# A Solid Sisterhood:
## The Goddess Within Barbara Walker

By Richard Leviton ©1992

Barbara Walker's first vision was entirely pagan and archetypal, with nothing of the conventional divine about it. She was thirteen and taking her dog for an afternoon walk in the spring woods, as she recounts in *The Skeptical Feminist: Discovering the Virgin, Mother and Crone* , Walker's intellectual autobiography and one of nine books she's written in the last decade about the Goddess, feminist spirituality, and patriarchal deconstruction. Pausing inside a grove of pine trees and finding a snakeskin, she examined it with great interest, never having encountered one before. A sudden gleam of sunlight through the canopy of pines spotlighted a wildflower near her feet, a Spring Beauty: a five-pointed white star with delicate veins of rose in the center. Immersed in her contemplation of the snakeskin and flower, Walker forgot about her surroundings until a new configuration of sunlight through the aisles of pine trees caught her attention—especially one giant tree that "suddenly became a woman."

In Walker's rapidly blooming vision, the tree didn't resemble a woman; it *was* the woman herself. "She was a hefty, hippy, bosomy, naked green woman with three heads and huge, powerful legs planted in the earth like a strange new version of the Jolly Green Giant." The giant green woman had three feminine faces: a young girl, a mature woman, a wrinkled crone. "Out of the dark triangle of the giant woman's crotch, between her massive thighs, poured an endless stream of living things." Out streamed plants and animals, goats and rhododendrons, fishes and cacti, and people—the entire biological world—but the triple-faced woman paid no heed to this perpetual, automatic birthing, Walker noticed. Instead, She was paying full attention to young Walker. "The eyes moved, sometimes looking at me directly with a sharp, intense stare. I longed to know more about this apparition." This apparition, Walker realized later in her life, was an authentic, unforgettable image of the Great Triple Goddess of virgin, mother, and crone, the three faces of the archetypal feminine. "I have never forgotten a single detail of that afternoon's experience," Walker noted some four decades later. "No matter how many years have passed, I can always replay it in my mind like an old movie, unchanged, unembellished, still unexplained."

Not quite unexplained, actually. Walker, now in her sixties and widely respected as a feminist scholar, Goddess mythographer, and intellectual activist, has devoted most of her adult life to substantiating that privileged adolescent glimpse of the ancient, pre-Christian triune Goddess. By her own account, Walker is more visual than visionary; sober-minded, grounded, practical, and habitually skeptical; she would be the last to present herself as a "chosen" mystic, an occultist, or some kind of neo-pagan Wiccan functionary. Skeptical femininists rightfully resist such glamorous seductions as too self-serving, Walker argues. Still, she knows that thousands of other women down through the "patriarchal centuries" must surely have been rivetted by similar visions, "responding to their own inherent archetypal mystery without a shred of book-learning about it. Like a dream, however, the vision is certainly a communication from one's

inner self to one's outer self." And as a communication from whatever source—Walker's inner essence or the Goddess Herself—it has informed and guided Walker's work and influenced a generation of ardent feminists.

At the time of her teenage vision, Walker strained to comprehend the words that passed from the green lips of the Goddess' young girl's face, certain her speech would be "supremely significant." Hearing only the word "key," Walker thought She would give her the key in the form of more words, but She said no more. Only later, only now in her "happy cronehood," says Walker, can she see that the Goddess' revealed presence itself is the key, the profound, prescient, and culturally subversive inspiration for contemporary Western women to become the creators of the new moral and ethical code of our culture. That, in Walker's view, is the Goddess' social mission for our time and it's one of the core reasons Walker has written so many books on Her behalf.

"There has to be a reworking of our moral code with more emphasis on the feminine, and this will come out of all our research into the tradition of the Goddess and the rediscovery of the Mother archetype," says Walker. Milennia of "patriarchal ideologies" have been so disastrous to the fabric of culture and environment, that almost any shift toward feminine imagery will be beneficial. "A resurrection of the feminine archetype that all women still keep somewhere deep inside themselves, even if they don't know it, may be the only ideological possibility for rehumanizing and reuniting the world. Reinstatement of the Goddess in the hearts and minds of her earthly daughters—and sons as well—may turn out to be the only practical salvation from the final chaos with which man in his vast cultural imbalance now flirts."

As one of the Goddess's earthly sons trying as many honest men are these days to "get it," I've been a fan of Barbara Walker ever since I stumbled, somewhat awestruck in 1983, upon her Wagnerian polemic against patriarchy, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* . I encountered Walker's massive well of information—an 1100 page, alphabetized, investigative critique of language, myth, and history—at a critical moment in my own delicate "feminization" period, a sensitive moulting period in my mid-thirties that many men I'm sure similarly navigated. At the time I was researching the subject of the Arthurian Grail Quest and found Walker's matriarchal reinterpretations of Western myth, legend, and presumed history only a little short of astonishing. As I wrote enthusiastically in an *East West* review in 1984: "With a prodigious heave Barbara Walker positively upsets the complacent Judeao-Christian applecart of orthodoxy, known in some circles as the patriarchy. Walker contends that the ancient Mother Goddess, in her myriad forms, lies hidden, besmirched, behind all the Christian Church's patriarchal masculinizations of pagan and originally feminine motifs."

Walker's encyclopedia is really about the politics of etymology, the matriarchal reclamation of the root meaning of words, myths, and facts, and in this task Walker serves as expert semantic archeologist. Walker saw sexism, distortion, and falsification through the complementary modes of history and mythology as she traced the transformation of a matriarchal, Goddess-nurturing society to the present male-dominated, destructive disaster, this "male-engineered apocalypse."

