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# The Wheel of the Year as a Spiritual Psychology for Women

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The Wheel of the Year is a name used to describe the cyclical progression of the seasons through time and most often described as part of Pagan, Goddess, and women's spirituality and/or Wiccan magical traditions. This article introduces the author's conceptual model of the Wheel of the Year as an earth-based psychology for women, one that is inherently feminist and also based in transpersonal psychologies. Women explore the turning points, or holydays of the Wheel, on both spiritual and psychological levels through a wide range of modalities that engage body, mind, emotion, and spirit. The Wheel provides an overarching psychospiritual framework for recognizing, understanding, and responding to experiences and processes that may occur over the course of a woman's life.

**Keywords:** *earth-based psychology, female development, women's spirituality, Wicca, feminism, transpersonal psychologies, psychosynthesis.*

After *woman* and *spirit*, *feminist* is the term I most often use to describe myself, my worldview, and my spiritual path. I believe I chose, on a spiritual level, to be part of bringing balance to the power dynamics between the sexes/genders on the planet at this time, and to that end, I have chosen and feel that I have been called to work specifically in the area of female healing and empowerment. I have done this in a number of ways all the adult years of my life: as a student of feminism, as an activist for the prevention of violence against women, and through my thirty-year career as a women's studies teacher in university settings.

Some time ago, even as I continued teaching in the university, my work with women moved from the academy back out into the community, where, like many feminists of my generation, my passion and advocacy for women began. Equipped with a solid foundation in academic scholarship about women, I have gone on to create environments, structures, and processes for women to acknowledge, retrieve, name, release, and heal old pain and anger, both as individuals and collectively, and to do so in ways that honor and celebrate women and women's ways of knowing and being. I call the container in which this is done *circle*, and the way that it is done *ritual*, both of which I consider to be remnants of ancient, long-buried spiritual psychologies that are re-emerging today. Although the technologies of circle, ritual, and the Wheel itself can be successfully applied to a variety of settings (Baldwin, 1998) and populations (Baker & Hill, 1998; Starhawk, 1999), I work exclusively with women in my

professional endeavors and in theorizing, as I do here, regarding the Wheel of the Year and female development and psychology from a feminist perspective.<sup>1</sup>

For over two decades I have offered formal classes in Goddess and women's spirituality<sup>2</sup> and in this way, *sat circle* with hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of women, listening and learning about women from women. As a woman who also teaches classes in women and psychology in the university, I consider what I have learned from women in circle to be of equal value to what I have learned in academic settings. As with the work of other woman-centered psychologies, such as that of Carol Gilligan (1982; Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988), Jean Baker Miller (1986; Miller & Stiver, 1997), and now many others who have also listened to and researched the lived experiences of girls and women, I have gone on to apply feminist research by creating learning environments that are specific to, and supportive of, women. For example, I have offered a Women's Mystery School since 1997, with a three-year formal curriculum that offers training in feminist (Christ & Plaskow, 1989; Christ, 1997) and Goddess spirituality based on my professional experience and training in women's psychology and spirituality and my work with The Wheel of the Year. I now travel throughout the US teaching a year-long training called The Wheel of the Year as an Earth-based Spiritual Psychology for Women through the auspices of the Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess—International,<sup>3</sup> and I am currently completing a book on the subject.

Although my interests and work encompass all aspects of women's spirituality in general, and Dianic Goddess and Wiccan traditions in particular (e.g., Barrett, 2007; Budapest, 1989; Jade, 1991), for the last twenty years much of my work has focused on European, earth-based shamanic and magical traditions. The centrality of the Wheel of the Year, or the Wheel of Life, in these traditions has become a beloved tool in my personal spiritual practice. I have also discovered, along with my sisters who have followed the Wheel together as a community for many years, that the Wheel is not simply a teaching or illustrative tool about the seasons, or planting, or a backdrop for the agricultural myths of antiquity. I have come to see it as yet another remnant of ancient psychologies as well as a spiritual path, and I teach it as such, as will be detailed below.

The reader will note that I have adopted instances of capitalization throughout this document to reflect the conventions of usage adopted by the spiritualities that are foundational to the Wheel of the Year work (e.g., in relation to words that signify sacred and symbolic terminology and concepts in traditions such as Wicca or Paganism). Such use of capitalization is in keeping with traditional usage in mainstream religious and spiritual practices. In other instances I have capitalized terms and concepts that I have developed as a theorist and practitioner that are integral to the overall conceptual framework of this psychospiritual model.

### **The Wheel**

The Wheel of the Year is a name used by those involved in contemporary European earth-based spiritualities, and now in common usage, to describe the cyclical progression of the seasons through time. The turning points, or holydays, of these seasons have also been given names, though the names vary from culture to culture and in different time periods. Some of the most commonly known of these are: Imbolc, Spring Equinox, Beltane, Summer Solstice, Lammastide, Autumn Equinox, Samhain, and Winter Solstice.<sup>4</sup> Some contemporary sources (e.g., Hutton, 1991) have asserted that the term "Wheel of the Year" is a fairly recent invention of contemporary Wicca and Neopaganism. These same sources stressed that there is currently no evidence that any one group of ancient peoples celebrated all eight of the holydays now recognized by contemporary European, earth-based groups.

It may never be known what the ancient foremothers called the "movement of the seasons through

time," or how many seasons or increments of time they celebrated, or the names these special days were given. However, because of the work of Marija Gimbutas (1982, 1989, 1991, 1999), the eminent authority on old European cultures, and others (e.g., Marler, 1997) in the fields of archeology and archaeomythology,<sup>5</sup> it is known that these ancestors did in fact celebrate the seasons and experienced them, and human life itself, as cyclical.

In Neolithic Europe and Asia Minor (ancient Anatolia)—in the era between 7000 BCE and 3000 BCE—religion focused on the wheel of life and its cyclical turning. This is the geographic sphere and the time frame I refer to as Old Europe. In Old Europe, the focus of the religion encompassed birth, nurturing, growth, death, and regeneration, as well as crop cultivation and the raising of animals. (Gimbutas, 1999, p. 3)

Just as the ancient foremothers did not separate themselves from nature in the ways later patriarchal worldviews proscribed (Eisler, 1987; Stone, 1978), it is also likely that they, like contemporary transpersonalists, did not separate their experiences into separate compartments of spiritual and psychological.

