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Barbara Bickel

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, bickel.barbara@gmail.com

Vanessa Fisher

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Barbara Bickel and Vanessa D. Fisher

Awakening the Divine Feminine A Stepmother–Daughter Collaborative Journey Through Art-Making and Ritual

Within this performative article unfolds a dialogical journey with the Divine Feminine as lived between two women. This co-written and visual collage employs visual art, poetry, transcribed dialogue and reflective writing to tell the story of a stepmother and daughter who found themselves within the stepmother–daughter roles and labels, with little guidance as to how to relate intimately to one another within such a framework. Collaborative art making and ritual became the medium from which to overcome such limiting boundaries, becoming the basis for nurturing their relationship with each other through the dark and rich process of mothering and daughtering, resulting in a collaborative transformation, and spiritual awakening that transcended all such roles. The role of priestess that emerged provided a link to another reality that was not limited by personal pain and unfulfilled expectations. Shifting the relationship from the bounds of personal roles to a transpersonal understanding that was larger than both became key to continuing the journey together.

The Mysteries [schools] ... fostered ... unity ... a kind of combination art institute, church and school. For what they offered was not a one-sided sole dependence upon language. The words uttered by the initiate as both cognition and spiritual revelation were supported and illustrated by the sacred rituals unfolding, before listening spectators, in mighty pictures.

—Rudolf Steiner (1964: 83)

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine.

—Luce Irigaray (2005)

Art opens a door to spaces that cannot be seen or felt with the senses, a space that cannot be structured or understood by the mind, an unseen embrace that can never be grasped by the form. If you try to find this space, you will forever be chasing your own shadow, if you try to grasp its illusiveness you will be continually left empty handed. Only by surrendering into its embrace does invisible wisdom and transformative power penetrate into the open and vulnerable heart.

We have become so separated and fragmented in our language and communication. We have become constricted and disconnected because of the labels and roles we identify with and let structure our relationships with others. How do we find meaning and connection that is not restricted by the world of labels and roles? This co-written¹ and visual collage performs a dialogical journey with the Divine Feminine as lived between two women, who found themselves within the step-mother-daughter roles and labels, with little guidance as to how to relate intimately to one another within such a framework. Collaborative art-making and ritual became the medium from which to overcome such limiting boundaries, nurturing their relationship with each other through the dark and rich process of mothering and daughtering, becoming the basis for collaborative transformation, and spiritual awakening that transcended all such roles.

I met Vanessa 14 years ago in an art room at a community center. She was seven years old and hiding behind the legs of her father, my new lover. She was suspicious of me, a new woman brought into her life, not by her own choice. On that first day of meeting, despite the distance between us, we made art together.

Just after Vanessa's eighth birthday I became stepmother to her and her older sister, Leah. Vanessa and I struggled quite painfully at times to connect in this step-riddled relationship for the next nine years. She was a tomboy whose mind was always ahead of her body, falling, stumbling and crashing through her environment. I was the too perfect and organized keeper of the home environment.

Our relationship held a historical base of betrayal that had come from neither of us yet was always present between us. An underlying sense of rejection permeated our relationship, one or the other feeling rejected by the other it seemed at all times. During her short and broken periods of living with her father and I over those early years, art remained a place of connection for us. When she was eleven she and her sister were part of a larger art project² that I carried out with 29 women exploring the idea of "sisters." Vanessa and I co-created an art piece, collaging the ground of the piece together. The drawing that I did came from a photo shoot where she wrapped herself in my scarves. She and her sister were part of the larger performance ritual³ that opened the art exhibition. This was the last time that I saw Vanessa dance and move freely in a public environment.

Jan Sheppard, a collaborator-poet and friend, wrote "Quiet uprisings" based on the finished art piece, with the same title.



Barbara Bickel, "Quiet Uprising," 1995, 48" x 24", mixed media collage and drawing on wood. Photo: Barbara Bickel.

Quiet Uprisings

Purring softly
In sleepytown
lives the voices
of daughters unborn
Moving stealthily
In a sunbeam
carrying the saga of stories untold

Rise up young ones
hear the call
of your leaders voices
Eat the bread of danger
Carry your rebellious knives
Run with your
Fearless feet to each other
To freedom.