In large measure, she laid the lion's share of culpability at the doorstep of the staunchly antifeminist, "antilife" Christian Church. So when I learned that Walker—habitually hermitic and retiring, an assiduous scholar who prefers anonymity, who hardly ever grants interviews, speaks in public, or makes tours because she's too busy fulfilling the intellectual dictates of the Goddess her muse—was in fact on a modest

promotional tour for *Amazon* , her new work of feminist fiction, and would be calling in at Northampton, Massachusetts, a short distance away, I invited her to our lakeside house for an afternoon of tea and discussion.

In print Walker sometimes comes across as strident, hectoring, even virulent, in her monolithic critique and condemnation of masculinist values. She writes with a strong voice and carries a stout antipatriarchal stick. It's a critical tone that could put an unfeminist man on the defensive edge. Yet in person she's congenial, soft-spoken, confident yet unpolemical, incisive yet unpushy, comely, and frankly, very feminine—a mother, wife, and, remarkably, a famous knitter and writer about knitting. Long before Walker began publishing her feminist cultural critiques, she had spent a decade writing a series of ten now standard reference works on knitting designs—*A Treasury of Knitting Patterns* , *Mosaic Knitting* , and *Charted Knitting Designs,* among others—that form, said John Birmingham in*Vogue Knitting* in 1989, "the most complete compendium of stitch patterns available" found in the library of every serious knitter and the studios of top designers like Calvin Klein and Adrienne Vittadini. "Knitting without them is like writing without a dictionary," Birmingham added, praising Walker as "the passionate scholar." What deeply drew Walker to knitting and has provided the line of continuity for her subsequent feminist interests was the aesthetics, graphics, and symbolism she enjoyed in these Arabic carpet designs, Chinese lattices, and medieval tapestries. "I've always lived through my eyes. I've always been visionary; I see visions very easily, almost at will, and what I see has a lot of meaning to me."

Walker wrote her last knitting text in 1976 as her "knitting phase" ended, but with her passion for scholarship she has since roamed other fields like mineralogy, Tarot, matriarchal symbology, the *I Ching* , and women's rituals. Incisive, encyclopedic, endlessly investigative, Walker is a woman of passionately undertaken phases: astronomy ("my first real love"), horses (she nearly became a breeder), journalism (a degree from the University of Pennsylvania), dance (she taught Martha Graham technique), motherhood (a grown-up son), dolls (a 300 doll collection of Barbies, Kens, and spin-offs, all sporting Walker-knitted costumes), crystals ("I love my stones!"). Probably her most overarching pleasure, confesses Walker, is to avoid travel, lecturing, and public notoriety, and stay at home, "very close to the desk," and write more books *for Her*. "Anything else takes away the writing force, the inclination, the drive," confides Walker, whose Goddess evidently has a taint of the Protestant work ethic. "There's the Goddess within me, cracking her whip, saying: Get busy! She's basically a pagan Goddess who wants her story told. What does she really want me to do? Sometimes that's not easy to ascertain, but I certainly want to empower women in whatever way seems feasible to me. I want to be able to tell the truth as I see it."

In many respects *Amazon* , Walker's first venture into fiction, reads like a compressed analogy for her own life story with the Goddess. Antiope, a warrior among the Amazons of the Mediterranean living about 4000 years ago, seals herself up in a cave at Themiskyra, "the site of the central temple that all the motherclans knew to be the womb of creation and the source of the Mother's power." Antiope has made her first kill in battle, striking down a young male Greek, which among the Amazons is a rite of passage as momentous as menarche and justification for a visit to holy Themiskyra. Purging herself of "blood guilt" and any responsibility to her victim's ghost, Antiope craves a vision. "I hoped that the Mother would honor me with a truly transcendent experience." The Mother did, but for Antiope it would be a shocking, almost unbearably

brutish immersion in the life and times of "one of the more unpleasant backwaters of Hades, the most alien place anyone could imagine."

Antiope wakes up in the "sulfurous murk" and "leaden veil of sour air" of late 20th century America, naked, except for her warrior's sword, and bewildered, in the breakdown lane of a New Jersey expressway. After an attempted rape by a carful of leering young men, Antiope is rescued by Diana, a scholarly middle-aged woman, "older in years, tall, with a thickish body and a cronemother's greying hair." Diana forges an inter-cultural bond with the prepatriarchal time-travelling Amazon, whose living presence imparts a profound, transformative impulse to the lives of Diana, her husband, friends, and society. For them, Antiope is the Goddess living amongst them. Diana eventually writes a bestselling book (and helps a millionairess establish a Goddess temple) about Antiope's matrifocal culture, hoping it will give many women in this country "a new philosophy of human behavior to consider."

Walker has crafted a compelling narrative frame for what is variously a wry, satirical, poignant, damning, and freshly critical look at our masculine-dominated contemporary culture. The new philosophy of human behavior is Antiope's most cogent gift to Diana's Motherspirit-bereft, "unwomanly," and "strange, flawed world where men rule." But first Antiope makes Diana, on behalf of her gender, uncomfortably aware of the inequities, ravages, and hollowness of a culture established upon male values. Antiope is appalled to have awakened from her trance vision into "the general nastiness of this dim, unloving age." From her perspective, here are people inexplicably existing in a self-imposed lonliness, living with "insouciant apathy," anxiety, and discomfort of the spirit, people self-privileged and self-threatened subjecting themselves from infancy onwards to daily television lessons in "hurting, shooting, killing, robbing, burning, blowing things up, and abusing others—especially men abusing women."