Although I speak in passing about the idea that following the seasons may have been a psychology as well as a spirituality and a way of life for ancient Old European peoples and cultures, proving such psychospiritual suppositions or the antiquity of the Wheel in its present form is not the focus of this article. My focus instead is to introduce readers to the concept of The Wheel of the Year as a helpful contemporary earth-based psychology for women and that it is, as I conceptualize and teach it, inherently feminist and also solidly based in transpersonal psychologies. To that end, after some contextual information and an overview of the Wheel of the Year teachings and format, I will explore in some detail a number of the holydays to show how I work with them as a spiritual psychology.

### **Transpersonal and Spiritual Psychology**

The Wheel as it is known today is seen or experienced mainly as an inherent part of contemporary, earth-based spiritualities, as in Wicca, Paganism, Goddess and women's spiritualities. As I previously asserted, my work shifts the focus of the Wheel to being a psychology, and specifically, a transpersonal and spiritual psychology.

I have always had an organic interest in psychology, though never in its traditional forms. My

early feminism taught me to mistrust much of psychology because of its inherent androcentrism (Baker, 1986) and, as I began to understand later, its limited scope. I encountered more expansive psychologies in the ideas of the transpersonal through my early experiences with holotropic breathwork and the accompanying theoretical frameworks of Christine and Stanislov Grof (1988) and elsewhere in my graduate program in transpersonal and spiritual psychologies. Only then did I begin to find and apply psychologies that made sense to me.

Transpersonal psychologies recognize, study, and develop responses to experiences that are transcendent and spiritual, including those that cannot be explained fully by the biographical life of an individual. These can range from what Maslow (1983) called *peak experiences* to altered and non-ordinary states of consciousness, mysticism, trance states, and the like (Lajoi & Shapiro, 1992). Caplan (2009) asserted that “transpersonal psychology addresses the full spectrum of human psychospiritual development—from our deepest wounds and needs, to the existential crisis of the human being, to the most transcendent of our consciousness” (p. 231).

During my graduate studies in the 1990s, I encountered a trend calling for changes in transpersonal psychology to include more focus on the spiritual. This was the spiritual psychology described by Thomas Yeomans (1999). The need to distinguish between transpersonal and spiritual psychology seems to have diminished today, and I continue to use the terms interchangeably. Central to both transpersonal and spiritual psychology is the recognition of the connection and overlap of the psychological and the spiritual, which is the basis of my assertion that the Wheel of the Year as I conceptualize and work with it is a spiritual psychology.

It took me some time to realize that what I was already doing in my circles and rituals with women was, in fact, transpersonal/spiritual psychology. That realization came in the mid-1990s when I was introduced to the writings of Anne Yeomans (1984) and her work regarding psychosynthesis, which I will expand upon later in this essay.

### **The Wheel of the Year as a Spiritual Psychology for Women**

The basis of the Wheel of the Year (WOTY) as a spiritual psychology is that of honoring both the seasons of nature and the corresponding seasons of women’s lives. Although many women’s and Goddess

spirituality sources have made these same connections (Barrett, 2007; Budapest, 1989; Christ, 1987; Mountainwater, 1991; Starhawk, 1999; Teish, 1985), none have named or practiced the Wheel, specifically or explicitly, as a psychology, nor have they recognized or explicitly made the case for the potential of conceptualizing, living, and teaching it as such. Most of these sources speak of and teach the Wheel as a part of Pagan or women’s/Goddess spirituality and/or Wiccan magical traditions. I deeply honor, am versed in, and live these traditions myself and consider these and other women writers and thinkers my respected foremothers in this endeavor. However, because of my training and experience in women’s circles, women’s studies, women’s psychology, and transpersonal psychologies, I believe my perspectives and theoretical model regarding the Wheel as a psychology are broader.

Although there are many differences, some of the works closest to my own perspective of the Wheel, specifically as a psychology, include the articulations of Davis and Leonard (2002) in *The Circle of Life: Thirteen Archetypes for Everywoman* and the tone of Judith Berger’s (1999) work *Herbal Rituals*. Surprisingly perhaps, Laurel Ann Reinhardt’s (2001) book for young readers, *Seasons of Magic: A Girl’s Journey*, offered one of the most profound psychological perspectives of the Wheel and the holydays that I have encountered. Perhaps this is not so surprising given that Reinhardt is also a practicing psychologist.

In working with the WOTY, participants explore the psychospiritual nature of the eight holydays of the European earth-based Wheel as well as other holydays that have been identified and added based on women’s lived experiences. For example, this Wheel includes holydays related to Menarche, the Amazon, and the Crone.

Whether it is in the monthly format of the Women’s Mystery School or the quarterly weekend intensives of the WOTY trainings, all participants attend an initial eight-hour overview of The Wheel as a spiritual psychology. Through lecture, discussions, altars, theatre, music, and rituals, women begin to unlearn or expand upon much that they may have read or experienced about these holydays exclusively as related to spirituality. Simultaneously, they encounter the basics of this new and unique way of perceiving and experiencing the Wheel and the holydays as a synthesis of both psychology and spirituality.

Thereafter, for each of the holydays, participants prepare by reading materials from a wide variety of sources, including those that describe traditional spiritual ideas about the holydays per se and readings from women's studies about women's lives and psychology specifically (Kesselman, McNair, & Schniedewind, 2004; Maitlin, 2004). For example, for Spring Equinox (March 21/22), which in the WOTY is also the holyday of The Divine Girl-Child, students read from Pagan, Goddess, Wiccan and women's spirituality sources about how Spring Equinox is generally thought of and celebrated, as well as from feminist sources that describe the reality of girls' socialization and experiences (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988; Kesselman et al., 2004; Maitlin, 2004). As a way of exploring each woman's personal experience of Spring Equinox or the Divine Girl-Child holyday, participants are asked to take all of this information in and allow their own response to surface. From that response, women create a five to seven minute ritual gesture that each woman shares/enacts when the group meets for the holyday.