—Jan Sheppard (1995)

Barbara's first piece of me was a good representation of the state of mind I was in at eleven years old. Asleep and innocent, unknowing, full of potential and possibility not yet seen. Asleep to the fire in my heart and belly, still structured by the forces imposed on young girls and women to remain unconscious and asleep to their own deepest potential, to remain frightened and falsely in need of safety. And yet there was a profound beauty to this time in my life. I was not yet awake to see what was happening, not yet trusting enough to see what my stepmother was drawing out of me. It wouldn't be until years later that I would begin to understand....

The following year when Vanessa was 12 I created another art piece inspired by a photo that I had taken of her during the Christmas holiday. The mystery that Vanessa's reflection alludes to is very present in this piece.



Barbara Bickel, "Hidden Shadows," 1996, 23" x 19", mixed media drawing and collage on board. Photo: Barbara Bickel.

In the summer of 1998 Vanessa and Leah asked to stay with me for part of the summer although their dad was not in town. This was the first time that I felt that my relationship with them as a stepmother was valued in itself. During that visit I asked them if they wanted to pose for a photo shoot, expressing what they wanted to say to the world. *Immortal* is the art piece that

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came from that. They each choose to give the photographer/the world the finger. Vanessa at fifteen had become a young woman with something to say to the world.

Waking up to cracks in time,
where darkness dares to dance in delight
fragile body yearns for comforts,
fear lifts the heart out of stagnant resting,
In search of its beloved.

To You, I surrender knowing and understanding
—Vanessa's 2004 performance ritual poem #1⁴



*Barbara Bickel, "Immortal," 1998, 14" x 21", mixed media drawing on wood.
Photo: Barbara Bickel.*

Prior to the girls becoming adolescents I had offered to create a ritual for each of them to celebrate their first bleeding when the time came. Vanessa had participated in Leah's ritual four years prior. On a visit a few months after her 16th birthday I offered to have a blood ritual⁵ to honour her entrance into womanhood with a few women friends as witnesses. We were living in different cities and saw each other only twice a year so the timing of this ritual was off and she very reluctantly agreed. During the ritual Vanessa opened up and shared the trauma of her first sexual experience. After my two women friends left, Vanessa lay in my arms until the small hours of the morning, her body releasing, shaking and trembling, struggling to reclaim the part of herself that

she had lost, until exhaustion brought her (and me) sleep. The outcome of it was profound, in that it opened a container of trust between us that had been absent throughout our relationship to that point.

Two months after this event, Vanessa called us from her home in Saskatoon and told us that she wanted to change her life. She was struggling with what was becoming a scary addiction to drugs, an unhealthy lifestyle of partying accompanied by hating and failing school. She wanted to move to Vancouver and live with us. Two months before her 17th birthday she moved in with us. For the next four years we shared our lives full time and came to accept our limitations with each other. It was a very intense time. During one particular difficult period in our relationship I came to fully admit to myself and to Vanessa that I could never be the mother that she desired. It was painful for both of us living with my “failure” that felt like our “failure.” At the same time it freed both of us to live with a new honesty with each other. I stopped trying to fix the relationship, yet did not give up on the relationship. I continued my own spiritual journey and practice of coming to know the divine feminine and came to recognize that my role and relationship with Vanessa was more importantly as a priestess. Shifting our relationship from the bounds of personal roles to a transpersonal understanding that was larger than both of us was key to our continuing journey together. The role of priestess, was a role that flowed from my art practice and gave us a link to another reality that was not limited by personal pain and unfulfilled expectations.

Each birthday that Vanessa had during those years was a celebration mixed with pain. On Vanessa’s 20th birthday I wrote this poem for her.

