and because I'm surrounded by people who might sit down and talk a lot. I'm surrounded by men who might sit down and talk a lot and they do. I'm finding myself surrounded by men who say great things, talk a lot, great feminists some of them and then they start getting up and doing and it's nothing like they've been talking about. And they wouldn't understand if you said, 'hang on a minute, what you're saying and what you're doing are two different things.' Because then they stop doing and they start talking again. Almost like they have two separate compartments whereas with women they talk all the time, all the words they use and the body language, the way they're talking, it's so all this 'I feel about it' all the time, it's so real in my experience, you know? They don't theorise and when they're talking, a lot of the time – I have in mind one woman who I spent a lot of yesterday with – and everything she said she apologised for and said, 'well I'm doing pottery, well I'm good at pottery, well it's not that good.' And everything she did. And she said, 'my husband went away for a week, it was so lovely, I shouldn't say that really!' And I was thinking, 'well, it's obvious, it's obvious.' And I recognise that I'm very lucky. It's taken me 46 years to recognise that I'm very lucky with the situation that I have, because in terms of our society as it stands, I am very unsuccessful, I haven't made the grade. I have no partner. I consider that rather nice at the moment. I haven't got an enormous income, well actually that gives me a tremendous amount of freedom, although there are times when I can't pay the bills, when I look back I've never not been able to pay the bills, I've always managed. I haven't got a garden, well no, but we've got huge fields and a park opposite. You have to stop and say, 'well hang on a minute, whose standards am I going by?' So, whereas I used to say 'I'm a feminist, I'm sorry about that' now I say 'I am a feminist and it's great.' And so the thinking and the doing is one action.

R So I would imagine it goes as read that feminist spirituality means something to you?
Would you say that that is what you are doing? And spirituality is something you do?

H Yes. And I love talking about it. Doing it is what I do and for me, talking is part of my
talking is part of my sexuality, talking is part of my physicality, talking is part of my
spirituality, talking is really, really important to me.

R You touched on Paganism, you are influenced by Paganism and you've moved away,
but are there any other aspects of Paganism that you still find you incorporate into your
own spirituality?

H Yes I think so. Some of the language I incorporate. Yes some of the Goddess imagery, I
like wearing long black dresses! I like some of the systems they have like they say you
wear long black things, that's normal and you wear white things for rituals because it has
a bigger significance and then you look at Christianity and you find it's quite amusing
really. The male priests wear long black dresses as their normal garb and I find it all very
amusing. But Paganism, I like the term Paganism as people of the land so, yes I like to
call myself Pagan because I feel like I'm just a person who's here rather than a Christian
which means a kind of spirituality. Paganism doesn't mean so much a spirituality it
means a way of life.

R That's interesting. So you wouldn't say Paganism feeds into your spirituality in the way
that feminism does?

H Oh no, feminism sparks it off, feminism plugs it in, Paganism is just nice, it's just around, I like that bit. I would write my books from a Pagan ... under a Pagan title, I like the term. I would like to think we were all Pagans and that some of us got sparked off by the feminist debate and way of life, and those that didn't, well that's OK. So although it would be nice to think that I incorporated and supported and ... what's the word when you incorporate? ... I'd like to think that I'm tolerant of all the religions, I'm not, I'm the only one that's right (laugh), no, we choose to go down the path we go down.

R The way you have been talking about spirituality again is very much about the here and now, living this life, and yet in that narrative somewhere are the idea of angels and spirits, so....

H I know you don't like them ... I'll have a word with them when we've finished

R I find them perplexing. So if angels and spirits are there then presumably the concept of life after death is also a fairly important aspect of your spirituality?

H Well, life after life really, it just keeps going. I'm quite happy with the idea that we come round again.

R Reincarnation?

H Yes, and we choose to learn what we want to learn in each life time. I like that idea.

R But if 'the self' is in process, what is it that comes back?

H I don't know. I'm quite happy with the idea that I'm somebody who just keeps going in different forms but I'm not bothered if I'm not, I'm not bothered if I don't.

R No, well the only reason that I would suggest that it mattered is in the same way that the narratives and the imagery matter, that they effect the way that we live and whether our processes are life enhancing or necrophiliac.

H Ooh I say! I like the biophilic stuff you came up with; I think that's very exciting, I think I'd like to live my life like that. I think I'm more interested in what I want that what's right and what's wrong, what is and what isn't.

R Yes, but aren't the two interconnected?

H No. What I want could be terribly basic. It could be I want to always drink really good drinks, I want to eat organically, so if I know that's what I want then that's what I'll move towards, but whether I know whether angels exist or not doesn't really affect that as much. I'd rather keep my feet on the ground with my wants and desires. I want to live fully, I want to live in such a way that I don't destroy things around me. That I don't support dreadful farming. so that's what I'm about in this life at the moment. Next week I might be into something else but at the moment. That's what I'm about.

R But you've been about that for some time, it's not likely to change?

H No it isn't but I'm just allowing the fact that I'm not static, that I may... I'm not going to shoot off into some strange cult but I ... it doesn't take up as much energy trying to work out whether there are angels or not. For me there are angels and I'm comfortable with that, I like it. Now if I'm with somebody else who says, 'but there aren't.' I say, 'well that's fine, OK' But if I was with somebody who said you should always get your clothes really clean and you should always use Ariel, then I would get upset, then I would start to argue. But if I was with somebody who said there's no such thing as angels, then I say, 'oh well, that's your...'. I'm happy, I think there are, I work with them, that's great. And if I'm with somebody who doesn't that's fine. But if I'm with somebody who says, 'there's no such thing as rape' then I get into more head on – we need to talk! And the way I would deal with that is, my Goddessing would say to me, 'get yourself into a situation which is life enhancing where you can discuss it, get your head round it and sort it out, then go back to that situation and say, can we talk about this?' Because if I went straight into that discussion, there's no such thing as rape – oh. how do I deal with this? What do you say to a situation like that? I need to go away, fill up with energy, plug myself in, then come back and respond. Say I come up against the situation with pornography, with violence, with abuse to children in the home. It's very hard to deal with those people, because those situations are normal, every day situations. It's hard until you withdraw yourself from the situation and go into a situation where you can talk it through. For me that means with other women, and get it sorted, or read up on it and get the facts, then go back in and, if you chose to, go back into a situation and try to do

something about it. Now I don't choose to go into situations and work with rape and violence and child abuse but there are those who do and I would do anything I could to support them. But what I'm doing is choosing to go into situations where people are ill and say, there's another way of looking at this. I'm doing my bit in that field, and I don't intend to do everything; I don't intend to save the world. I used to but I don't any more, but that's part of growing up, but it's also part of my Goddessing, which is life enhancing. I can't say enough about it, it's so exciting, and I rarely get the chance to talk about it. It's so good to talk about it and to clarify. I've never been this clear on it before, it's wonderful.

R So the process of talking, the narratives, they are important, they are powerful, because unless we address the narratives we're not going to change the structure?

H For me talking is like having the most wonderful firework, which never gets lit. You talk and somebody lights the blue touch paper. That's the difference. It's just wonderful. Just wonderful display of colour and excitement, it's just wonderful, you talk with other women, and I just get filled with energy, filled with life.

R With life. But presumably when you were in church, the Anglican Church, the images there weren't life affirming?

H No, they were controlling. Put downs, constant put downs. They were about men doing disgusting things being recorded in history as brilliant. Disgusting things, some of the

things that they did. You know, chopping the head off their own son. 'Well done, you'll be rewarded for this. Here's a goat, chop that off instead.' Madness.

R But also the images of the life beyond. They're a way of saying, this life, the way you treat people in this life doesn't matter.

H Well no, they said if you were good in this life then you get a good life next time. And by good it meant good behaving, not questioning, saying what I put in front of you, repeat after me. I went along with that for years because that's normal, that's around me, that's what everybody's saying so therefore I went along with it. I didn't know how to question it, I didn't have the vocabulary.

R So what was it that gave you that vocabulary?

H It was a gradual sense of discovery with other people who were going along the same pathway and I was beginning to read books.

R Which books?

H 'Fat is a Feminist Issue' was the first book that suddenly woke me up to a different way of thinking and once I'd done that there was no stopping me. I went on courses. I went on an assertiveness course. I met a woman who was calm and interesting and I thought, I want to be like that. I talked to you all the time about this process and we gradually, together went through a process, you pushing me a lot faster than I would have gone

because you questioned everything I was coming up with. It's great when you question everything, because if I can sit firmly and say I'm comfortable with it, however you might try and take it apart, then I know that's alright for me. If I can't then I think, do I really need this? And then gradually meeting other women who were like that, just questioning everything around me. If it didn't feel right, eventually I'd drop it. It took me a long time to drop it. In fact it took a real kick up the backside, being dismissed from my job because I was pregnant and not married.