Like other contemporary non-dominate spiritualities (Cahill & Halpern, 1992), women's spirituality has expanded upon the definition and experience of ritual that goes beyond the notion of "a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order" (Oxford, 2002, p. 1170) to include rituals that are organic, individual, spontaneous, and creative (Miller, 2004). I have developed a methodology I use in the Wheel as psychology work that I call *personal rituals*. Individual personal rituals are gestures that speak about or to the emotional response that arises in a woman as she explores the readings and reflects upon her own life experiences. They can include enactments, psychodrama, the creation of altars, readings, dance or movement, the honoring of items from that time period, shamanic healings, and the like, all done within a five to seven minute timeframe. Although she may enlist the help of other participants (e.g., as in a psychodrama), these are neither group rituals nor performances, but rather deeply personal connective conversations among the participant, the aspect of herself she is working with, and Spirit. Often it is the emotional and developmental processes a woman goes through as she prepares her personal ritual that is even more significant than the actual gesture itself. Personal rituals done in this way are unique to this work and one of the main reasons women are drawn to follow the Wheel as a psychology. At each holyday, depending upon how many

women are participating, the personal rituals take three or four hours, with women enacting their personal rituals one after the other. Although the group takes brief breaks in silence, the whole experience is considered a ritual in and of itself. The intensity and power of 13 to 18 women, each speaking the truth about her life experience in the modality of ritual and gesture, rather than just word-saying, creates an environment of exponential healing and authentic celebration.

All of this is done in what is called circle or *circle culture*, which has been best described by Christina Baldwin (1998) in *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture* and popularized by Jean Shinoda Bolen (1999) in *The Millionth Circle*. Circle is a "way of being together"<sup>6</sup> (The Women's Well, n.d., para. 1) and includes the use of a talking item (a technique used by Native American and other indigenous, earth-based peoples to assure that each speaker in a circle may speak without interruption), guidelines for respectful, attentive listening and witnessing, as well as commitments to confidentiality and anonymity. The personal ritual format described here is, without a doubt, one of the most powerful psychological tools I have ever experienced, applied, or witnessed.

Since learning is not just an intellectual endeavor, in addition to the personal rituals, each time the group meets, women also invite learning through their bodies, emotions, and spirits using modalities such as personal processing, meditation, movement, journaling, visualization, creating art, divination, singing, chanting, drumming, trance dancing, shamanic journeying, and the like. Those using transpersonal psychologies will most likely recognize these healing modalities. Using a large repertoire of methods helps assure that participants with different learning, experiential, or emotional styles are served.

Thus, at every holyday juncture, each woman of the group encounters related material prior to the session and allows an emotional response to surface, and responds in the language of personal ritual. The group then encounters further information and experiential exercises related to the holyday when they meet as a part of the Mystery School or WOTY weekend. In this way, women work throughout the year, and each year, with each life phase represented on the Wheel, including the Girl-Child, the Maiden/Adolescent, She Who Cycles, She Who Creates, Sustains, and Nurtures,<sup>7</sup> the Amazon, the Mid-Life Woman, the Crone, and so on.

One can name and work with these encounters of the seasons of women's lives in many ways. For example, in psychosynthesis they can be identified and worked with as subpersonalities (Rowan, 2001; Rueffler, 1996). These points on the Wheel and the corresponding phases of women's lives can also be experienced and worked with using shamanic techniques. I use the term shaman and employ shamanic methods with respect and care, being aware of and committed to an ethic I gained and maintain as a feminist, namely to take care not to appropriate the spiritual traditions of cultures other than my own (Three Rivers, 1991).

I have chosen to work specifically with European, earth-based traditions such as the Wheel for that very reason, to offer all women, and particularly women of white, European ancestry and backgrounds, an opportunity to explore and find their own indigenous, earth-based roots and shamanic traditions rather than taking the spiritual traditions of others. Sadly, at this time, just as the names the foremothers of Old Europe gave to the seasons or holydays remain unknown, so too the names they gave to those who embodied what is today known as shamanism have been lost. Although the full extent of their practices remains unclear, this situation is being partially rectified by the work of Max Dashu (n.d.), Vicki Noble (1991), Barbara Tedlock (2005) and others.<sup>8</sup>

The WOTY itself, both as a spirituality and a psychology, can be conceptualized and experienced as shamanic in a number of ways, including using a universal commonalities perspective (Harner, 1990). The standards used to describe or identify shamanic methods or experiences are many and include the following: they must incorporate a notion of the birth/death/rebirth cycle, be used for healing/wholeness, and include the notion of various dimensions of reality or places one can travel or visit for information to bring back to this reality, or another reality, for healing. In the model I am presenting here of the WOTY as a spiritual psychology, all of these factors are present including the notion that work with subpersonalities or developmental life phases can be considered other dimensions and worked with through the use of shamanic ritual.

Shamanic rituals and transpersonal perspectives are fully integrated into the WOTY practice. For example, I believe that Western women have yet to fully acknowledge and grieve the loss of the Goddess cultures that occurred some 6,000 years ago (Gimbutas, 1991; see also Eisler, 1987); those feelings can and do affect Western women

collectively and as individuals today. These unrecognized and unnamed transpersonal experiences or matrices can present in any number of ways, including serious and immobilizing psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias, and others.

Women in the WOTY practice learn about Goddess cultures and their loss in intellectual work with the Wheel, we do personal and group rituals of acknowledgment and grieving, and we may also use shamanic journeys to retrieve specific information and memory in support of healing. As the ritualist and transpersonal helper or guide, I give the same kind of support and suggestions in these situations as one might when working therapeutically with a personal, repressed biographical memory, but with the added perspective of transpersonal psychology and methods.

A similar situation often occurs as we study the Inquisition and the torture and murder of women en masse in what is known as the Burning Times (Armstrong, Pettigrew, Johansson, & Read, 1990; Barstow, 1994). Women in general, and especially those currently involved in herbalism, midwifery, and other female healing modalities common during that historical period of Europe or those interested in or returning to or maintaining their earth-based roots from any cultural tradition, often have transpersonal experiences they have no way of understanding or working through within traditional psychological frameworks. Common transpersonal perspectives and methodologies such as visualization, ritual, past life regressions, shamanic journeying, and the like can be of great help in these situations.