Their farmland is sterile, men and women are starved for physical contact and true mental enrichment, they're trained by commercials to subsist on unwholesome foods and pointless toys—it is "a sad world, full of sad, lost people." Along with the trivialization or neglect of women's vital sense of relatedness, notes Antiope, goes "an inevitable disintegration of clan and family, so pervasive that it was even regarded as normal." The air is bad, the religion is bad, male-female relations are bad, and the arrogant male priests have "erased the divine image of the Mother from women's minds" and made Mother Earth sick and enervated, all to support "their amazing civilization," wails Antiope in disbelief. "Surely, I thought, the Mother must be very angry at children who left canker sores all over Her body, turned Her breath and lifeblood into poison, and generally behaved like Her disease parasites."

Antiope's catalog of patriarchal abuse is by now familiar to many critical readers but perhaps not to enough. To Antiope the root cause of this pervasive "spiritual malaise" is our culture's loss of the Mother image and all respect for motherhood and feminine values. Where she comes from, Antiope tells Diana, "We worship the Mother, who created all that lives." Why hasn't it occurred to women of your time, she queries Diana, "that they could rise up together in a solid sisterhood and declare in one voice that this world's ways were wrong?" Jeff, a male physician and Diana's brother in *Amazon* , wondering what might be the "practical results" if a Goddess religion became firmly established among the women of his day, "sensed that it would mean profound changes." Of her character Jeff, Barbara Walker comments: "He's not quite with it, but he has a clue. As a doctor, as a man who takes care of others, he has that requisite sense

of responsibility already in himself, as many men do. These are actually the men who could understand the feminist movement. Other men have a deficiency in responsibility, a lack of maturity, I find many men never quite attain the same willingness to take responsibility for other people's welfare that women do. This being so, in a matriarchal society, it's recognized that women, especially as mothers, do more for others, they nurture others and take care of them. The men's function is to help them, not to take their power away."

That men have taken women's power away—systematically, legally, politically, and protractedly—is for Walker and many feminists the heart of the issue. In Walker's case, it was the first shocking glimpse of this gender divestiture, granted to her in an Episcopalian childhood, that sparked her feminist anger. The Christian Church has conspired with men to rob women of their power and rights, she understood. "It was anger at the way I'd been lied to by religious authorities, anger at what I sensed, back in the 1940s when there wasn't even the term, to have been sexism." In many respects Walker was a precocious feminist, radicalized by the keenness of her own perceptions and analytic deductions, that set her feet on the path of skeptical dissent at a very early age. She didn't like going to Church; it involved too much "physical immobility and mental ennui," plus she had "an uneasy, insecure feeling about God."

The ubiquitous image of a bleeding, agonized Jesus skewered on the Cross was "very cruel," while the empty pedagogy of Sunday school only convinced her that this was a "thoroughly hateful, terrible religion." Prayer seemed pointless in the face of an all-powerful, willful deity; God obviously didn't love animals because her beloved dog died despite her prayerful entreaties on his behalf; there were too many "unsettling indications of God's ill will toward human beings," too much obvious superstition, rampant irrationality, adult dissembling, lying, and cover-up, too much ecclesiastical obfuscation and denial. The Church's God wasn't to be trusted.

"He particularly detested females. I was small, weak, insignificant, powerless, hopelessly outclassed. I was just one more of his throwaway people. He could crush me like a mosquito. I saw the underdog here as myself and God as a bully, threatening me and always getting away with it because he was unassailably omnipotent." What she most wanted to do, the young Walker realized, was to "avoid him at all costs," preferring to be overlooked than singled out by an evidently antiwoman Father and "celestial lunatic." It wasn't fair, it was intolerable, and with a "certain cornered-rat defiance," the prepubescent Walker was going to do something about it.

One night during a violent thunderstorm an eleven year old Walker determined to force God to listen by calling his bluff. "In my last moments he would know I despised and defied him." Walker, knowing that traditionally God blasted his enemies with lightning, revealed herself during the thunder and lightning of the summer storm as his worst, most unrepentant defiler. She concentrated her heretical thoughts—"I hate you. You're awful. You hear me? I think you stink."—and hurled them back into heaven as her thunderbolt from a suburban New Jersey bedroom. "Because I truly believed in God's power of instantaneous retribution, what I did may have been the bravest act of my life." She gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut, held her breath, and awaited divine destruction, but none was forthcoming. She intensified her efforts, casting her anathema into "ever more insulting terms," yet still had no response. Then she had an insight: "It wasn't only that God wasn't listening. He wasn't there! Lo and behold the

paternalistic tyrant that had made me feel so unworthy was only a myth! I had imagined myself in chains, and the chains had turned to paper."

In one daring instant Walker shifted from believing in a terrifying, inequitous God to the liberation of nonbelief through a "conversion in reverse" as a "great weight" was lifted from her defiant psyche. God is a mental construct, a *man*-made myth whose image accretes over the centuries the way a polyp is formed, she realized in triumph in this icon-shattering moment. Our society's dominant image of male authority—our Father in heaven—was now unworthy of her respect and unfit to guide her any more through life. "He must be cut out of my psyche like a malignant growth before I could become a whole person." What she needed most was an *absence* of faith, certainly of a faith that offended her common sense and oppressed her femaleness. For Walker, the experience was a feminist epiphany, a life-shaping revelation; only in middle-age would she realize "how much inner freedom my antitheological opinions" had given her. "All alone, I had found my way to the haven of nonbelief, and I would remain there, at peace in my central core. I think nearly all women seeking relief from the internalized oppression of patriarchy must take this step at some point."