Living Awake

For Vanessa

The day
nineteen becomes twenty
amplification
awake in lies
television her respite

The day
grief consumes existential love
birth cord severs
awake in lies
psychology text her respite

The day
despair in desperation
appreciates her self

awakes in lies
her own Self her respite

The year
stretched deep
extends her further
awakens in lies
un/embraced she caresses truth

Six months after this 20th birthday, Vanessa was preparing to move out on her own. She had begun to read books on Eastern spirituality and was meditating, but she still struggled and suffered with her relationship to her female body. Despite the fact that Vanessa is a beautiful, healthy and fit young woman, she was continually obsessed with her health, weight, and complexion. Her menstrual cycle, which was never normal, had become more erratic. She would have weeks of premenstrual symptoms but no shedding bleeding cycle. Conversations laden with despair, pain, and shame for her body consumed our conversations. After one of these conversations I offered to co-create an art piece with her for her 21st. It would mark the end of a third seven-year cycle.⁶ I suggested that she might also want create a performance ritual to accompany the unveiling of her art piece and see it as a rite of passage that she could begin preparing for. The rite would honour her life journey thus far and welcome the next phase of her life. She had connected with a spiritual community and was planning to live communally with other young people (six young men) committed to practicing and living a spiritual life. It was not until two months prior to her birthday that she made the commitment to model naked for me and to prepare for a performance ritual.

We set the date for her photo shoot and met at her sister's home for the photo shoot. Vanessa was a different person that evening after the photo shoot. She was light and free. We spent that day together at her sister's house; three women, laughing and talking freely. To my delight and honour, by the end of the evening Vanessa was dancing without inhibition, her body moving fluidly, erotically, joyfully, without shame. This was a part of Vanessa that I had never seen. What follows is an excerpt from the conversation we had immediately following her photo shoot in August 2004.

Barbara (B): You seemed pretty comfortable.

Vanessa (V): Once I was in the actual process of it, it seemed fine. I didn't feel uncomfortable so much. It was helpful having you being naked⁷ with me because it felt less like I was the center of attention. I found the meditation before was helpful as that was the time all the thoughts could come up, my fears, and I could consciously practice just not relating to them and choosing to see through the absurdity of the thoughts themselves, and that they are actually very inaccurate. And really just getting to a space



Barbara and Vanessa, 2004, photograph by Michael Fisher

where I see you as an artist and not my stepmother, is an important part too. Then I just let go of more. It definitely felt comfortable and felt like something my body has wanted to do for a long time. And the thought that's come to me for the last while feels like I have been slowly stripping down myself, that's what it feels like, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. I just see it as a marking point for just being naked, vulnerable and seeing in the face of that nakedness that there's actually nothing to be afraid of. And that was really important for me to do—metaphorically, physically, you know it's the same as what I am going through in the rest of my life.

B: It's a good thing to do, rather than just in your nightmares.

V: Yeah, it was a big part to see my body as something that could be beautiful, and something to share with others as well. [starts crying] I've felt really caged for a long time. And feeling like my body was for other people and not for myself. And not having to feel ashamed for any imperfection. Yeah, it's like to truly love the vessel as spirit has chosen to have it. It's not even mine to feel ashamed of, in that way, you know. It feels like I've been doing it violence. It feels like I am rediscovering my relationship to my body, and what that means, as I get more spiritual insights into myself, to the soul, the non-material and try to figure out how to integrate the physical as well. And yeah, that's not all that I am but it's a huge part in this world, the relative world. It has to be part of my spiritual practice as well. So, it feels like I am slowly just trying to not hide all parts of myself, which is really hard to do. It feels really terrifying going into it. There's so many levels, it's so unreal. That fear is such an illusion that I've created. So, it felt like I was really present in the experience. I didn't feel like I just sort of dissociated from it, from what's happening.

And so it was just sort of like this presence. I've been working with this idea of presence. I realize that consciousness being conscious of itself is actually when you are completely just present and there's no thought and no feeling going on at some level, there's just an openness, an expansive embrace, you're completely absorbed. Yeah. It is a sense of dis-identifying with the body in the sense of, it's realizing that I am not just my body, and that's important I think when you are displaying yourself, to see your body as not yours to keep and hold onto and be ashamed of or displaced in some possessive egocentric way. Your body is not yours to own. I often just look in the mirror and it's not what I feel inside, it's like my image feels like a limit on what I can be. It seems I need to trust that if I can actually embody the essence of beauty I will no longer have a need to possess it. And beauty will come through physically when it is embodied by the soul. It's not about fixing the physical to reflect that inner beauty. It seems really obvious but it has been really hard for me to trust that and believe that. And know that this layer of skin, this boundary is not actually my limit. It's hard to trust that. It's a huge step for feminine energy itself. And I want to put this up [the art piece] in a house with a bunch of males in it, you know, have it be honored and its bigger than me, a mirror to reflect the inner beauty of all ... of the One.