R You were made to leave the church?

H I was made to leave the church and what that said to me was, here was a group of people and the people, especially in authority, who were not doing what they were saying and I could not be part of an organisation that said one thing and did another and that's when I knew I had to leave. And I left everything, I left the whole spiritual caboodle. I left the church, I left organisation, I left thinking, I left prayer, everything.

R Did you leave God?

H Absolutely, totally, completely and utterly. This God went in with this church for me. This God went in with these people who said to me, 'we are loving, Christian caring people, now piss off please because you don't come up to standard', and that for me was like, 'ah! I don't want to be part of that any more'. And for two years I kind of wallowed around in nothing and I felt empty, I knew that I was spiritual, deeply spiritual and there was

nothing there and I couldn't do it any longer. And I was living with somebody who didn't talk about these kind of things, who talked about political things, not spiritual things and who probably could have talked about spiritual things but who was in a family who didn't do that sort of thing so she went off and started studying homeopathy which got me really excited and I went off and studied massage and then healing, reflexology and all that stuff and then you told me about the Unitarians and I was thinking about Paganism, I was thinking, I've got to go somewhere. And then when I got in touch with Unitarians and found out it was fine to be Pagan and Unitarian, in fact the particular people I got in touch with thought it was great, I landed, I thought, 'ah, this is fine, I now have a community that I can belong to and my spirituality can develop within the context of a community'. So I do need a church, I do need a ... not place of worship because that isn't my place of worship that's my community...

R So there's a distinction between that sense of community and your worship?

H Oh yes, my place of worship is personal, the rituals are my quiet, my space, to give me the energy to go on but my place of worship is the steps I take, is my pathway. Does that make sense?

R It makes sense to me. Thank you very, very much. It's been a fascinating journey. Long may it continue!

JAKI

Interview with Jaki 29.9.99

R Thank you very much for agreeing.....

You've read my research proposal and you said you had some idea of what I am interested in and what I'm looking at, so I wondered if I could just start by asking you....I know that you identify yourself as a witch and I know that you take part in some sort of Goddess spirituality. I wonder if you could just tell me how that came about and what you understand it to be.

J Right. I think, if I look at the poetry I wrote as a child and young person there was always talk about God in there, sort of painful, you know, how can there be a God when I feel this bad? The first thing that opened me up to Goddess spirituality was, somebody gave me, in fact an American feminist, gave me a copy of 'The Paradise Papers' by Merlin Stone, which made sense to me. I felt I'd been lied to, I had been cheated in a way, I'd not been given the full story. And witches seemed to me to be part of that, These were women who were persecuted for being women. So I went to a lecture by Michael Ralph Harvey, who's quite a well-known witch, he's a lovely fumbling old dodderer, bless him, and I joined their coven. I then , so that came after, so just like the thought process was going after the meeting and the Merlin Stone. Then somebody gave me Mary Daly, first of all 'Gyn/ecology' which again was 'how dare these people have lied to me all these

years?'.....and I started going to coven meetings. I have to say I'm really coming to the end of that period of being an active witch because I feel that for me Goddess spirituality is about empowering women. And Goddess gives me a role model, a spiritual role model that I can identify with, in the same way men have got their God that they can identify with, and that makes me feel bigger, if you like. Witchcraft as it is practised, I have a problem with this business of trying to affect reality by spells. I think it's meddling in areas that I don't think we should meddle with. It's so easily used for your own desires, your own wants, your own betterment. To be honest I've never seen a witch who does all that, whose life seems to be working better than anybody else's. As an ex-actress I'm not particularly interested in the theatrical side of it because it embarrasses me. I do, what I do is a mixture of prayer, I use my Wiccan symbols, you know like candles and things that I associate with Wicca now, I use as much and a mixture of prayer, but my prayer is to the Goddess who sometimes I see as external and sometimes I see as internal. Sometimes She is the planet I'm standing on and sometimes She's a well, a what ever, alien thing in the sky, my great mother that bore us all, and it changes. Now after I had an experience at Glastonbury conference this year, which I felt was quite a magical experience, a religious experience, and I had a very strong feeling of Goddess within me, which immediately, it's like that was something else that I felt was in me, that was another. That was a very clear feeling of an other presence. I had this once before when I was part of an amazing workshop about storytelling and when we closed our eyes we prepared ourselves and she did this ritual and sort of took back the communion ritual and all that and

said, this was Goddess stuff years ago, and I had this very clear image of big, beautiful eyes of the Goddess looking down on us. So I have occasionally experienced this as 'other' but most of the time to me it is the planet, it is nature, it is beauty, it is conduct of human relations, it's that relationship with other creatures which are all part of Goddess to me. I suppose the more I study or the more I learn it tends to change.

R Right. That is interesting. So it's a process.

J It's a process, a changing process which has got me to the point now that I do see it as a separatist thing. That I do not really see how Goddess and monotheism can come together because they're the second sex. I hate to say that and I wouldn't say that anywhere near my son of course but in terms of what I see as important, what makes the world go round in a better way, men's contribution is far less valid than women's contribution. As far as I can see, what ever they contribute is violence, destruction, technological....OK it's great, I love being able to switch the light on and off, but if it didn't exist, well OK use something else. It doesn't seem to be vital in terms of our relationship with the whole, which does seem to be important. I know it's probably got nothing to do with it, I think we are such an unbelievably narcissistic species that it makes me shudder to think of it. It makes me shudder even more to think that we plan to take our filth and destruction off to another planet and try and do the same up there. I find all that just doesn't make sense to me. But what Goddess does for me more than anything, it makes me feel

confident. That I have an absolute right to be on this planet, to feel as I feel, to act as I act that what I feel is important is important and that there's nothing that these men (quote, unquote) who ever these men are, can say is not remotely interesting to me because they've got it wrong. And they try to abstract from Goddess or from Wisdom or from Sophia, whatever it is that makes it magical, and they try to disembody it, which doesn't work. And the very nature of Goddess, it has to be embodied. It can be embodied you know, through touch, through political, I mean like Starhawk's 'Dreaming The Dark' of using magic to try and effect some sort of political change I think is a very proper use of it. So I see myself as a feminist in the sense that I'm very proud....I'm not sure what a definition of feminism is. I mean to me it's like woman is important in her own right and Goddess makes me realise that, feel very, very deep down that that's right.

R So your feminism, your Goddess talk and your spirituality are very much part of an interrelated process for you?

J Yes. Because spirituality is another word for.....

(R That's just what I was going to ask you..)

J What is spirituality, you know? I don't like the idea of spirituality as this detached something pie in the sky thing, I mean spirit is spirited, it's got to be a way of living and a way of expressing and a way of treating that which is around you and that

which comes into contact with you in a particular way, with a respect, with a concern for the other. But in a crisis I'm the first to go, 'please Goddess, please' or if it's some other 'please God, please' I mean it depends on what.....sometimes I do feel, oh God I'm a naughty girl and Daddy's going to hate me, sometimes it's like, 'oh Mummy, please help'. That's how I see when I externalise it. But when it really..... I just feel, pow! And I want to throw my head back and just sort ofdon't give me any trouble because I'm a Goddess in training. And it's that sort of confidence of spirit that I think Goddess is to me.

R Is that at the same time, as you said, Goddess is in you but sometimes you also think of her out there?

J Yes, yes because I do believe that Goddess, the body of the planet, what we've got left of it, is the body of the Goddess. But we are also a planet within a greater scheme of planets and stars so there also, to keep the whole thing in balance there has to be something to keep it all together. I basically think it's all chance and fluke that it all hangs together but at other times who am I to say it's that? If there is something else, if this experience is of an alien and other then there is an alien and other out there. I still see that as above so below, as below so above, the two do not conflict. But I don't spend all my time wondering what's going on out there like most women, I'm more concerned with the day to day running of what's going on down here. In which case I try to act as if Goddess works through me whereas I suppose if I want to then honour Goddess and I think of Her as

other to renew that connection that then I...you know, it hopefully comes through me.

R And you said that whatever spirituality is it's embodied. And that's quite a difficult concept in a way because the whole term 'spirit' suggests something other than body.

J I know, but I believe it's all body. Soul, spirit, mind, body, it's all embodied, I really have difficulty with any idea of that idea that the body is this corrupt thing that carries within it this eternaland this escape. I mean to me it's all psychology, it's all escape from the mother, it's men's escape from....you know that's what it is, whereas if we can bring, I don't know how men would deal with this having had this 5,000, 2,000 year ego tripping, you know deification of the male ego. I don't know how you would bring it back to that but unless we see it as embodied, acting through everything, we are going to continue with this sort of genocidal behaviour, the love of war toys, wastage of all our resources in war games, I mean a wrong set of values. How our tribe or society, whatever you want to call it should better function. I don't think we function very well at the moment.