It's not the kind of message likely to sit well with fundamentalists, Christian or Moslem, but then these true and literal believers may be among the last to acknowledge the Goddess as they were among the first to discredit her, Walker suggests. In these circles being a feminist is the most eggregious form of heresy. Talk about feminine values in these circles is nothing short of blasphemy and sacerdotal subversion, but then that's essentially what feminists like Barbara Walker have in mind. The roots of that interiorized patriarchal oppression and "runaway masculinization" have burrowed so deeply in the Western psyche, that nothing short of profound, shocking upheaval will make many people aware of their "colonization." The Judeo-Christian God has always been "the world's greatest imperialist."

Males have colonized motherhood and attributed their rules of conduct to God, without whose masculine aegis patriarchy could never have gained its foothold, Walker contends. "After two thousand years of leading their world through rivers of blood, centuries of war, incessant exploitation, and spiritual dissimulation of the most shameless sort, the patriarchs may find that their loss of feminine understanding and creativity is their true original sin," argues Walker. "By destroying the spirit of their Mothers they may have brought about the destruction of themselves."

Feminist scholarship in recent decades has revealed the degree to which Church Fathers have edited, distorted, even eradicated Church documents, history, scripture, and imagery to suit the gender politics and "doublethink" of the male theologians, contends Walker. The Bible is by no means any longer a spiritually reliable text; at best, it's a "collection of second-hand myth and biased history," providing no "spiritual nourishment that the educated people can stomach." In this way the living Goddess and the formative force of women have been expunged from establishment religions. "From its inception, the Judeo-Christian belief system has been committed to antifeminist doctrines." Its historical record shows clearly to the unbrainwashed that it is an antilife "father-oriented ideology of guilt, sin, pain, and punishment."

When she was an adolescent in junior high school and beginning to date, Walker learned firsthand how the Christian God is a prop for gender inequities and a macho man's best friend. Her date, a typical adolescent boy, expected her to "put out" with some "romance" in the backseat of his Buick, but Walker refused and dismissed him

from her life. But the unpleasantly coercive experience, now increasingly called date rape, was her first inkling of how for a sexist male God is his primary ally in the effort to control women. Her date, knowing Walker didn't attend Church and was therefore evidently not Christian, assumed she must be free of conventional religious sexual scruples and thus amenable to what he called "free love." Walker wasn't and she kicked him hard in the shins to make the point. "Men are most disturbed by women who deny their God and most disposed to punish such women," she says. That's because for the Church and State a woman's disobedience before a man is tantamount to disobedience before God—an "insoluble dilemma" indeed. "Father God is woman's internal fetter, more effective than any external chains," and nothing transmits this institutionalized sexism better than patriarchal religious imagery which burrows deep within the cultural subconscious. If we're going to have propagandistic imagery, why not have icons that are life-affirming?

It's time to reclaim and refurbish the Goddess, says Walker, as male destructiveness and masculine "collective insanity" must now give way to the "comparatively less sociopathic" gender. "The mothers of humanity must reclaim their natural powers and rights. Now it is time for work on the female deity to resume. It is high time for women to reclaim their own deity, the Goddess who took on her first reality in their hearts when they worshiped the spirit within themselves and their ancestresses and equated motherhood with the motivating energy of the universe."

A reclamation of preChristian Goddess icons and woman-centered values would be culturally useful and socially empowering, claims Walker, provided we purge the feminine/Mother archetype of its superstitious, magical accretions. Throughout her years of scholarship, Walker has never deviated from her core perception that deity is a human-made mental construct; this is as true for masculine-centered God epistemologies as it is for feminine-oriented Goddess beliefs. "Every humanlike personification of a nonhuman, impersonal cosmos may be called superstitious, including the ancient images of the Goddess herself." Deities in essence are anthropomorphisms of natural forces, embellished imaginatively over time by generations of human devotees. Walker's feminist skepticism is rigorous, chastening, and unilateral; an enlightened feminism, she stresses, must not be credulous, rife with uncorroborable superstitions, unsupportable attributions, "magical misapprehesions," irrational beliefs, and spurious sacred histories; otherwise women will replicate the intellectual "disease" of patriarchy.

The skeptical feminist is the true icon broker, smashing the old images, generating the new, and as such, is unrelievedly threatening to male ideologies, says Walker. "Spreading doubt about any aspect of the conventional wisdom is what stimulates its perpetual changes, even under the noses of those who regard it as an unalterable constant." Ideology is continuously changeable and surprisingly malleable; the skeptical feminist knows this and works unrelentingly as an intellectual activist until the formative force of collective opinion shifts towards the matrifocal. A feminist, says Walker, is one who contends that the moral and ethical standards of matrilineal societies are intrinsically superior to patriarchally derived values, and that they provide more emotional satisfaction and stability with "fewer irrational, destructive, or violent behavior patterns."