B: The experience that you just brought to mind for me when you were talking about being spirit, that you are actually showing spirit and choosing to let spirit come out through your body. In my experience, the word that comes out for me is goddess, because that is that female energy spirit, and for me it is like feeling every cell in my body, just there, every cell of your body is just radiating out and wants to embrace the world and wants to touch everything, that energy just going out. I don't know if that's ...

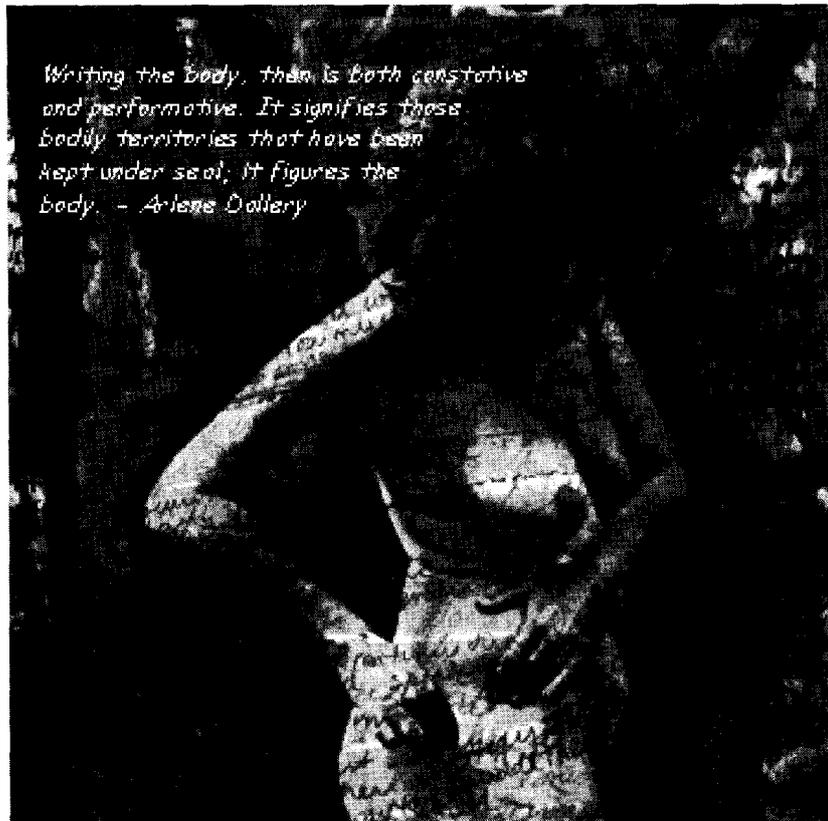
V: It's totally the same. I tend to have a masculine view of it, when I reference back, because the stuff that I read is very masculine. But it's the same experience of this complete outward embrace ... you're there because you're always going to be there, but you're just so unaware of yourself in the moment, and yeah, it's like just wanting to touch everything and eat everything, and there's no sense of what you want to touch that's good or bad, in fact you are not even aware of the distinction, you just don't even care, at some level. But it is such a simple experience, and I don't think people can even imagine, even if they had those experiences, that it could be so simple. And maybe we as women especially, we tend to undervalue, because we think it has to be this really big intellectual thing, and its totally just Ground of Nothingness.

Pieces fall away,
Caught in the flow of your current,
Lights burn out in silent waves,
Pushing and Pulling,
The body embraced remembers its harmony,
Invisible eyes bring new vision,
Silent hands weave garments of majestic beauty.

To You, I surrender all doubt and disbelief.