R So you link this critique of a transcendent spiritual otherness to a set of social and political concerns. You think they are connected?

J Yes, it's all pie in the sky, it's all escape from the mother. You know, little boys want to break away from their mother in a way little girls don't necessarily, because girls and mothers are the same. They look the same, they have the same similar bodies whereas boys are different from their mothers so they may, you know. What caused them to be so antagonistic and hostile, that I really don't know and I don't know if we can ever find the historical facts or what happened to cause that seems to me utter misogyny that invests monotheism. That they must have been nasty little men who had a really bad time and then chuck it up. It's got to be somewhere in the psychology of these prophets, it's got to be. I honestly don't believe it is God given. No god has got to be that hateful towards his creation. It's madness, insane. You've turned yourself inside out to make sense of it and cannot reconcile a loving god with the way that his religion is being practised or manifest. It just doesn't make sense.

R And so this escape from the body and hatred of women you see these two things connected?

J Yes. Also because of course, Goddess religion, what you have to take on board is death.

R That was going to be the next question! For many people spirituality is linked with some idea of existence after death.

J Which is a way of trying to escape from the reality of death. That's it! We die. Now when we die, in an ideal world we're laid in to the planet our minerals will go back so it recreates, I don't know maybe from whenever we look, somebody stood on the planet chewed a magic mushroom, look at the sky and went, "Wow! There's up here, we're down here," there's been this desire to escape this inevitable, the shortness of the span of life. It does no good, we still die and all your attention's up there and life just degenerates. I think civilisation is the degenerate form of life really, social interaction. I think you need to embrace death because that's what gives quality to life. So I think the entire idea of transcendental gods and transmigration and all that is an attempt to escape death.

R Right. I agree with you and I think a lot of feminist thinkers have argued that very powerfully. I am interested then that you still want or feel this idea of a Goddess out there, because you just seem to have given a very good critique of any sort of transcendent religion at all.

J It's the Mother that birthed the universe. A mother doesn't desert her children, a mother may die, who knows? Her children may die. That's a very interesting.....mention because usually a mother will die before the children will die, that's a more natural thing, but then perhaps it's my need. This is my psychological need to have a good mother image and because that doesn't exist for me on the human, the real plain then maybe I create this for myself. So this is

purely, you know, I'm not going to try to prove Her existence or anything but I think it's very much something that I need and it's very subjective and very personal.

R Right, so it serves a purpose which relates to social, political as well as spiritual concerns.

J Well, I can't talk for anybody else. For me Goddess within me is how I look at the political...it's when the child within who needs to hold hands with mummy that it becomes the great Goddess who gave birth to the universe, that is, everything's all right really, She's up there, so that'sI mean I like very much, I mean Jung talks about the god wishing to manifest through everyone. I mean in very simplistic terms. Have you read 'Answer To Job'?

R No

J OK his argument is that in the story of Job ..., by the end of the story, Job is so much more the greater moral figure than god that even god has to see it, so he sends his son to manifest, but of course, Jesus is supposed to... is good. Well people are not 'good' so it doesn't work in long term Christianity because people aren't good. So the next stage is for God to manifest through everybody and I love the idea. If people, and I love it that if we take on responsibility, if we say to ourself 'we are god or Goddess manifest', therefore we have the responsibilities of God, which should make us humble rather than acting as if we were God. Which is what a lot of men and patriarchs do, but then my religion is mixed up with psychology.

R Yes, you've mentioned psychology a lot.

J I think religion is the product of psychological development or change. I don't see how you can divorce the two. That's why it need to be embedded in a person's total story because how else do you track where it comes from?

R That's very interesting. The whole idea is sort of narrative spirituality. It must make sense within a narrative.

J Yes, yes, yes. Prophets, when they have these ideas or revelations, I honestly believe it is not something up there, it's something in here. And something in their life or in what they're doing or what's happened or puts in a position or maybe they fast, and something happens in here. They choose, they claim it's something out there but it's not it's in here.

R Right. Well this is very interesting that you do see it as psychological, in here, within narrative and yet within your narrative you need a mother out there. That's interesting the relationship between the two. But also interesting is your idea that this whole concept of spirituality is changing, is in process. If you abandon the idea of an eternal soul then that opens up the possibility of flux and change.

J Obviously as you get older your thought changes but as you learn, I mean who knows, this is where I am at the moment. Certainly I felt stronger and more confident and more in touch with Goddess than I did five years ago, ten years ago. It works for me but I absolutely see why I believe that any feminist theology has to relate to personal experiences because your story only makes sense in terms of...it's your story. Now whether, because most of our stories resonate with other people's here, there and everywhere, then your observations or perceptions on one bit can actually help illuminate somebody else's but it's not to say that theirs isn't going to go on to a slightly different thing because their need may be different. They may have...you know I think we all, our inner children all need a good mother. If you don't have one in life then maybe you have to create one for yourself. It might be your mother's dead or it didn't work, whatever reason. And we are a civilisation of damaged children, so that may have a lot to do with where spirituality is going is the fact that we try to heal ourselves then the idea of the mother, the good mother, Goddess, this may be part of a healing process.

R Again you touch on the problem of talking about women's experience, and every woman has her own story. Feminist theology has tended to lump women's experience together in a very globalised and undifferentiated way. But in your emphasis on motherhood ... some feminists, spiritual feminists are concerned about that, that it might be essentialism, that it might be again colluding with the idea that women are mothers and that's only how they are to be understood, is there a problem there?



J Right, well, no not for me, because I think when I need the mother figure then Goddess is the mother, when the Goddess comes to me she could be the Amazon, the Lover, the Crone. I mean whatever, it's all change. I think the very nature of Goddess is that at different stages in your life it changes, or She changes. And it's not just one mother, it's also daughter, warrior, whatever, it's a vitality.

R And I think it's perhaps the emphasis on this one image mother that has developed very much in the popular Goddess movement, That some, including myself, find alarming. It's this sort of almost idolatry of one image in the same way you have the idolatry of the father.

J God the father. It's a sort of pendulum. If you had all this talk about God the father then the first thing is God the mother. When people say to me, 'why should women want to do things separately from men?' Well simply because for 5,000 years you had the choice. You had it separate from us, why shouldn't we have a few years when we can actually just explore ourselves? Why do you have to come in and join us? It's that same thing. It's process, it's process, it's changing that I find the Amazon, I love the idea of Goddess as the Amazon. I think it's great. I think women have to be more assertive, not aggressive, assertive about what they want, and I think they have a right, it's perfectly reasonable. This assertion of the

female ego, that it has an equal right. How you then work it out between the sexes, I've no idea.

R This is remarkable -that's the next question I was going to ask you. You say it's process and at this stage women need space, they need to be able to identify with one another away from all the male imagery. Do you envisage a time when men and women can have an understanding of one another? Is it necessary or does that not come into your considerations?

J No, no, you often think about it because we live in a society that's based on partnerships so I think about it. How can you generalise? I can only speak for myself and I'm over 50 anyway. I tend to have occasional things with young men. I very much like the Goddess young, I think that's great, you know, one night of magic and off you go. Or I have ongoing relationships but they're not sexual because I'm terrified of falling in love, because that absolutely, just think, because my vulnerability, bringing back all my old needs and just open a whole can of worms I don't need opened at this time. Who knows what will happen? If, if, well I wrote it in a poem once. A kind of Goddess poem, that said 'believe me my sisters, they're delightful companions once you've taught them their place!' That I think is possible but women have to have more sense of their power in that, you know, it's a blessing to be a woman not a curse. I think that's such a deep, deep wound in female psyche in the West at least. Certainly this neck of the woods. Until that's healed, and there may be some outrageous things go on while that's

happening but then maybe, yes, you make peace treaties, you have to make peace treaties. Now I'm not sure I would be bothered to put up with anybody else's needs as well but I amwith my son. I am responsible for his being here, I am responsible for the part I played in what's gone wrong or what's gone right. I absolutely see that you have to respect the other. I don't think I'd want it though, a close relationship, it would just take up so much time. But that's personal.

R Do you think your son has an understanding of self and his relationship with the other and with the female which has been effected by your spirituality, by Goddess talk?

J It's more in our case, it's more affected by the Grandmother. There's a whole story there, it's not quite a ...I mean he respects what I do and he's very supportive but I cannot utter anything remotely about other men in his presence. It enrages him and it's not fair, he doesn't...he's actually going through stuff at the moment, he's not well, so part of what's going on now is part of his healing, his illness is about that so, again it's a specific situation.