"We must achieve a new outlook on spiritual matters," argues Walker. This means deliberately, rationally constructing a new Goddess image from the ground up,

based on a true understanding of the core, irreducible values of the feminine archetype: tenderness, sensuality, mother love, tolerance, sympathy, family ties, sex, fun, playfulness, creativity, intellectual achievement, self-growth and awareness, spirituality, and esthetic sensibilities—"a fully mature, responsibile morality, a benevolent sensitivity to human needs." New Goddess imagery, resuscitated from the vast iconographic treasures of a suppressed Goddess tradition and creatively adapted to the sociopolitical exigencies of our time, can be "indubitably useful and empowering" for today's women struggling to cast off a deeply ingrained, almost genetically-inherited, "monstrous inferiority complex." In large measure Barbara Walker has devoted the last decade to assembling encyclopedias of neglected Goddess imagery to serve this purpose through such reference works as *The Secrets of the Tarot: Origins, History, and Symbolism* (1984), *The I Ching of the Goddess* (1986),*The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects* (1988), *The Book of Sacred Stones: Fact and Fallacy in the Crystal World,* (1989). Such a Goddess revival will help women "assert the femininity within one's self as an awe-inspiring power independent of any masculine influence." Mothers, not fathers, are the natural models of nurturing social relationships, argues Walker, and therefore best suited to transmit new social, moral standards. "Woman's perceptions and woman's morality must take charge of the future if there is to be any future."

The most likely venue through which women will begin to take charge of the future is through politics and if the 1992 American political scene was any indication, they are well on their way. Barbara Walker wasn't one of the 170 American women who ran for Congress in November 1992 (16 for the Senate, 154 for the House), nor had she wanted to be. But her assiduous scholarship and persistent exhortations in the past decade for a restoration of feminine values was undoubtedly one of the sparks that moved many women to step into political prominence. Certainly the injudicious treatment of truth-telling Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings (immediately followed by the highly publicized William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials) enraged and mobilized American women to run for political office. The personal *is* political, editorialized Robin Morgan in *Ms.* last April. "We know the way a man treats women in his personal life is connected to how he treats women in his politics; we think that *matters* . The surfacing of women as a political force—and the impact across all party lines and at local, state, federal, and *international* levels—is the real (unacknowledged) factor. That, my friends is called making history."

The Democratic National Convention held in New York City last July electrified a national TV audience with its unprecedented frankness and honesty, and the visibility of politicized women, elements no doubt of the history-making *Ms*. called for. When the Democrats spoke of "putting people first," it was obvious that foremost among these people would be women, six of whom spoke the first night. It was electrifying because as Americans we don't often hear our political leaders speak the truth or talk about genuine social issues, especially not on live television. But there was Ann Richards, Governor of Texas—sassy, white-haired, wrinkled, and proud of it all—declaiming in that inimitable Texas drawl, "I'm pro-choice and I vote." Former Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan—a revered ethicist now confined to her wheelchair with multiple sclerosis—spoke about change and sacrifice in the uncompromising words of a wise woman. Elizabeth Glaser, a mother who got the HIV infection from a blood infusion when pregnant and unwittingly transmitted AIDS to her two unborn children one of whom died, spoke from the heart to perhaps 20 million TV viewers. "I have words

inside me that I have to share. I want people to understand that the life and death of my family hinges on who the next President is." Sisterhood is political, as Carol Moseley Braun, standing for office to be the nation's first black female Senator, suggested in her remarks at the Convention. "I am proud to stand here tonight with the other women candidates for the United States Senate. We are proof that each person can make a difference and together we will win."

As the *New York Times* bannered a photograph of the 16 women Senate candidates, "Women are triumphant in their gains, but cautious." Veteran political journalist R.W. Apple, Jr., noted that on the strength of the mid-1992 primary victories by women, "the hour of their breakthrough is at hand." The breakthrough women candidates were financially aided by Emily's List (Early Money Is Like Yeast, founded in 1988), a unique women's political fund raising organization that provides money in the crucial early days of a campaign, that pledged about $5 million for women running for office in 1992. "Women candidates are the face of change for the 1990s," declared Emily's List director, Ellen Malcolm. "They're the classic outsiders trying to break into the Congressional system and make it work." By 1991, according to data published in the *New York Times* ,18.2% of total state legislature seats (1359) were held by women, although some individual states had much higher proportions such as Arizona (34.4%), Maine (33.5%), Vermont (31.7%), Washington (31.3%), and Colorado (31.0%). Among mayoralities in cities with a population exceeding 30,000, 17.2% (or 151) were held by women compared to 1.1% (or 7) 20 years earlier. "This is no longer some isolated emotional triumph of women backed by women," commented Harriet Woods of the National Women's Political Caucus in reference to the success of womens' candidacies in California. "This represents a watershed shift in public attitudes."

In California alone 164 women ran for state or federal office during the primary season. The 1992 political climate—gender consciousness, redistricting and reapportionment, and anti-incumbency—offered women a rare opportunity to enter what has been a male-dominated political world and to get in position to make major changes. It seemed as if all the politically prominent topics were fundamentally feminist, matters of the home: health care, family values, the environment, welfare, the homeless, interethnic harmony, abortion, domestic stability. "But this year, even skeptics agree," wrote Jane Gross in the *New York Times* in late May 1992, "a rare set of circumstances have come together, especially in California, and may produce an avalanche of victories."

America's new breed of political women may not enter office on the strength of having waved Goddess banners, although that at least tacitly underscores the momentum that moved them into prominence. Once in place, women may begin implementing the practical expression of feminist values. "The more visible women there are in politics, the better," comments Barbara Walker. "It's great to have women in political office, although some may be basically men in skirts, part of the patriarchal tradition who have to play the game as men do. What I see the movement coming to eventually is that women will become the creators of the moral and ethical code for our culture which would offset the violence, militarism, aggression, might-is-right, and nasty stuff we have now."