This has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of the fusion of feminism and transpersonal psychology for me. Feminism, and the subsequent scholarship that has grown out of feminism, can give factual information about women's experiences, while transpersonal perspectives and psychologies can offer not only a framework to contextualize collective non-biographical experiences but also methods inherent in that framework to respond to women's bodily/emotional/spiritual reactions to this information. As a longtime feminist educator and as a woman involved in women's psychology, often the only way I have witnessed movement and healing in women's psyches and lives has been through this application of transpersonal psychology, transpersonal/shamanic methods, or both.

### From Autumn Equinox to Spring Equinox: The Underworld/Inner Time of the Year

Although this is not the place to offer an in-depth description of each of the holydays, I would like to focus on some of them to give the reader a sense of how they can be worked with as a spiritual psychology. In doing so, I also wish to highlight what I think is one of the most important aspects of the Wheel as a psychology for women and one that I later found echoed in the transpersonal psychology of psychosynthesis. To explain this further, I will return to the example used earlier: Spring Equinox.

Earth's peoples have always given names and personality forms to the energies they experience, and one of the names given for this time of year and its processes is Persephone. Her story involves voluntarily leaving her mother, Demeter, and the *outer world* ways of being, in the autumn of the year, to turn toward her inner life, to explore her soul-self and learn wisdom from her "inner Wise One," Hecate. At Spring Equinox, one says goodbye to the *inner time* and returns to the *outer time* to create the world anew, guided by the wisdom gained in inner time reflections/lessons.<sup>9</sup>

The WOTY has been used to describe the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth's surface at any given time of the year, resulting from the tilt of the Earth, which in turn creates the seasons. This is of great importance to those who must be attentive to the light and the seasons: the farmers, gardeners, gatherers, fisherfolk, herders, and others involved in the growing or pursuing of food and other resources needed for the living of life. There are also many myths and stories that have been overlaid on the Wheel. Some use the lifespan of a deity, but others were created and used to explain and teach the lifecycle of vegetation, grain, animal life, and the seasons. One of the most ancient of these stories is that of Persephone and Demeter.

In the patriarchal version of this story (Foley, 1994), Persephone lives with her mother, Demeter, in a world that is always sunny and beautiful. They pass their days together happily tending to Earth's bounty and caring for one another. Persephone is exploring on her own one day when Hades, the god of the Underworld, creates a huge chasm in the earth's surface and forcibly takes Persephone into the underworld to, as it was euphemistically framed in classical Greek versions of the myth, "be his wife." Demeter, who does not know what has happened, grieves so deeply that all living things

on earth cease to grow and produce until another god intercedes and Persephone is permitted to spend half of her time above ground with her mother. However, she must still reside the rest of the year in the Underworld with her abductor. If elaborated on at all, this story of abduction and rape continues to be proposed in world civilization classes as a story that the Greeks created and used to explain the seasons, specifically Winter and Spring. When I recount this version of the story to women, they shudder, shake their heads, and roll their eyes (and often weep). All of us who share those moments are very clear that we would never tell our children, and especially our daughters, such a story to explain the naturalness and beauty of the changing seasons; nor do we believe that Greek mothers did this.

Neither did Charlene Spretnak, one of the early writers in women's spirituality, who constructed an earlier version of the story based on the "many artistic representations of Persephone's descent that omit the rape" (Downing, 1994, p. 106). Spretnak (1992) saw these as reminders of an earlier version of the story. "Spretnak's version of the myth proceeds from her assumption that the story of Persephone's rape and abduction was added to the Persephone traditions after the rise of patriarchy, indeed, that it is a disguised representation of the patriarchal invasion" (Downing, 1994, p. 106).

In Spretnak's (1992) rendition of the story, Persephone and her mother Demeter are living in beauty and peace. Persephone, however, experiences an internal shift when she sees the spirits of those who have died off in the distance, "their faces drawn with pain and bewilderment" (Downing, 1994, p. 110). She chooses to go and minister to them and in this way spends time in the Underworld. In this story, she also returns from the place of the dead in the spring to be with her Mother in the *above world*. She feels called to be in both worlds and goes back and forth voluntarily. There is no violence in this version, only the story of the natural cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

In work with the WOTY as a spiritual psychology, Spretnak's story and her notion of Persephone's descent as voluntary is taken one step further, a step based on what can be readily observed in nature and in one's own garden. The story is much the same, with Persephone and Demeter, the Goddess, having a wonderful time in the beauty of the world, marveling at all of creation and loving one another. One day, however,

Persephone “has a feeling” and wonders earnestly: Is this all there is? Is there more to life? By doing so, she names a restlessness or knowing that there is more to life than outer pursuits, a knowledge that she later chooses to heed by traveling to the Underworld for other kinds of learning and experiences.<sup>10</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine that European foremothers, as well as those of other cultures, used these observable realities, the cycle of changing light and the growing seasons of both animal and plant life, and the stories they created about these cycles, to describe their own inner lives and the dynamics between and amongst themselves in human relationships and communities. Just as trees and plants stop their process of producing leaves, blossoms, and fruits in the Fall and move their energy downward to the roots to renew and resource by absorbing nutrients and slowing their life processes for Winter, so too might women’s needs for rest and reflection amid cycles of productivity and outward focus be conveyed by such a story.

This account, which stresses Persephone going voluntarily into the Underworld, has other precedents in nature as well. In late Autumn, if left to finish their cycle in the garden, plants drop their seeds naturally or, as it were, voluntarily. They fall to the ground to winter over until the light and warmth of the sun bring them to life again as fragile shoots in early Spring, and the growth cycle begins again. Food plants that grow where they were not planted or that appear unexpectedly in compost bins are commonly called “volunteers.” Ancient peoples saw this same process and may have used it as the basis of early pre-patriarchal descent psychologies and stories not reliant upon violence or abstract ideas.

Contemporary Western women often respond deeply to this version of the story and its basis in nature. Many immediately relate to the story as that of a literal mother-and-daughter dynamic, and especially regarding the daughter’s need to go on her own adventures. In the spirit of others who also work with this story as a psychology for women (e.g., Carlson, 1997; Downing, 1994; Meador, 1993), I ask women to consider expanding the story’s meaning to describe other relationships and psychologically complex situations. I ask, for example, about the scenario of being truly happy in a love relationship and with one’s life and also wanting to travel on one’s own or return to school. What about being successful and happy with a career but feeling called to make a change that will affect the status quo of one’s life in some way? Women often nod

gravely in response to these questions. Although such a dilemma is not an easy place to be, it is a situation women recognize, know, and are relieved to hear described as a natural part of their psychology, whether or not they choose to follow the call.