R A particular narrative.

J Yes a particular narrative so for him we are still healing the whole mother/son which is the basic mother/son mutual respect.. you know, I was an abandoned

child, he was an abandoned child and we just spent twenty years trying to heal this so that's a particular....

R I'm sorry, I didn't mean to touch that..

J No it's all right, it's impossible to extrapolate that sort of anything general out of where we are at the moment. It's good, it's great, certainly my Goddess stuff empowers me to deal, to actually step back and let him take centre stage so I'm certainly not prepared to do it for any other man.

R There are so many things that you've been saying. I happen to know that you've come from a Jewish background and maybe I'm just reading this in but some of the things you talk about again seem to be within a narrative that is very Jewish. Would you think that's true or not?

J I think it must be. It must be. Just the very atmosphere of a post war Jewish child brought up in a non-Jewish environment. My parents were Jewish but they were so isolationist, they were ghettoed, the people who adopted them were ghetto Jews out of their ghetto, so we have this very isolated existence. And I never felt happy with monotheism from the day I walked into the synagogue and I was supposed to sit up there and all the men were down there. I just knew something was wrong, just didn't, just couldn't express it. What is Judaism? I don't believe it's from something in the blood. In it's most positive I see it as a humour and an

intelligence and a way of looking at the world out of adversity and a very pragmatic approach to things but yes, I really feel it's part of me. Put it like this, if Hitler came back, whatever I believe I'm in the oven and that you cannot get away from, because anti-Semitism, like racism, it's there and my adoptive mother was panic stricken. Her uncle was one of the last people to be brought out of a concentration camp, it's very real. And my son says, you know, 'Mum, it's never all right. It could happen tomorrow.' So in that sense, what delighted me was discovering about the Hebrew Goddesses, because then I suddenly related to a whole Jewish heritage that I'd never really felt related to, I always related to American Indian spirituality. My natural father was a Jewish man but I don't know enough about him. I always like to think that maybe there's a little drop of something, because I always related to that, was like something really almost Goddess like, poetic, you know. Never related to Judaism as a religion, but once I found out that my fore-sisters were out there making cakes for Asherah- yeah! Go girls go! Yes so Judaism is a ... get three Jews together, and it doesn't happen often unfortunately because I live in a non-Jewish environment really, -. the three of us together, one is a performing artist the other one's a singer and I was doing performance poetry at that time - what are we talking about? We're talking about God and it's just that level of intensity and depth of soul if you like manifest in the body that is just so.. I love it, it is rich. When I go to Israel with my friend we'll sit there with all the language problems and we're going into these, this is what you're going into. Yes I love it and I think it's Goddess talk. Whatever you call it, we're just discussing essence of life.

R I've heard some Jewish theologians describe Jewish theology as 'God wrestling'- which is, of course, where the word Israel comes from. I just thought Goddess wrestling would be rather nice...

J 'Goddess wrestling' I just feel that Goddess is....I mean God wrestling to me suggests that you set yourself against him. 'Goddess stroking' or 'Goddess tickling' or something. She's there to support, you're Her children, we have this right to explore or to find, you know that's what we're born with, that's our freedom, you know it's our minds if you like, in our bodies and it's not challenging, it's supportive and nourishing. Maybe 'Goddess waltzing'.

R Yes, Goddess tickling, Goddess waltzing, those are nice images. I agree now you talk about it, it is an image of God which is very 'other'.

J But Goddess stuff, it is how it manifests for each of us. It's different from how God effects, God is so definitely the other that you'll spend your whole time working out your relationship with God, whereas Goddess is just there, through us, enabling us to explore on Her behalf.

R If that is the case, and I won't keep you much longer because we've talked for a long time, but it's wonderful, when I was taking part in a ritual at one of the women's house, we called on the Spirits of the Directions and at certain points in

the ritual for healing and justice, particular Goddesses were named. Now if Goddess is manifest in us, what do you understand is meant by this calling on spirits from outside?

J Well that's why I don't really want to do it any more because I find it's empty for me. My lodgers always on about spirits and ancestors and I can only know what I experience and I don't experience that and so I feel, I don't feel it.

R Well that is very interesting because it did seem that so much of what you were saying didn't fit in with the assumptions that seem to be underlying that ritual.

J But after, I did actually talk toand said, I really actually am not that comfortable doing rituals any more. I don't mind if things happen spontaneously but I really don't like the idea that 'we're going to do a ritual now' because it doesn't work for me. Only that which is spontaneous. At the moment if something spontaneously, I feel like any time of the day or night I might want to go and kiss a tree or touch the planet or whatever, that's what I feel, but it's a feeling that goes all the way through and not, you know... And I've always had that problem with Wicca, with practising it. I've never felt it in that way that I do when I'm on my own, so I don't use names for Goddess.

R And do you use the expression 'Goddess' rather than 'the Goddess'? You seem to use both.

J Yes, well I think it's 'Goddess', it's not 'the Goddess' it is 'Goddess'.

R Well thank you very much.

MICHELLE

Interview with Michelle 17.3.99

R ...You were telling me about how you got into Goddess spirituality and how you understand its relationship with feminism.

M How I *didn't* get into it in the first place! In the first place I was a feminist when I was 19 and within a couple of years I got involved with feminism in this country by also becoming friends with Asphodel Long who has since become known as the Grandmother of the Goddess movement. But I was not interested in spirituality when that word was first uttered. I was not interested in the Goddess, I was not interested in the luxury of a Matriarchy study group -as the group was called - who researched early times to see if women had once been powerful. So for me it was very intimately linked with being very involved with feminism being involved with political change. However, a few years later I went to Crete and I also went to Crete with Robert Graves' book, 'The White Goddess'. And while I was there I read The White Goddess because I was interested in mythology, not spirituality you understand, and I would say I had a very spiritual experience in Crete, but I link up that experience with the land.

I also went to Heraklion to the Archaeology museum. I have always been interested in archaeology and ancient images, artefacts etc. and of course in Heraklion were all those Minoan seals, which I came to realise later were images for the Goddess, the Goddess as Tree of Life, the Goddess with the lions, the goats or what ever animals it was, the bees, and I think in later years I came back to Crete with much more of an

understanding what those images might be about and much more appreciation of Goddess imagery. So there was Robert Graves, there was a lot of stuff about the land, about this inspiration of the White Goddess. It was all this mythology and all this ancient material that really fascinated me and I also experienced, it's hard to describe ... I felt that I was also meditating on the landscape, and I had no previous experience of meditation, I wouldn't have been keen on it anyway, and I really felt almost as if I perceived much more strongly in my connection to the land and connection of people with the land, a sort of religious inspiration but I wouldn't have used the term religion because I come from a Roman Catholic background and I hate everything to do with religion and I want nothing to do with traditional religion.

R When you were in Crete, was this before you met Asphodel or after?

M No, I had met Asphodel already, I had known her but we had been politically active in doing this Liberation workshop in London together, and when she herself became involved with this group as one of the founders of Matriarchy Study group I just was not in that at all. I wasn't in antagonism with her but I was not attracted to this. When I left Greece, with something being transformed somehow inside me I went to Holland and I read 'The Wanderground' (I'm not sure I would like it so much now...) - the lesbian feminist novel that had a lot of spiritual stuff to it, a spiritual research. I was very captivated and I got involved with some women again, very much in this context to have... my spirituality has always been involved with feminist women. We started what

we call a Witches Group. We did start it after taking a lecture, I've no idea why I went.

A friend of mine said, 'You must go to this, this is absolutely for you.'