For Walker, morals are shaped more by spirituality than by politics, and this shaping, which could take the eventual form of a feminist "manifesto of commandments" to men, will be the work of many hands, drated by empowered

women working through a lot of ways. Such women, envisions Walker, "have the power to create the social standards, to allow for laws that are humane, to look after people as women usually do, and to respect those women who respect these laws." Such a woman isn't prone to "male-bashing," but wants to "instruct and assimilate" men into a better, more compassionate social ethic. After all men and women know about mothers directly. A mother is the only parent every child knows of itself, without needing to be told, says Walker. "Children must be told about their fathers, but Mother is a direct experience from the moment of birth and even before, when she is the living environment."

Assmiliating men into a more humane ethic is the work of "Mothers in Arms," as Stephanie Coontz wrote in the *New York Times* on Mother's Day last May. When Mother's Day was officially adopted by the U.S. Congress on May 8, 1914, it paradoxically marked the reversal of everything of political potency the days—originally there were many mothers' days—had previously represented for 19th century American women, says Koontz. "They celebrated the extension of women's moral concerns *beyond* the home. The women who organized the first mothers' days believed that motherhood was a political force that should be mobilized on behalf of the entire community, not merely an expression of a fundamental instinct that led them to lavish all their time and attention on their children." True, 19th century American women lacked the political franchise and the Victorian era was a generally repressive milieu for women, but this didn't dampen their enthusiasm for social activism. In 1858 Anna Reeves Jarvis organized the first Mothers' Work Days in West Virginia as an attempt to improve community sanitation; in 1872 Julia Ward Howe of Boston inaugurated a Mothers' Day for Peace which was celebrated on June 2 for the following three decades.

The efforts of women figured prominently in temperance movements, agitation against slavery, consumer protection, and the creation of the social welfare system. So when Congress institutionalized this ad hoc tradition of mothers' days, argues Koontz, it effectively decommissioned it to an observance of "sentimentalism and private family relations that made it so vulnerable to commercial exploitation." Rather than breakfasts-in-bed and bouquets, Koontz would like to see motherhood repoliticized so that its innate connections to the social ideals of peace and justice might be reactivated. "Mother's Day belongs neither in the shopping mall nor the kitchens, but in the streets and community action groups where it originated."

Above all, women must become "goddesses of disobedience," Naomi Wolf, feminist cultural historian and author of *The Beauty Myth* told the graduating class of Scripps College in May 1992. In her commencement address (reprinted on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* later that month), Wolf gave the young women "a backlash survival kit." She was referring of course to the controversial critique of presumed feminist progress in the Reagan-Bush1980s by Susan Faludi in her *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* . Faludi had claimed that the movie and television industry, the New Right, pop psychology, and academic research had colluded to derail feminist momentum by suggesting that women's social dissatisfaction was the result of their own overweening desire for independence. So Wolf wanted to empower the Scripps women with some matronly advice to counter the backlash.

Ask for money in your lives, demand top dollar, and use it; redefine "becoming a woman" in your own terms; don't be patient, don't remain silent, don't be paralysed by niceness, don't swallow any more tyrannies, slay the censor within, fall in love with

your own vision, speak out, act up, *confront* . The movement needs more wild women and bad girls like Thelma and Louise, more women who run with the wolves. "We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language. The only language the status quo understands is money, votes, and public embarassment. Our speaking out will permit other women to speak until laws are changed and lives are saved and the world is altered forever."

While Walker is delighted with the rise to political prominence of American women and the apparent inevitability of some measure of immediate social change effected on the strength of their political representation, ultimately she thinks the greatest change will happen at the grassroots level. Certainly the movement is "galloping along," notes Walker. "When I was out on the West Coast recently, especially in Washington and Oregon, I was surprised to see how much of it there was. It's like the 100th monkey syndrome; sooner or later it suddenly blossoms out of the grassroots." According to journalist Irene Lacher writing in the*Los Angeles Times* in September 1990, "She worship" is making a comeback "in the spiritual lives and academic thought of feminists around the country." Estimates of U.S. Goddess worshipers and the newfound "celebration of female divinity" run as high as 100,000, Lacher reported. Of course this spans a considerable range of belief and practice, from feminists to neo-pagan Wiccans, from native American shamanists to modern witches, from lesbian separatists to harried urbanites, encompassing wimmin, womyn, and womons, quipped Rusty Unger in her "Oh Goddess!" report in *New York* magazine (June 4, 1990).

"I think the feminist movement will be basically grassroots and come from ordinary women finding and creating ordinary things to share among themselves," says Walker. It was for these ordinary women—"a huge, middle-of-the-road majority of women" who "don't want to label themselves witches"—that Walker wrote*Women's Rituals: A Sourcebook* (1990). Such women of "practical intelligence" are agnostic, indifferent, and have repudiated patriarchal theology as "unsuitable, unbelievable, or offensive to their female personhood." They're not interested in the occult or the craft of Wicca, but yet they're conscious of a "nagging vacancy" in their spiritual lives. Like Walker, these women are no doubt aware that as far as mainstream, establishment religion goes, "men alone have claimed the right to invent, teach, or lead religious rituals."