—Vanessa's 2004 performance ritual poem #2

Two weeks after this photo experience I defended my Masters' thesis entitled, *From Artist to A/r/tographer⁸: An Autoethnographic⁹ Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body* (Bickel 2004). After thirteen years as a practicing collaborative visual and performance ritual artist I entered into an arts-based inquiry of my own work and self. The guiding question of my research was: *What does it mean to me to have an ethical and aesthetic feminist art practice?* Ritual is central to my art practice, as is the (re)presentation of the body. The purpose of my return to university and graduate studies was to integrate text and language with art and the body. To do this I responded literally to the numerous feminists (Helene Cixous [1997]; Adrienne Rich [2001]; Susan Bordo [1997]; Arlene B. Dallery [1992]; Luce Irigaray [1994]; Audrey Lorde [1984]; and Trinh Min-ha [1999] amongst others) who compellingly summon women to write from



*Writing the Body, then is both constative
and performative. It signifies those
bodily territories that have been
kept under seal; it figures the
body. - Arlene Dallery*

Barbara Bickel, "Testimony," 2003, 12" x 12", mixed media collage on wood.

Photo: Barbara Bickel.

and with their bodies as a form of resistance. I began the art making research with a ritual of writing on my entire body.

Within the third space of ritual, my resistances were engaged and my body, art and writing re-forged as interconnected language. I posit in my thesis that art making, as ritual provides the means by which the a-rational¹⁰ or the mystical can emerge and expand our ways of learning and knowing in this world.

Vanessa attended my defense. Although she had at this point been part of art-making experiences with me she continued to struggle to understand my way of being in the world. Listening to the thesis presentation and the dialogue afterwards helped her find clarity and to achieve a new understanding. She emerged from that day with a desire to help me articulate the feminine spirit that she now clearly recognized in my art and performance rituals. The experience also changed her perspective on the new experience she was having as the only female in a house of males. She now felt to a greater degree the responsibility and importance of keeping the feminine spirit present in her home and the larger world. It was at this point that we decided to write together to bring the Feminine Ground of Being into greater visibility. As the artist of writing in this piece I leave her to write further about my art and her experience of our collaboration.

If I used one word to describe my stepmother's artwork it would be *reclaiming*. Reclaiming not only the female body which has long been oppressed and repressed within culture and throughout history but also a deeper reclaiming of forgotten depth and repressed darkness; the very darkness that is the source of all light and visible beauty. She unearths the longtime ignored Ground of Being; the dark womb within which all potentials that ever were and ever will be are contained. The Divine Feminine, the formless which gave birth to all form, this is the gift of remembering she offers, if only we reach out to that which is beyond what our normal senses can perceive.

Collaborative unfolding seems to be a strong aspect of the feminine path; the desire to share and learn and transform together rather than pursuing purely solitary paths to unearthing spirit. My stepmother works with the invisible side of reality, intuitively kneading and massaging unconscious energies and urging them forth into spaces where they can be illuminated. With love and respect Barbara journeys with me into the darkness, we venture together through the unseen, unknown, aspects of ourselves. The spontaneity in movements is the embodiment of this unmanifest beauty. Barbara is teaching me a reclaiming of this lost art of connecting beyond words. And then also reclaiming the beautiful expression of words and writing but with transformative power because the words no longer are presented to merely describe an experience, rather as we rest in this timeless ground of potential, the words arise fully formed from the experience, the words are an expression of the ground, of the divine feminine, rather than a detached tool in which to structure and make sense of the Mystery of the Universe.



*Vanessa in meditation with veiled art piece behind her, prior to performance ritual 2004.
Photo: Barbara Bickel*

On October 17th, Vanessa's 21st birthday, her rite of passage was shared with friends, family and her male housemates. She had been reluctant, still needing encouragement and guidance, yet committed to creating a performance ritual. She began by sitting in meditation and asking those that came to join with her. The lighting of candles and sharing of poetry marked each phase of her life. Music combined with mediation created the space for unveiling and dwelling with her art piece. She became priestess for the evening, dressed in black with coloured veils (my scarves) flowing from her waist, holding the Ground of Being for those that came to witness the unveiling of the art. The memories of the years of co-labour that led to this return to nakedness drifted away as I witnessed this daughter of the divine reclaim her birthright.



Moonlight dances on unseen bodies,
graced by warmth,
between the shadows,
kisses of darkness fill spaces of un-
known mystery,
Infusions of bitter sweet delight cut
through fear,
Wisps of sacred breath slip through
finger tips,
shimmering cloaks of sparkling black
beauty
wrap around timid souls,
in embracing love,
Every cell breathes the bliss,
All is revealed,
raw and unashamed,
I surrender to You, my need to know
the way.