This was a workshop on Witchcraft. I hadn't touched the stuff with a bargepole 'till then and I still can't understand what made me go. The workshop was based on Starhawk's work and the woman leading it was in the same Coven as Starhawk. One of the attractions I guess must have been that this was situated very politically because the Coven of Starhawk and the leader of the workshop were doing a lot of political activity on the nuclear/military in California and I myself had become involved, in Holland, very quickly when I got there with the non violent direct action groups against the transport of nuclear waste and I had started to become a trainer and I fairly quickly after that, a matter of a couple of years, I came to Greenham Common. And I came to Greenham Common because of the plan to 'embrace the base.' Then with me coming back to England again with a whole bunch of British women and feeling that there was a very strong spiritual element to Greenham Common and to many of the women there, and to the form that they used in the actions they took. I don't know if I can put that into words. It's hard to think of it as being spirituality but there was something to it, for example, the holding of mirrors around the base so that the soldiers could look at themselves in the mirror is really appealing somewhere, offering an alternative view of life while going on the runway, the plane runway inside the base and you know, roller skating or cycling or what ever ... instead of ... in a way behaving or presenting alternatives that were somehow imbued with life. I guess would be the word, and very strong beliefs and to the fact that people were connected together, I've always loved the title of a particular

book, it's called "We All Belong Together", "We All Belong With each Other" and it's a classic of non-violent direct action writing. So it was that feeling that I had. It was my first perception of ...it was crazy - what those women were doing - , at the same time there was just something so attractive. I felt that I belonged with this particular way of behaving. And I think the fact this women's witchcraft group got started, a mixture of belonging, the 'Wanderground', being women together, being feminist, being activist in various ways and having been at Greenham Common, so that's when it got launched properly when I went back to Amsterdam. And we did, for a while, successfully carry out some rituals. And I say 'for a while successfully' because I became a bit disenchanted, but we held some open rituals that were widely attended and that were very successful. And what was successful is that everything that we did with those rituals, every woman present felt the connection to it, it might have been .. I can't remember but I think we did a sort of changing of the seasons, going into the Spring or connected to Demeter, Persephone with this idea of the classical story but also the idea of going into the darkness and from the darkness you re-emerge strengthened, facing fears with something that ultimately empowers, and this was embodied in this ritual and corresponded to 'out of the Winter we emerge into the Spring', new life comes forth, and it was powerful because I really could have said that all the women there felt connection. We get a physical shape to what we perceived, the change in the earth and how it corresponded to the change in human beings, the patterns we go through, the mood we go through, the way we learn, the way we come life the way we grow, the way we die, the way we blossom... After that we did carry on with some rituals but they

became obscure to my perception. I could not have said, 'now we are doing this and we are doing it because of that,' instead of which we were doing, we face that direction we face this direction, we say this we say that, and I felt the same thing at Glastonbury recently where I had a renewed attempt at going into a situation where I felt that there would be a lot of ritual and I wanted to again see whether that could have a place in my life.

R I can really empathize with that.

M It broke my heart when I could no longer stay with this group in Amsterdam and it broke my heart a little bit at Glastonbury to feel that again but it means nothing to me what-so-ever if there isn't...oh yes, I regret something else. At Greenham Common we had a will to live at Greenham Common.

R Did you actually live in Greenham Common?

M Yes, I lived there for a couple of years after I had visited and one of the extraordinary things that happened was Starhawk was involved and though I'm not necessarily inspired by Starhawk now I had to give her credit for this one. We held a march to Salisbury Plain which are very extended military grounds, you are not allowed to pass through them, but in fact we did,-in conflict with the military - and those were women from Greenham Common, you know, extensive supporters, a lot of women who

visited the camp, there were hundreds of us there. We marched over the Salisbury Plains over several days, finally arriving at Silbury Hill (or Avebury ? -no Silbury....you know the hill that is actually shaped like the pregnant body of the Goddess...)and we actually went to held the ritual on the spiral path that led to the top of this man made (*man made?!*) mound and it sort of 'flattened'. It was very late at night and we were quite tired, we'd been walking, it filtered through that there was this ritual and it was going to be led by this American woman, Starhawk. But a hell of as lot of the women didn't really have any idea what a ritual was or why we were going to do what and were somehow pulled along into this thing, and there was a lot of grumbling, and at that point I had done rituals before in this workshop with Starhawk ideas and thought about witchcraft so to me there was a celebration that made sense, there was a spiritual connection to the land that fitted very well with having protested at the rape of the land by the military who had occupied Salisbury Plain etc. So I was quite concerned about this and I was concerned that a lot of women were upset because they didn't understand what we were doing, and I had of course felt this before ...and what was quite wonderful is that although Starhawk had started leading this spiral of women going up that path with the idea of doing something while we were at the top, we ended up gathering together - quite a lot of women - I say 'we' - several women from the camp...getting a big gathering of women together to talk about 'what is this ritual? - and there was a lot of anger - there was ' What's all this bullshit about rituals? ... it doesn't mean anything and how come we didn't talk about it?'. There was a lot of anxiety, of fearing something which was perceived as a bit 'religious', that was not explained. And

we ended up doing ... Starhawk led us into chanting some Goddess songs, some of them in fact were used at Greenham, but there was one woman who got terribly upset that we ... she felt that we were desecrating something very special about the Goddess, not feeling a respectful something or other to some of the songs, so there is this woman got into this discussion and we ended up doing what became known as 'the bogroll ritual'.

R I've read about that in Starhawk's books!

M Really?! - I must look it up...

Basically it was quite extraordinary because there we were doing something utterly ridiculous like having this big spiral of women who were passing this enormous roll of loo paper and as we were passing it around you know unrolling it and unrolling it feeling a connection to what ended up being called the web, and ... in the process of doing it ..., -it was hysterical, it was very funny, very amusing, ... we were also chanting a Goddess song at the time, -this became a way of explaining what a ritual is about. I don't remember all the words or anything but there was a way in which women felt a connection to a kind of story, we passed this 'thread' and things were explained and Starhawk was indeed extremely good, explaining, simply, why we were planning to do this political ritual, what it was about, what was perceived, what women wanted to put in an outward shape in form of a ritual. I always thought that it was very interesting and, of course, there's no point to have a sense of reverence that is akin to what we felt if we had a traditional religious upbringing. That's not what it's about. I think one of the

stronger perceptions of the Goddess for many women, for many men as well, is that one of the things we lost with the beginning of monotheistic religion was that people no longer felt a connection with God in the same way. God became a little man up there with a grey beard that stands on a cloud and can watch everything we do and he says if he's happy or not with what we're doing - instead of religion having been something ...instead of the relationship with God having been one where we all belonged with God, who wished us well, who was involved in our lives rather than being a separate being. And it seems to me, from what I have learned more recently, - is that in a way it is when God, when the female face of God, was lost - when the Goddess or the Goddesses or the perceptions of God that was female became the perception of God that was one man and the insistence of monotheistic religion, which ever one it was, - that we lost the understanding of religion being the underlying current in our life, being completely part of our life, instead of which religion became, well you have your natural life, you have this, you have that, and then you have religion, it's separate, the soul becomes separated from day to day existence. If we talk about Goddess religion it can mean almost as many things as there are women talking about it, certainly the strand that I'm interested in is a sense that remains political, a sense of connection between human beings and the earth, a sense of perhaps the ancient people might have seen a connection between their lives, the current of life, the current of the season, the course of the fields, the course fo the pollen they need to live on, the changes in the animals they saw around them and they also needed them to feed on - the earth's pregnancy without understanding completely where that came from, but simply seeing the female

body change, seeing perhaps the female in the land in terms of ...for example - , you know, wheat growing and producing, fertility. Not just fertility - birth, growing, death - but there's a sense of pattern - 'out of the winter you come into the spring'. So for me that's what those beliefs were, expressed in so many ways, through artefacts, through symbolism and that certainly a sense of connection between everything and looking at it in more modern terms I think there is a connection with .. we belong with each other, we belong with the land, we need to respect her, we need to respect each other so there is a connection with the need for liberation, for changes for justice, for changes - ... we have moved, we have moved so far away from a place where our spirituality can be fully integrated. So I think that is possibly one of the problems with things like Glastonbury, it feels like an artificial construct, dare I say it, on the part of some of the participants there. It's almost like playing at disguising yourself as a witch or as a Goddess or as a whatever and I think if I tried to do it I got so little of a sense of ... frankly, as far as I could see, for some of the women who were there, there wasn't necessarily much love for the women, there wasn't a connection with feminism. There was a connection with Paganism, of course, on the part of quite a few women, but then Paganism is absolutely not a guarantee of a respect for female equality or respect for anything that is female, I mean it can be -in certain Pagan circles it is just as patriarchal as... and that by definition is not something I'm interested in. I think I will stop at this point... and have a breather!

(Stop tape)

(Resume taping)

R What do you mean by the Goddess do you think, or is it actually difficult to put into words?

M It's quite difficult to put into words, especially when I say that I don't see it as something that is a separate section of my life. I think it goes back, perhaps my first connection with the idea of the Goddess, and when I started using the word in a way, is once when I saw those images that are seen as images of the Goddess on the Minoan seals in Crete, there was something that to me was so many images of this powerful female, and plenty of evidence that it wasn't a female as opposed to a male God, it was the people especially for Crete, it wasn't a religion of women as opposed to religion of men, it was a religion of the *people* of Crete, it was a belief system for which they fought very hard against invading, patriarchal, monotheistic, male-God, 'blah' religion from main line Greece, - and I do remember thinking,... because there was thousands of those images, and lots of symbols associated with this Goddess, or different Goddesses, (I think she can actually be called Goddess or different Goddesses - it still fits.)

R So that makes no difference, does it?