But why shouldn't women rethink their spiritual values and develop their own legitimate ceremonial procedures based on the Goddess, who after all, isn't a devil. As the undeviating skeptical feminist she is, Walker adds this caveat: "Spiritual does not necessarily mean credulous, shallow, or naive." Divinity can be discovered through the physical senses and woman's spirituality—feminist *theaology* as distinct from masculine theology—can exalt the holiness within the mundane. "A profoundly spiritual ritual may have nothing to do with otherworldliness at all, but may celebrate the sacredness of the real and the natural: woman, earth, flesh, daily living, human relationships." Patriarchal theologists may insist on bifurcations—body versus soul, mind versus matter, thinking versus feeling, heaven versus earth—but not Goddess celebrants. Such women, says Walker, will use common sense, delight and comfort the flesh, love, honor, and protect Mother Earth, remembering that She is old—3.8 billion years old, geologists claim—a crone among planets.

Women will lead the way for Western culture to venerate the crone once again, the third face of the Goddess as wise woman of age, wisdom, and power, says Walker, a

crone herself. "I like being a crone. My husband tells me I've been waiting all my life to be a crone. Now that I've finally made it, I'm enjoying cronehood very much. I find it a great relief not to be flirted with any more by men. They don't do that any more now that I am a crone." Not long ago, "crone" was a top-flight sexist pejorative for an old, ugly, withered, witchlike, useless woman, a doddering, senile grandmother, a hag. But gender-biased, sexist language is gradually moulting under the unrelenting pressure of the feminist critique and old insults are re-surfacing as powerful "word-webs," due in part to the brilliant semantic reconstructions and conjurings of Mary Daly, most notably in her*Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Beacon Press, 1987). The crone is the "Great Hag of History, long-lasting one, Survivor of the perpetual witchcraze of patriarchy, one who has Survived early stages of the Otherworld Journey and who therefore has Dis-covered depths of Courage, Strength, and Wisdom in her Self," says Daly. A crone is *crone-logical* , in accordance with the "clarifying logic" of Crones, able to see through the dissimulations and erasures of "man's mysteries/misteries." A *crone-ography* is a radical feminist work that records women's history "from a Crone-identified perspective" that "Crone-logically understands connections between and among events normally erased in patriarchal chronologies/histories."

Mary Daly's exuberant wickedary speaks to the progressive, evolving image of the crone, but the fact remains, says Walker, that in America the crone, the ruthless emissary of aging, sickness, and death—our unavoidable biological mortality—is feared and repressed. America is incorrigibly youth-oriented, an attitude that exacts a disproportionately severe toll on women. Short of Katherine Hepburn, how many Hollywood movie stars age gracefully and in public? Ginger Rogers, now 81, still struggles to present herself as if she were fortysomething; Elizabeth Taylor, in her sixties, after untold physical alterations, face-lifts, diamonds, and husbands, still balks at the unavoidable transition from matron to crone. They're not to blame; our culture punishes aging women with oblivion. Female elders are marginalized, made invisible. Women unconsciously take their cues from Hollywood and the mass media persuasions of *Vogue* and *Glamour* —"those mythic mirrors of our culture"—unless they willfully struggle against it. It was no different fifty years ago, either, when Bette Davis starred in *Mr. Skeffington* (1944), a film in which Davis portrays a perennially young and desirable thirtysomething socialite who is at last painfully updated to her true middle-age by the ravages of diptheria.

Not the pretty Virgin or the fecund Mother, but the Crone—"the wise, willful, wolfish Crone," the Destroyer—is the face of the Goddess we most need to understand today and "our best guide in this long, dark, labyrinthine spiritual journey," says Walker, who addressed the issue in *The Crone: Woman of Age,Wisdom, and Power* (1985). This symbolic Old Woman who heeds no master has been haunting the fringes of Western culture for centuries, unnoticed and unacknowledged except when her "witchcraft" aroused a panic of persecution among threatened men in power. But there is an ineluctable psychological economy at play such that any culturally suppressed archetype will continue to arise, continually threatening the established order until it willingly integrates this untidy image. It needn't be that way in a psychologically healthy society, says Walker.

In matrifocal societies, old women were founts of law, healing skills, moral leadership, sacred lore, and wisdom, says Walker. "Their wrinkles would have been

badges of honor, not of shame." As funerary priestesses, their proximity to death would have been a living initiation for the younger women and men into the Mystery of dying. But Western culture has suppressed the wrinkled wise crone and everything she represents, including death. "In their anxiety to deny the Crone archetype through religious imagery, patriarchal societies even denied the fact of death itself. She represented the kind of death that our culture wished to conceal, making it invisible as old women are made invisible: the common garden-variety kind of death; death in old age, death from wasting disease, death after slow degeneration of body and mind."

So, to evolve the best moral codes, the most mature social vision, we need to bring back the "crone-wisdom of the clan matriarchs," says Walker, evoking an older tongue. We need to "bring our own old women out of their closet of suppression, social invisibility, and pejorative labelling," and *listen* to them. Men may fear the judgemental, morally-awake eye of the wise-woman, but her counsel is sorely needed. "God can't, but woman can call man to account for his gynocidal, genocidal behavior." The Crone is a once and future vital aspect of divinity, one face of the threefold Goddess, and thus an irrefutable fact of life. Her reinstatement, as part of the widespread iconographic Goddess restoration Walker is calling for, could make a big difference. "If the world's women joined together to reinstate a full three-dimensional feminine divinity, with her own authentic theology, life on our planet might be quite different."