In the work with the Wheel as a spiritual psychology, we honor that each year in the Autumn, or at other times in our lives or personal cycles, we as Persephone go voluntarily and naturally into the inner time of growth, often wearying of the always outer time. We understand our need to be more reflective, knowing that it will strengthen us. We learn to know and respect that significant growth happens *below ground* and we seek it. We say we go to be with our Grandmother Hecate, the name we give to our own inner Wise One, a term and concept readily recognizable to transpersonalists who utilize shamanic or mythic tropes in their own work.

In this psychology, Persephone’s return and our own are also voluntary and natural, the heeding of an internal call for both inwardness and outwardness. Though adherents to patriarchal science claim to be the ultimate authorities on the processes of nature, who can really explain the confluence of factors that make a seed fall when it does, or what causes it to germinate, sprout, grow, and bloom? In the same way, who can know an individual woman’s corresponding internal rhythms and cyclical needs and patterns? Working with the Wheel in this way can help a woman to deeply know herself, and encourages her to find and eventually listen to and trust her own internal cycles and processes.

We ask women following the Wheel as a psychology to step fully into this teaching story, to think of times they have been Persephone, Demeter, or Hecate. In this way, we try to honor that each of us has all of these aspects within us and to encourage ourselves to see the overarching wisdom inherent in the story as a psychology. Together we learn that each of us must go inward for reflection, rest, and inner nourishment before coming out to grow and bloom, to be healthy women.

In relation to this seasonal pattern, Spring Equinox and Autumn Equinox are the two crucial holiday thresholds. One can see them as the beginning of Autumn and the beginning of Spring but also, and more importantly as a psychology for women, the former is the beginning of a going-in time or experience, and the latter is a coming-out time or the *Return* from an inner or Underworld experience.



The WOTY as a spiritual psychology is not an abstract idea. The Wheel is the name given to a literal natural phenomenon, the predictable but ever-changing flow of the seasons through time. While this work with the Wheel as a psychology asserts that there is great healing value in realigning ourselves with this chronological reality, it is also meant to be a psychological and developmental map or framework, and while it is one that is firmly embedded in nature, it can be experienced and used outside of the actual chronology. As a way of internalizing the map, we encourage women to follow the Wheel chronologically year in and year out, and in this way, the Wheel can offer women practice in this psychospiritual framework for recognizing, understanding, and dealing with a range of situations that may arise in the course of their lives.

The focus here has been on the *under time* of the Wheel that begins with Autumn Equinox (September 21/22) and includes five other holydays: Samhain (October 31), Winter Solstice (December 21/22), Imbolc (February 2), and Spring Equinox (March 21/22).<sup>11</sup> The fifth, one of the created holydays of our year, occurs in November. It is the time of the Late Winter woman, the Crone, the older woman who is honored and revered as the Wisdom Keeper of her people. Although each of these will be mentioned briefly in the following discussion, the focus for now is on the two threshold holydays, the Autumn and Spring Equinoxes, and the season of Winter generally.

Autumn Equinox has a multitude of meanings and psychological opportunities for those who follow the Wheel as a spiritual psychology. In the larger Pagan, Goddess, and women's spirituality communities, it is most often associated with the end of the growing season that culminates in harvest celebrations. While honoring the harvests of the year just past, or of a lifetime, may be part of what a woman feels called to ritualize at this holyday, as a developmental model, this time of the year is equated with the "Autumn woman" (Monaghan, 2002, p. 93). As such, it is a time of proactively taking stock, much as the foremothers did literally in the Fall, assessing their storehouses of foods. At Autumn Equinox, one encounters a corresponding time of assessment. We ask ourselves a set of pointed questions as we explore the spiritual psychology of a woman at mid-life and the Blood Mystery of menopause.

Another focus of Autumn Equinox is what is

called *Persephone's change in consciousness*. This gives name to that poignant, complex moment in the story of Persephone and Demeter, and in real women's lives, when a woman finds herself in the midst of situations of abundance but is also being called to something else. This poignancy can also intensify during mid-life and menopause when a woman grapples with a need to seek rest, reflection, contemplation, and resourcing for the next half of her life as she simultaneously contends with the life she has already created.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, those of us who follow the Wheel as a psychology speak of and ritualistically enact Autumn Equinox as the time of going voluntarily into the Underworld or what is most often referred to as *the Deep*.<sup>13</sup>

It is here that one can begin to discern the many ways to go in or find one's self in the Deep. It is possible to see that there are times in a woman's life when she has been taken down, *grabbed by Hades*—or, in other words, by patriarchy. This describes those experiences that are outside of nature or the natural flow or experience of nature. These are caused by human social/political dominator systems and include such horrors as rape, incest, and chronic poverty—situations outside the natural flow of plenty and scarcity—and the many other experiences of being degraded, diminished, or limited that occur specifically because one is female.

Illness, separations, traumas, losses, and deaths are also things that happen in nature or in the nature of human life, and one can describe these experiences that can *take us Down*<sup>14</sup> as being *grabbed by Hecate*, and though devastating, can be seen as an integral part of the living of life. One can see being grabbed by Hecate as inner wisdom or Self-creating, serving the purpose of growth or good, situations that prompt a change in direction. These situations, though perhaps painful and confusing when one is in the midst of them, can ultimately serve as a guide to more authenticity or wholeness. A woman can still experience these situations as part of nature or as part of the natural cycle.

It is also possible to enter the Deep voluntarily to work on issues that need attention. I suggest to women that they be alert to things that come up during the *outward* seasons in their lives, and to make note of them even when they cannot attend to them immediately, knowing that there will be a time, either seasonally at Autumn or otherwise, to focus on these issues. If these things are not attended to voluntarily, they will likely arise sooner or later, and often in devastating ways.

There are other less dramatic ways to be in the Deep. A woman may simply find herself feeling out of sorts, disoriented, or restless and seeking time alone to check in on the direction of her day or life. She may withdraw to try to attune herself to the natural flow, for example, by seeking to spend the Winter as a time of rest and quiet reflection or by taking time during her menstrual cycle to dream and journey. It can also mean making time in each week or day for a balanced mix of outwardness and inwardness.