M It can be a particular concept and a portion of it would be associated with an individual female image - like the Goddess that is related to the water, the power of the water, and childbirth.- I think it is the concept of the Goddess taken in different shapes, different female shapes, for various aspects of life. It boils back down to a normal

principal, ...it is difficult to say ...perhaps a sense that all things belong together. There is a secondary aspect which makes it powerful, which I had to look up more recently. The first one really was that connection with archaeological artefacts attempting to understand what people felt, a very powerful relationship to a female principle, that's practical, that they describe solely female shapes, so their artefacts, and the work of Maria Gimbutas fascinated me because I am fascinated by that sort of theory. It strengthened my curiosity.

The other aspect is that ... my anger at seeing women's oppression. Not just my anger but my having been on the receiving end of it until I having felt angry when I was a youngster, having understood some of the reasons for my anger when I first joined the Women's Liberation Movement, there was a parallel with religion. There again there was, you know, a male character standing there telling us how it was supposed to be, telling us how our religion was supposed to be, our spiritual perception, basically being the Pope, and I can see that while not wanting to replace a male God by a female one, which would not make much sense really, there was... challenging the idea that God is male or that God can only be seen in male shape, basically saying that it does a lot of damage to the female people, that God does not represent the people, that God is not of the people, that God has been of man and for men and that religion, in its turn, has, like so many other things, damaged the lives of women and carries on doing so if women are not fully included in it. It doesn't just mean .. it *does* mean justice, it means equality, it means fighting for our freedom along with the feminist idea but at the same time it means that we are empowered in this process if we can also use the word 'she'

in relation to God, because either you see God as ...God is whatever, God is a force, God is a presence, God is a male, God is a female, God is ..um..(Tries to find the right words) ... There is something beyond our material existence, I would say, and that many people feel that now ...but being able to address the need as 'she' gives the power back to women. Gives back images that women are powerful, that they were. Of course it connects with the fact that that there's more and more evidence as the years pass, more and more documentation that either God was female or seen as female or there were powerful female in early religion including Judaism even though we are led to believe that that's not the case, but there were women preachers, there were powerful women at the time of, so called, Jesus, were powerful in their own right and that this in fact, this loss of power was lost because of religion.

R Mmm. Thank you. Can I just get clear? You said, when you were trying to describe what you mean by God or Goddess, you said 'there's something behind material presence', did you say, or 'beyond'?

M Yes. Something...There isn't just the material world there is something else. I tend to think of it in sense of connection with the universe, with belonging, which is a bit tricky since ... (laughs). I don't want to explain the world just in terms of molecules and this and that and how it was started. I have a scientific explanation and at the same time I have to perceive something else than the way the earth functions by itself and the way such a beautiful mechanism of the human body is a beautiful mechanism, and I

feel that I'm a small portion of it all but that we are all connected. That would be my best way to define ... 'spirituality' and at the same time you take any of us out of the equation then the form of spirituality that is offered is no longer of interest to me.

R Right ... Thank you very much.

PAMELA

Interview with Pamela 18.5.99

(Helen present)

R Helen, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview.

I have given you some idea what my research project is, so what I would like to ask first of all is, do you use Goddess talk in your spirituality? Do you have some idea of Goddess spirituality, and if so, what do you understand by that term, Goddess?

P Well I think the term spirituality is very, very difficult to define for a start. I would say my definition of spirituality is a great mass of grey, perhaps with dots of light when I'm in a good mood.

R That's reassuring

P A vague attempt at trying to define spirituality is some sort of connection with another dimension of reality. So, for example, I absolutely love walking, the English countryside, different countryside, whatever, and I suppose my awareness

is heightened of the fact that it is very beautiful and it is like a spiritual communication with what I call Goddess or God with a very small g. What that is I haven't really a clear idea. More and more it is a female entity for me and I guess that my inner voice is in dialogue with that entity when I'm on my own. So it may be delight or wonder taking example of a walk, because that's not the only place where this happens. I may actually get a sort of tingling sensation or heightened sensation or nowadays you would call it a buzz but not necessarily that, more a feeling of contentment, 'isn't it lovely' sort of feeling and the energy to which I am referring the Goddess is probably receiving my appreciation. That's probably about the best I can do. Is that Goddess talk? (laughter)

R It sounds like it to me. It sounds fascinating. So you would class walking in the countryside and experiencing this sense of wonder and connection... that for you would be indicative of what you understand spirituality to be about?

P It would be one facet of my attempt to discover more about spirituality. I think I am very, very fortunate. I seem to have a very rich life and I have a lot of experiences that come into my life and therefore a lot of places to feel that I am in connection with something spiritual. I don't know why I am blessed like that but I seem to be very fortunate. So I could give you other examples, it's just that the example of a walk is the first one that comes to my mind.

R Right. Does that mean or does that suggest that connection with the physical world is an important part of your spirituality now?

P Very, yes. It's probably why I did Geography. Yes.

R Right. So this sense of relation with, or connection with the natural world is something that you would trace back to your childhood?

P Yes very much, yes. I had a very lonely, very difficult childhood and was out on my own a great deal in the Shropshire countryside. I was actually given a lot of freedom and so, yes, it was an outlet for me, a sustaining for me, sustaining, energy for me. Yes.

R And this sense, this sense of connection with the physical world, that view is one aspect of what you understand spirituality to be?

P It is, yes.

R But you talked about feeling spiritual. Can you explain what you mean by that?

P (pause)...Well, (pause)....I think I become anecdotal when I try because I think that, um, music is a thing spiritual, poetry, prose and relationships, friendships, loving, sex, these are things spiritual and we try in Church, or Meeting House to

set the scene so that we can have a spiritual feeling amongst a group of people. Sometimes it's easy to have a group of people with music and you feel spiritual and I suppose that's why we use music in Church. We are also trying to do other things as well which is perhaps a pity, like stimulate people to think and to progress their religious ideas and all these extra, it makes it complicated but I think essentially, we're trying to have a ..um.. to create a spiritual experience or feeling probably...um....

R Excuse me. By Church do you mean Unitarian Church?

P Unitarian Church, yes. Or Meeting House. Um.....and so the Unitarian setting is the best place for me to hope to find that. I was a Quaker when I was a student. I went to Quaker meetings but I missthe music and I miss the not doing things together, sharing that comes from doing things together so I could be a Quaker but I don't think I would be quite as comfortable as being a Unitarian.

R You get that sense of community, of relation?

P Yes

R So, um..... part of me, I mean I personally can relate very much to what you're expressing by spirituality, but somebody perhaps could say, well how is that different from an aesthetic experience?

P I know, I know and I think that's extremely difficult. I think because I have a fundamental belief that there is a power somewhere, um.. I enjoy looking at the stars very much, when you can see them, when there are no street lights, and the whole knowledge that we have of the universe is so mind blowingly incredible. That's a situation when I've always utterly believed that there is some power beyond us, and I tend to call it energy, which I suppose is very cliché but I can't find a better word for it and if it has an entity, as I say, for me, it's more female now than anything else.

R That's interesting. That was what I was going to come back to because that expression that for you it's a female entity, it's interesting, and obviously interesting in relation to my interest in Goddess talk. Could you give me some idea of *how* you came to think of this power/energy as female, and what difference it makes, what you understand by that?

P Well, I think it did come to me through feminism. I think that, as I was saying before, in the late sixties, early seventies, when the feminist movement and consciousness raising groups and all sorts of groups of women were meeting in this country, in North London where I was living. It opened such enormous doors for me that the kind of basic attitude to thinking changed somewhere. So although you could make a list, you could fragment all the aspects of feminism that were being talked about, there was an underlying ...um...thinking, philosophy behind it

and I think that, because I'm a geographer, geographers are interested in the relationships between things as patterns, and so it was inevitable for me that I would look at my own religious beliefs with this change in attitude, change in thinking, philosophy. This is the best I can put it....(laughter).. so it wasn't surprising that I began to think about my religious beliefs in that way. I think it was just a natural extension of that really.

R And did it have any important implications if you applied those feminist ideas to your religion, did that change your religious ideas, did it change your understanding of spirituality ... or not?

P Yes, I think my spirituality became more comforting, um... of course I may be projecting, some sort of psychological process maybe going on but I still feel that when I was confirmed it was a very traumatic experience for me but it was *very male*. The Bishop put his hands on me and it was associated very clearly in my mind with hierarchy and authority and I don't think that is a projection I think that really is how it felt because as I sit here I have that feeling again, whereas I think of the years in the sixties and seventies, of the Gaia hypothesis and those sorts of ideas that were being floated, and the Solstice services that we held at Golders Green - the Women's Group ran for the congregation - this Goddess energy was much more maternal and comforting, more like a woman, and non threatening. Now, I mean, there is a whole pop psychology thing one could do with my relationship with my parents I'm sure which would have a bearing on this but I

think that's how it was. Yes it did change my fundamental feelings, not just attitudes but feelings about God I guess.