—Vanessa's 2004
performance ritual poem #3

*Barbara Bickel, "Spirit's Vessel," 2004,
24" x 48", mixed media drawing on
wood. Photo: Barbara Bickel.*

After years of being bounded by an invisible barrier, I had broken through and reclaimed my identity with the Divine Feminine. The goddess had been closer to me than I could have ever imagined, and through my own journey into darkness and death I had been resurrected and reborn as an embodiment of the Divine Feminine herself. In making the journey back to my Self the greatest gift revealed to me was the transcendence of all such distinctions as masculine and feminine, and roles such as mother and daughter. The struggles Barbara and I had faced in our relationship as stepmother and daughter were illuminated as illusory baggage that did not belong to us, and had no place in the Divine Feminine space. The answers we searched for would

never be found by fighting to figure out our relationship within relative existence, but by transcending to a space where such relative distinctions had no place and fell away as empty and hollow appearances. Through the art making and ritual process we had entered and remembered our bodies, our shared femininity and our true connection in the immovable power of our Source. We can now continue to build a relationship as stepmother and daughter within the relative world of existence based on our shared connection within the Ground which we can never lose or forget.

¹Different fonts distinguish the voices of Barbara and Vanessa throughout the piece of writing

²*Sisters* was a collaborative exhibition where I worked with 29 women and a poet Jan Sheppard (Bickel and Sheppard 1995). Jan's poetry was fed by meeting with the co-creator and myself with the finished art piece. It was my first art exhibition that included a performance ritual with the model/co-creators.

³Public performance ritual as I have come to call it is the ritual letting go of the art by the women and myself at the opening of art exhibitions. This seemed essential in the Sisters project and I have continued this as an ethical, spiritual, community-based educational part of my art practice.

⁴Vanessa's 2004 performance ritual poems are interspersed throughout the writing as a reflection of the crossing of time boundaries.

⁵I was introduced to blood rituals through my women circles where some of the women chose to reclaim and ritually celebrate their first menstrual cycles as adults. I later read about it as part of N.A indigenous traditions and as developed by spiritual feminists. With my own renewed understanding of female blood rituals I then offered it to Vanessa and Leah. For more literature on blood ritual's look at Judy Grahn's 1999 book, *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* and Kisma K. Stepanich's 1992 book, *Sister Moon Lodge: The Power & Mystery of Menstruation*.

⁶With the help of her sister, Vanessa took the theme of the three seven-year-cycles and found the story of Inanna to describe it further (Crain, 2004):

Inanna
We go down as She goes down
We follow Her underground
Hail to Inanna
Who dies to become whole
And deep calls to deep

The veils drop by on our way
As we pass through the gates
With Inanna as our guide
We find truth in deepest night
And deep calls to deep.

The theme of decent to the underworld and deep letting go has been the central challenge of this past year. This is why I've added a poem on the goddess Inanna. Inanna was a female ruler who descended to the underworld where she faced seven gateways, each gateway could only be passed by the surrender of some aspect of her power until the last gate where she was stripped naked and then killed. After three days of being dead she was rescued and became goddess of heaven and earth. I've found this myth powerful in illustrating the struggles of my own spiritual path of deep release and letting go.

⁷In an effort to acknowledge the power differentiation that is in place with the artist and the model, I at times offer to be naked when photographing women naked. I have also invited the women to photograph me first so that they can have the experience of being on the other side of the lens first.

⁸A/r/tography draws upon the skills of the artist, researcher and teacher in an alternative and evolving form of inquiry. Educator, researcher and artist, Rita Irwin (2003), explains a/r/tography as the act of the "artist/researcher/teacher art making and writing offer[ing] complementary yet resistant forms of recursive inquiry." She goes on to describe "A/r/tography [a]s a fluid orientation creating its rigor through continuous reflexivity, discourse analysis, and hermeneutic inquiry" (8).

⁹Autoethnography, according to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000), "is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal and the cultural". They further explain it as collaging "concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness" into stories that are related to human and institutional relationships that are "affected by history, social structure, and culture" (739).

¹⁰Accessing and honouring the a-rational as texts of the body and the subconscious through altered states within ritual is an important counterbalance to the dominance and privileging of the rational mind in our society. The a-rational allows the ignored ghosts and forgotten/hidden knowledges to emerge.

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