The Wheel turns and with it, life and the seasons of women's lives continue. After Autumn Equinox comes Samhain and with it, the multitude of personal, psychological opportunities awaiting in facing and grieving the losses of the year or a lifetime. It is also a seasonal opportunity to work with and face the fact of mortality. In November, it is time to explore the notion and the reality of the Crone, to engage in personal rituals focused on aging, and to celebrate and honor female elders and strengthen the internal Wise One or *She Who Gains Wisdom Through Experience*. Winter Solstice, which is probably the best known and the most appropriated of all the Pagan holydays, is celebrated by those who follow the Wheel as a time of rest and quiet. It is a time to imagine aligning ourselves with our ancient ancestors' rhythms, who, after the tending and mending of post-harvest and the early winter days of resting and storytelling by the fire, may have moved into semi-hibernation for the months of deep winter, hunkering down into a shamanic sleep-dreaming-journeying state. The lower level of activity and subsequent reduction of body temperatures among these ancestors may have stretched resources and at the same time created ample opportunity to dream and journey for one's tribe.

The latter begins to describe the time of year known as Imbolc (February 2), which in the Northern Hemisphere is usually the darkest and coldest part of Winter. Some cultures and traditions speak of Imbolc as the beginning of Spring, and it can, in fact, have those qualities. It is, however, this darkest, coldest, part of Winter that serves as the focus of Imbolc. When seen as the nadir of Winter, Imbolc signifies endurance in the face of adversity and scarcity of resources. It is a fragile time, when life is tenuous and uncertain. Based upon the clues that ancestors left in the activities and gestures suggested for this time of year, I have often imagined the rituals foremothers created for their communities in the darkest of Winter. I imagine that they sat circle in

### **Wheel of the Year as Spiritual Psychology**

caves and cottages, with whatever sources of light were available to them, and listened closely to each member of the tribe's description of how things were for them: this one with little food left, this one in need of a new blanket, and this one unsure if she will even survive the Winter. I imagine the priestesses, shamans, or healers responding to what they heard, making sure this one was fed, this one had the extra blanket, and that they spent time telling stories or enacting dramas of Spring and Return with the ones who spoke of despair and uncertainty. In this way, I speak of Imbolc as a time of faith, the real faith of earth-based folk living in and closely with the cycles of nature.

This approach to teaching Imbolc is also reflected in the work of Anne Yeomans (1984), specifically in her articulation of psychosynthesis and transpersonal perspectives in the essay "Self-Care During Dark Times." Her insights have now merged with and deeply informed the way we work with the Underworld or inner time seasons of the WOTY and is yet another example of the value I have found in the confluence of feminism and transpersonal psychologies.

#### **The Wheel of the Year and Psychosynthesis**

**A**nne Yeomans (1984) described some of the basic tenets of psychosynthesis in the following way:

As a psychosynthesisist, I assume the existence of a natural process of growth within the individual. I also assume that the process unfolds in a certain direction. It tries to move from conflict to integration, from partiality to a greater and greater wholeness.... I also assume that the process of growth necessarily goes through some very difficult times. As well as times of integration and harmony, and peaks of joy and ecstasy, there are also times of disorientation, of falling apart, of struggle, of darkness, of crisis.... I also assume a principle in psychosynthesis, often hard to remember in dark times, and that is there is help for us, both inner and outer. (p. 67)

Yeomans named specific processes that are described in psychosynthesis as *destructuring*, *restructuring*, and *the place in between*. Although it is not the main focus of her article, she later uses the seasons as metaphors for these processes.

Yeomans (1984) described destructuring as experiences of "coming apart," "undoing," or what has also been called "the positive disintegration" (p. 69). Not surprisingly perhaps, she has also associated

destructuring experiences with Autumn. She defined these as times:

when old ways are not working, where old symbols have a kind of emptiness and have lost their vitality and meaning. We are in a time when the usual habits and patterns of activity do not work quite as well, where things may feel awkward. We are not at one with our lives the way we might have been a month or two before. (p. 71)

This describes the awareness or restlessness earlier referred to as Persephone's change in consciousness and may also aptly describe one's experience of mid-life.

Recall that Yeomans (1984) also described destructuring as those times of "disorientation, of falling apart, of struggle, of darkness, of crisis" (p. 67), and, in so doing, began to identify the other ways that going into the Underworld or the Deep can happen. While one may go voluntarily into Autumn as the inner world time to release or deal with issues that need to be healed or experiences that diminish one's life, Yeomans' description aptly captured those intense experiences earlier described as being grabbed by Hades or by Hecate.

Restructuring is a familiar concept. Destructuring, however, is something not only less known but also feared.

When someone is in a period of destructuring, we say they are falling apart or breaking down. These are scary words, critical words. Our language indicates a lot. We rarely see these times with respect or as a necessary aspect of the process of growth. We hope they will be gone quickly. We hope they will not stay at all. We worry that people will not make it through. We worry we will not make it through. (Yeomans, 1984, p. 70)

Yeomans (1984) also likened destructuring to "dying," or the "dying of certain ways of being, of certain patterns of coping" (p. 70), which echoes the understanding of Samhain, the holyday that honors loss and death as an integral part of life.

Before the restructuring time, here described as the time of Spring and Return, Yeomans (1984) spoke of the place in between as "another part of the process.... This is the time between endings and beginnings, 'the time in between'... the time in the Winter when you are not at all sure there is going to be a Spring" (p.

70). Linda Leonard (1983), whom Yeomans referred to in this essay, also used the metaphor of Winter to describe what is being said here about the in between time: "Soon it will be Winter, the time for accepting the cold outside and going inside, the hibernation and patient waiting which cannot talk of victory, but which can hold through and endure the dark" (p. 176).

This sounds much like the description of Winter and Winter Solstice offered here and, although neither Yeomans (1984) nor Leonard (1983) made distinctions or spoke of the increments that those who follow the Wheel do, it appears that both spoke initially of Winter generally and then of Imbolc specifically. For example,

If destructuring is the Fall, then the time in-between is the Winter. It can be a time of great darkness and despair that tests one's faith deeply. It is often experienced as flatness, an emptiness, a time when one really doubts that there could ever be any light at the end of the tunnel. (Yeomans, 1984, p. 74)

She then described "the time in-between (as a time) which challenges our faith.... the tools of prayer and meditation, and being with those people who have faith in these tools, who practice them honestly, can be very helpful" (p. 77).