R You use the term, 'maternal' and some feminists, they are suspicious of Goddess religion because they feel it is reinforcing attitudes towards women, being maternal, being nurturing, being related to the earth, which they would argue feminism was trying very hard to move away from. They would want to say that our biology is not our destiny and some feminists are alarmed then when Goddess women talk in terms of the sacred as a mother and then seem to be reinforcing all the traditionally feminist attributes which feminists would argue the whole women's movement was arguing against. Where would you stand on that sort of debate?

P Mmm, yes, right...yes

I think there is a conflict and I think feminism did give us *choices*. It's about choices, it's about opening doors. So, for example, had I come to feminism earlier, I would not have given up my career, and I would have pursued my career with more vigour and done other things with my children, although I think I'm a pretty maternal sort of person. But when it comes to God and Goddess I think it just, again, gives you an awareness, an ability to chose between the feminine -and no-one's sort of stereotyping-, but the feminine attributes and the male attributes or even cross-gender approach is ... it gives you..... it gives you sustaining tools to support you in order to do the best in your life I think. It just gives you choice. I don't think that fundamental change that feminism brought about which was really

about choice, I don't think it's terribly altered in belief in the Goddess unless you say I only believe in the Goddess, unless you are absolutely committed to one thing and one thing only.

R And you would consider that to be dangerous, or harmful?

P I think it would just be limiting, I'm not sure it would be dangerous. I think it would be limiting. I think there are times in life, it's as though we all go through passages and we all go through mood changes, you know all the time when we need to be sustained or to give out or to communicate outwards, it's either inwards or outwards, in a different mode.

R So you're talking about ways of communicating. So if I use the term Goddess talk your sense of Goddess talk is an option alongside others ...

P Yes, yes, but I use it a lot more as I get older, I seem to be more comfortable with it. Perhaps that's again related to my own human existence in that I've been very close to my mother these last few years. My father's been dead and gone five years and I was never close to him, sadly, so there may be things that are filtering in to this approach that I have to feeling that my spirituality is more 'Goddess' than 'God' like. Also in my life I have many more close women friends than men friends. I have very few close men friends where I feel sexually secure and never

threatened and um..... I'm not sure that I want more men friends like that particularly, but I find it easier with women.

R So this community of women and this sense of relationship with women, that's an important part of your spirituality would you say, or just of your experience?

P I think it is because I think it's the sharing which is something to do with the spirituality. I think it's like I was saying about church meetings. It's something to do with the communicating sharing. I used to have to do a lot of work one to one with kids and because the empathy level required was very, very high there was a different dimension that I was aware I was in as well as communicating with that particular pupil. And, after a session was over it was important that I analysed and unpicked what had happened in order to learn and to progress, but usually when that feeling was there the session had been a good one and I think it's about the sharing, it's something about the combined energies that are created between two or more people that is spiritual.

R So spirituality is very relational for you.

P A lot of it is, yes, I don't know whether nature, you can say it's because you are relating to nature, I think it probably is, it probably is relationship, yes, or the stars or music or poetry. It probably is because I'm always interested in the voice behind the poet, poetry, the poet behind the poetry, I'm always very interested in

that. Yes I'm probably a very.... I was going to say a 'person's person' but then I do find it very exhilarating to be in the mountains and the hills and amongst fields and flowers and things, which is not people...so ...

R It's fascinating.....I'm also interested that you talk in terms of 'Goddess' and your use of Goddess symbolism of Goddess imaging as a possibility, an option which would seem to suggest, and correct me if I am reading things into what you're saying that are not there, but would seem to suggest that what you're talking about is on a symbolic level rather than necessarily referring to an absolutely unchanged reality that is out there. Is that true or not?

P I think I'm somewhere in a transition zone. Mostly Goddess is about, it is symbolic and it's about what it stands for. I think it's a bit like Helen R's magic, there's a sort of an area where I *do* believe that it's possible.....and ...it feels a bit like that about Goddess, there's something beyond the symbol. I don't think I can articulate more than that.

R Right ..."There's something beyond the symbol"?

P Yes

R But you wouldn't want to articulate what it was?

P ...Only in terms of feeling really.... I think it's... um...like feeling sustained or being able to feel warm in an outward sort of way...I do have this kind of feeling there possibly is something...The Unitarians are always on a path or...who is not on a path?... (laughter) it's not just common to Unitarians, but that's probably where I've got to on this path.

R But that is interesting that, again, you use that imagery, a journey imagery, that you feel you're travelling, you're moving...

P Sure, sure, yes. I think that's one of the big things that life is about, not the only thing but it's one of the major things that life is about.

R This process...

P This process of travelling, yes.

R And so you feel there is something beyond the symbolism but you wouldn't like to articulate it. Can I just ask that whatever is beyond the symbolism, is that also God if you choose to call it God?

P ...Yes, yes.

R Whether you call it God or...

P We haven't got a word for 'neutral' in our language. It maybe that in Thai they have the words but I don't think in English we've got sufficient words really.

R And when you talk about spirituality, does that mean that you are referring to 'spirit' in some way and if you are, what do you understand 'spirit' to be?

P Well I think I said earlier on, it's more about contact with another dimension, um....and 'spirit' somehow conjures up a 'form' and I don't really think I have a lot of form, it's more to do with... it's more to do with energy. I keep coming back to that word although it's not completely satisfactory, but I keep coming back to that. ...um... it's beyond me or beyond us and yet it is absolutely and utterly related to us and I think that a lot of the great world teachers had a way of explaining it which are useful to us in our passage through life, so I don't think any of them were greater or better than any others, my knowledge is very poor but to the extent that I have knowledge I think that they were all inspired people, and I think there were *probably many women who we don't know about too....* And I think that what we communicate with when we have these dialogues that I was describing before is that divine part of a person that everybody has. So I think even very limited, severe learning difficulty children have that divine element, it's just that you need tremendous talent and love and skills to harbour it and to nurture it, but I think it's there in mass murderers and I totally believe it's in everybody.

R That everyone has the divine I them?

P I do, I do believe that, yes.

R And that 'aspect of the divine', is that what you would call 'spirit'?

P I suppose I would, yes, although, as I say, the word 'spirit' to me seems always to have some kind of form to it which I don't like but yes I think I would probably call it spirit.

R So you have some reservations about traditional understanding of the spirit?

P Yes I do, yes.

R *What sort of reservations would you have?*

P Well I think, with my background, it's immediately very Judaeo/Christian and immediately if somebody uses the word spirit I think of the disciples all gathered when the spirit came into the room at Whitsun, Pentecost wasn't it? And I think flashing across my inner mind are pictures of, you know, spirit light, spirit form or a spirit, an embodied spirit looking a bit like a cross between a fairy and a gnome or something descending ... (laughter) one carries all this awful luggage and I think

really, I have to work at it, to get rid of it, to break through it, not that it isn't valuable that it's there, but it's a starting place, it needs to be broken through and moved on somehow. I've lost your question now, I'm sorry (laughter)...

R No that's OK, no it's that you don't...you seem to have reservations about traditional understandings of spirit...

P Yes, I do.

R ...and you want to move beyond that. Why are you uncomfortable with those traditional ideas about spirit? What do you think is restricting about them or ...um... not helpful?

P That's a good question. ...It feels as though it's child like. It feels as though my life experience has made me, encouraged me to want something more. A bit like a hunger. So ...um...I mean, I often wonder why I pray. I don't kneel down and pray but I do pray and I wonder why, because my rational mind says to me this is a totally useless exercise, even if I'm praying to the Goddess, this is a useless exercise, think of, you know, the Jews who went through the concentration camps...um, everybody must have been praying, and yet I continue to pray. I think that I feel that that is something I bring from my childhood which I probably still find sustaining so I bring it with me but my life experience ...um, these kind of moments you have that are beyond comprehension, that you garner as you go

through life, they encourage me in some way to want to have a better and more satisfactory definition or better concept of Spirit.

R So again it's moving?

P Yes, it's about progress. Not that I think progress is just a straight line, I don't for a moment. No I would never say that.

R So...I really sympathise and empathise with your struggling to try and make sense of ideas that come from previous religious concepts. I mean I'm doing that all the time as well and I find listening to processes that you are going through absolutely fascinating, so again, I don't wish to put words into your mouth but I if I tell you some of the ideas that I've tried to cope with regard to Spirit and spirituality it would be very interesting to hear your response.

P Yes, it would be really interesting for me.