But of course it's all negotiable. We don't want to exchange a patriarchal cultural totalitarianism for a feminist, Goddess State; that would only perpetuate the historical dialectic between masculine theology and feminist theaology without any prospect of a harmonious synthesis. So let's talk it about it, I suggested tactfully to Barbara Walker as we enjoyed the late afternoon view of our lake in summertime. As a thoughtful man in favor of gender equity in all aspects, I nonetheless entertain a few concerns. For example, I'm concerned that an emphasis on Goddess-worship, Mother-based spiritualities, and wickedary conclaves of crones might further gender separatism at precisely the moment our culture desperately needs understanding between men and women. "I don't think it will," replies Walker. "Women do love men. Women as mothers produce both sexes; they have brothers, husbands, lovers, and sons. We're not going to put men down completely. Most of the women in my local spirituality group insist they don't want anything to do with man-bashing, but to instruct them in a better way of being. And lots of men enjoy Goddess worship in groups with the women, my son included."

Walker continues, on the state of men today: "I see the authentic male spirit re-emerging in men who perceive that the patriarchy is hurtful. These men—and I think there are *many* of them—are basically nonviolent, peaceable, and show a kind of male strength that's free from violence, machismo posturing, and the old boy's locker room male bonding mentality. On the positive side this male strength is quiet, dependable, steady, responsible; such men strive for insight or they take a different approach in traditional roles, like the Kevin Costner character in *Dances With Wolves*, a soldier who becomes sensitive to the situation of the native Americans."

I moved on to my next concern. The trouble I have with both feminist and masculinist arguments—God is a man, Goddess is a woman—is that it seems that divinity is construed as a projection from biological gender. It's not rational to presume that deity, whether it's the cosmic Mother or divine Father, could possibly have attributes based on our subjective experience of being embodied, genitalized,

genderized men and women. Aren't we, in light of this, committing the regrettable fallacy of "misplaced concreteness," articulated some years ago by the American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead?

No, said Walker, because as feminist thealogists, we're dealing with metaphorical portraits and not ontological realities. "It's important to realize that the *Goddess as metaphor* definitely means a different kind of force than what *God as metaphor* has always meant. God has always been perceived as transcendent, as outside the created world, outside the workings of daily life. Goddess has always been seen as inherent to the life force. *Mother* Nature, *Mother* Earth—we already have this tradition living in our language and thoughts. That's how I perceive the Goddess, as in me, in you, in the Earth, in Nature, not outside the planet, but immanent. The planet *is* the Mother. The planet *is* the Goddess."

Finally, then, my concern is that feminist spirituality, in so strongly repudiating the Christian Church and its hieratic misogynist Fathers, might be throwing the proverbial baby out with the purgative waters. Although thealogists perceive Jesus Christ, the Church's revered, sacrificial Son as a cruelly tortured man in whose name innumerable moral, political, and military travesties have been since committed, other Western traditions, such as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, have found a way to reposition the Christ separate from the outrages of a Church founded in his name. Espousing a form of esoteric Christianity, Steiner claimed that the Christ is a cosmic spiritual being, without gender or specific form and certainly without any brand name ecclesiastical affiliations, who singularly incarnated through the body and soul of Master Jesus in order to impart a dynamic cultural evolutionary impulse to all of humanity, regardless of creed, race, gender, or ethnicity. Steiner further asserted that the Christ as a "cosmic solar being" was the deity, the Sun God, consistently evoked throughout the preChristian Mystery initiatory tradition. So can there be a Christ-centered but not Church-based spiritual revelation compatible with feminist theaological politics?

"It would be nice, but the term Christ has too many connotations hanging all over it to make this feasible," says Walker. "He comes through the patriarchy and represents a victim. We don't want any more victims, male or female. I'd like to see a different figure, like Dionysos, Adonis, maybe an old Celtic deity. Christ is the wrong name. It has too much baggage from the past for me."

Fair enough, I told Walker, but before she left for her evening's speaking engagement, I asked her what she hoped to accomplish in her cronehood. Of course she would write more books: a sequel to *Amazon* , a mineral dictionary, and a revised *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* . These are likely, immediate tasks, although Walker doesn't like to project her books too far ahead of the burning interests of the moment. She writes what she needs to and at her own pace. "One thing I'd really like to do before I die is go into outer space and look at Earth. Crones can't do that, but I'd sure like to."

If Walker doesn't succeed in becoming the first crone astronaut, she's probably more likely to realize her second big unfulfilled dream. "I would love to have somebody come along with infinite amounts of money and build a Goddess temple." Several architects she knows have already drafted designs, and through her own "visions and imaginings" Walker often sees such a temple "in my mind." In fact she devoted a dozen pages in *Amazon* to an evocative description of the interior of a Goddess temple that her regrettably imaginary benefactor, Matilde Bloodworth, constructs on her estate with the

help of Antiope and Diana. If Antiope's assessment is any indication, Walker's imaginary temple got kudos from the Goddess Herself.

"This temple seemed as honest an expression of reverence for the Mother as any ever built by my own people, truly a house of the Goddess," admits Antiope. Her approval is pivotal; after all, it is her inexplicable, unexpungeable Amazonian presence that is mainly responsible for the re-emergence of the Goddess archetype in architecture, culture, and spirituality in the fictional but plausible world of Walker's *Amazon* . As I said above, Antiope's eruption into Diana's closeted world is an abalogical compression of the emergence of the Goddess in Barbara Walker's life and thoughts. "Are You really here in this world, where I have been lost all this time?" exclaims Antiope with a mixture desperation and surprise. She suspects that despite all appearances, the Goddess is indeed immanent even in this flawed, sulfurous world. And if in the last decade we've become just a little more aware of the Mother's abiding omnipresence, we owe it in large measure to the insistent, skeptical scholarship of one of Her emissaries, Barbara Walker.