Regarding spring and restructuring, Yeomans (1984) said: "If we have lived through the falling apart, the breaking down of destructuring and the waiting, and the doubting and resting of the time in-between, the process takes us naturally to restructuring" (p. 78). Leonard (as cited in Yeomans, 1984) warned, however:

It would seem that this season Spring would be the easiest to accept, but we know that suicide rates are high in Spring. If one hasn't properly related to Winter, if one has fought it and not really accepted the possibility of both birth and death, or if one has gone into it too deeply, forgetting the passage of seasons, then one may not be able to accept the new and fearing change will cling to depression and the old. (p. 78)

### **Restructuring/Return**

Often I envision Spring Equinox and Return as a woman walking out of the woods, tired, clothes a bit tattered or mussed, gaunt perhaps, but also clear-

eyed. She has been on a vision quest. She has been to Hel<sup>15</sup> and back. She is worn out and in need of care and nourishment. She may want a hug, or she may still be too raw, and it may take some time for her to be comfortable around others. She has had experiences, often shamanic experiences, that have torn her apart and put her back together again. Hopefully, she returns more healed, more whole, or at least with more of the parts of herself integrated. She has at least learned a bit more about herself and encountered opportunities for wisdom.

She has come out; she has returned. That is often a miracle in and of itself. And now, like Persephone, she is also a shaman, with one foot in one world and one in another. Remember, this thing she has just traversed (the being taken, or the going-in voluntarily to seek and address her own shadow self, the Winter and the Imbolc of her journey) has been tenuous, and she has made it this far. But as Yeomans (1984) reminded, she is not yet out of the dark (or “woods”) even now. Spring, re-entry, and restructuring can be tough and dangerous.

It seems to be helpful to remember that we are working with the re-forming of a process that is deep inside us. We need to leave time to allow the new integration to take shape. It is a process that is deeper than the conscious mind can fathom. Something new is trying to reconstruct itself within us. We need to give it space and time. This does not mean waiting passively or limply, but being in a state of alert, aware receptivity. (pp. 78-79)

Each year, in the Mystery School and in the WOTY weekend intensives, in addition to the personal rituals each woman does in honor of her Divine Girl-Child, the community creates and enacts a large ritual at Spring Equinox to honor this thing called Return, and what Yeomans (1984) described as restructuring. To create such a ritual it is necessary to know something about the psychological experiences of having gone through a destructuring time and the transition time of the in-between and of having returned from such an experience. How might one honor the complexity of going into the Deep or destructuring experience and the subsequent restructuring process? What is it like to come out of such an experience? What is needed for integration? What ought contemporary priestesses, shamans, or healers do to help prepare each woman for these experiences? The answers are in the language of ritual.

## **Wheel of the Year as Spiritual Psychology**

The ritual of Return is created in a safe, wooded place in nature. The women have a sweat experience, or bathe in the river or involve themselves in other deep purifications before the movement toward Return. This is done to leave behind the dross of the work of the inner time. Each woman emerges from the river or the dark hut and begins a self-paced journey, walking the forest alone, guided by the path itself and directives along the way. Just being out in nature in the early Spring brings many gifts and may offer women many instances of what Yeomans (1984) spoke of as the “inner and outer help” (p. 67): There are also interactive altars and experiences discretely incorporated into nature all along the way. The journey continues down a slight incline. At the nadir of the path, there is a final meeting with Hecate, who is sometimes in the form of a woman, but most times in the form of an old tree. Here is the reminder that:

Hecate is the name given to our inner Wisdom, the place where we go to listen, reflect, hear, and to heal. Any time we need. And for earth-based women, we also actively seek this time of introspection and “listening” to our inner Self at the dark moon, or when we are bleeding/menstruating, and during the Winter season, the season just past. And at this time of year, at the Spring Equinox, we ritualistically leave this place, the Inner Time, to turn our energies to the next part of the natural cycles of our world, the Outward/Growing time. A part of that, then, is one last visit with Hecate, to hear what final wisdom She may offer us and to say our goodbyes to Her, as we turn our faces toward Spring and new growth.<sup>16</sup> (Duckett, 2008)

Participants then begin their ascent, at the end of which is a final ritual within the ritual, that of being greeted by Demeter:

Demeter is that aspect of us and the Goddess that awaits our return from the Inner Time and who is here to not only greet us but to wholeheartedly welcome us back from our Inner, and sometimes dark and challenging, journeys to know our Selves. She is our guide in the Outward Time, teaching us how to grow and bloom, create and manifest. (Duckett, 2008, see n. 16)

A Priestess, embodying this energy, takes each woman by the hand and says: “Persephone, just as the seed must be planted in the earth, so too must you go into the

Underworld, the Inner Time, for the nourishment of solitude, healing, and reflection” (Duckett, 2008, see n. 16), and offers a piece of pomegranate, the fruit of the inner world.

And, now, just as you were called to the time and gifts of the Inner World, you are now called to the Outer, to bring your gifts of wisdom, integration, and all that you have learned in the Inner Time so that you and your community, and the world, shall benefit from your Cycles, your Journey, and your Wisdom... as you move from the Inner to Outer, and Outer to Inner, and through all the Turnings of the Wheel. (Duckett, 2008, see n. 16)

She gives each woman a slice of apple, the fruit of the outer world. She continues, “But for now, walk gently and surely toward rebirth, renewal, new growth, and Spring” (Duckett, 2008, see n. 16). She places an eggshell in each open palm, to hold, sheltered, as each woman continues her journey toward Spring.

Each woman is led out of the forest, back out into a clearing. Here she is fed easy, nourishing foods and beverages. She is seated and cared for as she eases herself into the restructuring time, into Spring. The Wheel continues to turn, for after the Return and Spring Equinox are the other outer time holydays of the Maiden/Adolescence, Menarche, Summer Solstice, the Amazon, Lammas, each with their attending spiritual psychology for women.