R One of the things that I find challenging from a spiritual feminist point of view is the idea of a dualistic way of understanding spirituality that soul or spirit and body are completely separated, which seems to underline most traditional understandings of spirituality. One of the things I found particularly liberating about feminist spirituality is challenging that dualism and understanding spirituality as completely embodied and completely life affirming. To do that I therefore find it hard to

reconcile that with the idea of spirit or soul that is everlasting, that carries on when your body disappears, so I would be very interested to hear if your understanding of the spirit, whatever way you imagine it, is that something that goes on forever, or do you understand it as something that is an integral part of the physical body?

P I don't, ...we know so little about consciousness. If it's an integral part of the body I think it has to be located in consciousness and awareness somewhere. I think, at this moment in time, I ...think that it probably is though we shan't discover it, don't think it's going to be discovered in a Western thinking rational kind of way with work on the mind. We may see traces of it a bit like we see traces of quarks we may see little flickers of it eventually, like wasn't it Susan Greenfield doing all this wonderful research but I don't think we are going to actually find it. I do think that it lasts after the body dies and yet I can't really quite believe in reincarnation. So somewhere there I think I'm in a mess.

R Well, maybe in a state of process?

P Yes, maybe! (laughter),

R It certainly sounds like it to me, it's very creative. So you don't believe in reincarnation.

P I can't quite believe in reincarnation, I'd like to, I have a longing to believe in it but I can't quite believe in it, so what happens to my spirit or energy or soul or what ever after we die, because I think it does continue, I really... I'm in confusion.

R Right. So you don't have a clear idea of life after death?

P No I don't, no.

R So that, presumably, isn't a very important part of your spirituality, if you're prepared to leave it?

P I think some people probably can communicate with that dimension that goes on, you know I said after the body dies I think spirit goes on, I think some people have that facility to communicate with it and the trouble is it is fraught with people who can abuse that and it's ...it's being conned and the whole area is so difficult that within me there's a tremendous confusion, almost a rage sometimes, that goes on between my gut feelings and my thinking processes. So, sometimes, my intuition, gut feelings are stronger and sometimes my rational thinking is stronger.

R You talk as if they're separated. Do you think of those in a dualistic way, that your rational processes and your gut feelings are two separate things?

P I think my spiritual life, if we come down to spirit in terms of my spiritual life influences my thinking. I'm not sure whether my thinking influences my spiritual life. It's easier to talk about them as separate but I think there *is* interaction. So I don't know whether.... I'm quite good at brain washing myself, quite good at controlling my inner life.

R What do you mean by brainwashing?

P Making myself think in a particular mode.

R Can you give me an example, what do you mean?

P If I wake up I the morning at the moment, and I wake up to the feeling that my mother's here no longer, we were very close when she died in March, I take myself in hand. I guess you could call me an awful control freak really. I take myself in hand and I talk to myself and my inner life, and I say, "Helen, love, there's nothing to be gained by this, get up you might start moving around the house physically you begin to feel better and that's a physiological condition that helps your mental condition" - all very fast, it's not slow. And then there's a dialogue that goes on, "yes, but it's nice to stay with this for a while and be sad." So whether my rational processes of thinking and moving into positive mode influence my spiritual life I don't really know. I'd like to think they do.

R You'd like to think they do? Why?

P Yes, because I've got quite a lot of reasonable, not complete, but quite a lot of control about what I wish to think.

R That's interesting. You talk as if it's an internal.... debate...

P I have a very, very busy inner life. A psychiatrist once told me that and he's absolutely right. So busy I'm sometimes quite frightened of it. And on the occasion that I had some sort of breakdown I actually got quite terrified of it, quite terrified. So, it's nice for me to forget my inner life and be outward, put it on one side, forget it and be outward, because it's very, very busy indeed, much busier than my husbands, and there's not many people one talks to about one's inner life but I suspect it's busier than a lot of people's. So I think there is an argument that goes on I my inner dialogue, yes.

R So the dialogue is inside you as well as with other people?

P Definitely. I think that we all have chatter that goes on all the time. That's what I'm calling my inner life and there's definitely dialogue that goes on there.

R Actually, the way you describe it I can empathise. I've never thought of it like that before but as you were talking I can think, well yes, that's what goes on with me as well.

(H Yes I can identify with that as well.)

P Well that's good.

R That's it. I often find myself talking to myself, I think, oh I'm obviously barking mad, but I think, from the way I hear you talking it's a much more natural occurrence than we perhaps allow ourselves to think.

(Discussion with Helen, not caught by tape.)

R So your spiritual life, you're prepared to say there are certain aspect of it, for instance life after death, remain unknown to you and obviously that doesn't concern you enormously. So am I right in thinking your spirituality therefore is much more about the here and now and the relating to others and relating to the natural world, that is the focus of your spirituality rather than projecting it into what might or might not happen.

P I would think somewhere between 80 or 90% of it is, because I think what I do with this life I've been given is very, very important, very, very important. It's like

an enormous gift and I must have come to that decision when I was probably quite young, when life was extraordinarily difficult, and that must have been my escape from that kind of life I was living because I'm utterly committed to that, utterly. It doesn't necessarily make me very brave or anything but that's a kind of belief.

R I really appreciate your sharing that.

P (laughter) You're welcome. But that doesn't mean to say that this energy that I feel.... spirit that goes on after death, isn't important. My brother died when he was nineteen and I would love to be able to believe that I will "see" him again. I would desperately, I can't tell you how much. It's just that it's not as important to me as the here and now, as you said.

R And you said that your understanding of this energy as a female entity came through the process of feminist awakening. Would that mean that you could use the term feminist spirituality to describe your spirituality or would you see feminism and spirituality as being two quite separate issues.

P No, I could use that term. Yes 'feminist spirituality'. I think when we say 'women's spirituality' we mean probably the same thing really.

R And what would you say is distinctive about women's spirituality or feminist spirituality?

P I think that it gives the right, appropriate recognition to feminine values that are of tremendous importance so that there is equality between the sexes. Very often I think that women have a lot more going for them than men anyway (laughter) trying intellectually to be fair...I think that's what good feminism does, it gives recognition to those things which are important and valuable about women.

R And these women's spirituality groups that you mentioned before, they were just women presumably.

H P Yes, absolutely.

R Do you see that as part of a transitional process in the hope that eventually it would lead to an inclusive spirituality that would include men and women or do you think that women will always need special space and time to have distinctively and exclusively women's spirituality?

P I think women will always need it and I think there will be a need for combined areas of spirituality, I mean there are men who do respond to what women are bringing spiritually, like forms of ritual that are congregations in Unitarianism and a lot of men are very moved by that...not a lot, some are. What saddens me rather is that there isn't a sort of balancing, this is the geographer again, of balancing, where the men are exploring more their own area of spirituality really, and then

there would be like a trio, there would be a combined and two separates, I mean it's very pop psychology but I think the men are very, very defended and it's very difficult to get beyond the brick walls really.

R So do think that what's coming out of this women's spirituality has something to offer men?

P Absolutely, absolutely. Yes I do, yes.

R And when you bring these rituals to Unitarian worship do you use Goddess talk then?

P Yes. We would always set the circle. ...um...Do you know Starhawk?

R Yes

P Rather in a sort of Starhawk manner. So the symbolism would be Earth Goddess, and then the contributions from the women would be about women's life experience, women's spirituality, and there would be other symbols, candles, flowers and water and so on. And we would be creating a spiritual setting in female mode, dance, very often used by women, not so much by men, and chanting, used by women, not so much by men, and I've known men really respond to this and like it. Very uplifting and very moving.

R Do you think that what you're doing there in this spirituality is understanding spirituality in a different way to the way that Unitarians traditionally understood it?

P Yes I do.

R Generating new possibilities?

P Yes, absolutely.

R That's really exciting, really encouraging to know that's going on.

P If only there were more.

R Thank you ever so much for your time.

P Was that all right, useful?

R Well it's absolutely wonderful.

P I would love to listen to the other tapes. It must be really intriguing.

R Well I'm feeling increasingly privileged to sit and listen to people. It is such a privilege to hear women talking about their spirituality and exploring ideas. I think, I just think I'm so fortunate.

P I think it's very mutual Ruth because it's also lovely to talk about it, because something happens with the spoken word. It's like Helen and I having a good chat - not a frivolous chat, a serious chat - although those are good as well sometimes!
(laughter)

It clarifies, doesn't it, when you speak? I mean even more so when you write. It's a clarifying process so that we probably don't do it enough, don't ask each other enough what we feel about these things. It would be quite interesting to concoct a service around women talking about their spirituality, actually, wouldn't? Very interesting.

R I agree. I think speech is extremely powerful.

P Very

(Tape ends. The interview concludes and R. thanks P. off tape.)