### Conclusion

I believe that in her essay “Self-Care During Dark Times,” Yeomans (1984) accurately described the Underworld or inner time of the WOTY and did so in the language of a transpersonal psychology. She stressed that the processes she described are not well known or accepted by general society and said, “We need to build a new thought form” that says, for example, that “destructuring is essential, that it is integral to restructuring” (p. 70), and that the in-between time is also necessary. In psychosynthesis, all of these processes are seen as a part of life and the living of life in a conscious, meaningful way. I believe that the WOTY as an earth-based spiritual psychology as I have described it herein, is such a thought form, and one that is solidly based in the reality of nature and nature’s cycles and dynamics.

Using the Wheel and its holydays in this way offers women a language as well. I can say to a friend,

“I’m feeling Imbolc-y,” and she has some notion of what I am saying or how I am feeling and what is really going on for me. It means I feel a deep uncertainty—not the uncertainty of what to wear to the party tomorrow but a far more complex, “I don’t know if I’m going to make it” state of mind. Because the Wheel is not just a seasonal or chronological reality, it also serves as a developmental model for women and a map of psychospiritual processes that can be applied and followed at any given moment.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, I believe that many of my foremothers, the writers and thinkers in Goddess and women’s spirituality, have instinctively known that the WOTY is a spirituality that has psychological value. Yet, until now, no one has named nor developed it explicitly as such. Those in my circles who have followed the Wheel as a spiritual psychology for many years have begun to apply it to their own work. For example, a psychotherapist used the WOTY as a spiritual psychology with female prison inmates for two years, meeting weekly “to tell our stories” and “heal wounds” (N. Vanarsdale, personal communication, May 13, 2010). A counselor of adolescent girls in an out-of-home care program offered the Wheel in a course on healthy relationships. The class ended with the young women creating a Menarche ritual for themselves, following the guidelines of all that they had learned throughout the year (S. J. Fussell, personal communication, January 18, 2009).

It is my hope that in the coming years, as more and more women in Goddess and women’s spirituality and in transpersonal psychologies encounter the Wheel of the Year as a spiritual psychology, that others will not only be able to apply it to a variety of settings, but will also join those already working with the Wheel in this way, in exploring, developing, and crafting a woman-centered, earth-based, spiritual psychology for women that will be helpful and healing.

Blessed be!

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## Notes

1. There are many and conflicting definitions of feminism. For this discussion, I appreciate the work of bell hooks (2000) in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Regarding psychology "from a feminist perspective," please see the mission statement of the Association of Women in Psychology (AWP) ([www.awpsych.org](http://www.awpsych.org)).
2. Women's spirituality, Goddess spirituality, and feminist spirituality are all related but distinct threads that developed out of the feminist movements of the 1960s-1980s and share the notion that women have the agency to define spirituality for themselves.

3. The Re-Formed Congregation of the Goddess, International (RCGI-I) is the oldest officially recognized women's religion in the US ([www.rcgi.org](http://www.rcgi.org)).
4. Although these particular names come from two different cultures (the quarter-days, or the solstices and equinoxes, are from the pre-Christian Germanic, and the other four, Imbolc, Beltane, Lammas, and Samhain are from pre-Christian Celtic traditions), both are recognized as part of the Old European culture described by Marija Gimbutas (2001) in *The Living Goddesses*, and as such, may be seen as sharing a common, ancient spiritual heritage.
5. Archaeomythology is an interdisciplinary approach to cultural research of ancient societies, combining research methods and perspectives from such diverse fields as archaeology, folklore, art, anthropology, linguistics, and so forth. For more information, see the Institute of Archaeomythology's website ([www.archaeomythology.org](http://www.archaeomythology.org)).
6. One of the best descriptions of "Circle" is from *The Women's Well*, in Concord, Massachusetts ([www.womenswell.org/faq.html](http://www.womenswell.org/faq.html)).
7. Along with many others, I use the term "She Who..." based upon Judy Grahn's (1977) poem, "She Who." Alicia Ostriker (1987) described the usage as being "the goddess as verb," in *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*.
8. For further information about ancient and contemporary women and shamanism, please see *Shakti Woman* by Vicki Noble (1991), *The Woman in the Shaman's Body* by Barbara Tedlock (2005), and the work of Max Dashu, founder of Suppressed Histories Archives (<http://www.sourcememory.net/womanshaman/names.html>).
9. From the unpublished program (Duckett, 2000) of our "A Year and a Day Sacred Mystery School for Women," Spring Equinox ritual, in Asheville, North Carolina.
10. Regarding other descent stories, please see Austen (1991), who identified a number of such stories, Wolkstein and Kramer (1983) who wrote about the descent story of Inanna specifically, and Marguerite Rigoglioso (2010) and her provocative interpretation of the Persephone/Demeter story in *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*.
11. Throughout this article, I am speaking specifically of the seasons as they manifest in the Northern hemisphere. They are opposite on the Wheel in the Southern hemisphere; for example, when it is Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere, it is Summer Solstice in the Southern hemisphere.
12. See Borysenko (1996), especially chapter eight, regarding women's mid-life metamorphosis.
13. The use of the term the Deep in reference to going into or being in the Underworld comes from the lyrics of the song Inanna by Suzanne Sterling (1994).
14. From the same song by Sterling (1994), lyrics are "She goes Down as we go Down, we follow her underground..."
15. Hecate/Persephone's equivalent in Norse mythology, the female ruler of the Underworld.
16. From the unpublished program (Duckett, 2008) of our "A Year and a Day Sacred Mystery School for Women," Spring Equinox ritual, in Asheville, North Carolina. What is said at each of these junctures may change from year to year but the original sentiments come from a synthesis of women's voices in women's spirituality gathered by the author of this article. Capitalizations reflect the spiritual foundations of the Mystery School and terms and concepts integral to the conceptual framework of this psychospiritual model.

#### About the Author

**Kim Duckett, PhD**, received her doctoral degree at Union Institute. She is an ordained Priestess, a beloved Teacher, and shamanic ritualist in the Dianic Goddess tradition. After thirty years as a Women's Studies educator, including the area of women's psychology, she now devotes her time to exploring, developing, teaching, and articulating psychologies for and about Goddess women. She travels throughout the US teaching the Wheel of the Year training and is currently completing a book on the Wheel of the Year as an earth-based psychology for women. She lives in the mountains of western North Carolina.

#### About the Journal

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