

CoverSTORY

We are Godesses

**Connecting to
other women and
the feminine
within can be
nourishing and
empowering for
the self and
everyone around.**

By Jeanne Tan

The women laughed. Their eyes shone gleefully and their whispers spoke of happy conspiracy. Eight of them were transforming Priya's (name changed) homey living room into a celebratory cave of scents and festivity.

It didn't matter that some of them were meeting each other for the first time. It also didn't matter that their ages bridged three decades. They were intent on preparing for celebration. As they worked, they wove a seamless rhythm—each performing their task. Someone lit burners scenting the room with perfumed oils and flowers. Others strew the marbled floor with petals of reds, purples, yellows and whites. Two whispered in the corner about music for the afternoon. These women had one thing in common—each was a dear friend, women who had lived, laughed and loved well. They had come together because of me—to help celebrate and mark a rite of passage, my womanhood.

Then the women turned to transforming themselves and me. They eyed and fingered colourful batik bundles, chattered on the merits of each design. One of them, a dear friend and co-worker led me into the also flowered bathroom for a cleansing and to change. Soon, we were all wrapped in sarongs and the celebration began.

We sat on the floor among the petals, lit by the dimming sun; our faces softened by candle light. The women spoke of themselves—so that others would know them and how they knew me. From their hearts each spoke of their appreciation of me, of the role I had played in their own lives and presented me not only their carefully-chosen gifts, but also the gift of wisdom. They each told me stories from the book of their lives so that I could create my own map of womanhood.

Does this sound frou-frou to you? Or does a whole bunch of women getting together like this seem silly or even frightening? Yet an increasing number of women are finding such scenes are exactly what they need to nurture their soul. For a small movement of women, numbering in the hundreds, this is a tangible sign of an internal transformation that's taking place. Women are finding it okay to enjoy being feminine again. Apart from going to these groups, some of them are also working on themselves intensely to rediscover their feminine strength.

The Feminine Principle

Women in Singapore have for the past two to three decades found economic and professional success by cultivating toughness and upwardly mobile go-gettedness. But more recently some women with tough veneers are melting their hard shell and rediscovering and embracing their femininity—their soft and long-buried, yet powerful core. This is what some would call their "Goddess" self—the woman beyond all the masks and the roles they play.

The feminine principle embodies qualities of nurturing, relationship building, co-operation, receptivity, acceptance, softness, flow, birth and beauty. It also governs creation and emotions. These are said to be universal ideas, primordial



images or archetypes, according to psychologist Carl Jung. Jung believed that archetypes are "as much feeling as thoughts" embedded deeply in our collective unconscious, in our psyche waiting to be brought to light. Even Asian philosophy and cosmology are full of these ideas of the feminine. These are the energies of yin in the Tao Te Ching and Shakti in Hindu thought.

Women who have embraced the feminine say they have found new acquaintance with emotions, paradoxically greater strength while being able to exercise compassion, pride in themselves as women and improved relationships. More specifically, it stilled the suicidal thoughts of Saleemah Ismail, a business development manager and brought more balance to Shirley Leow, a general manager's career and relationships and saved her marriage.

Gathering the Circle

An important part of embracing the feminine is the gathering of women to mark rites of passage, speak their innermost thoughts and fears and offer their wisdom for the benefit of other women. "I find that it is very safe to open up...I really gathered a lot of strength (from the circle) because when you are among women, you can speak out your very experience—anything you want. No one judges you, no one gives you advice on what you must and must not do. All everyone did was to ask questions to make you arrive at your own decisions," says Saleemah who has been going to a monthly circle for a year.

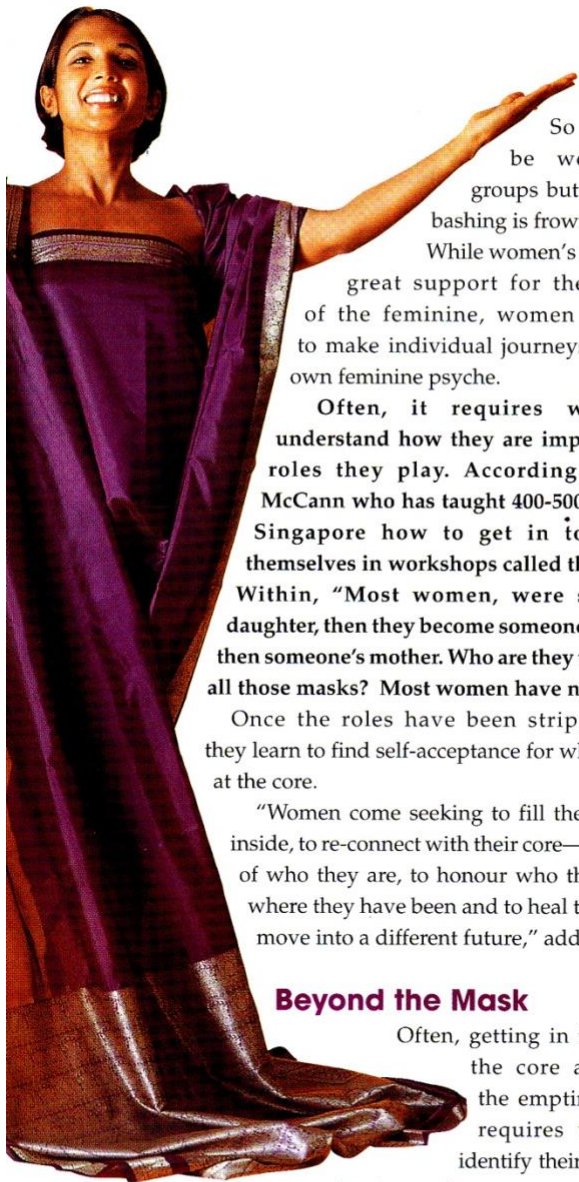
Some women gather circles at important junctures of their lives—like the one gathered to celebrate my passage into womanhood. When another friend was about to give birth. She did not have a regular baby shower but gathered a woman's circle. The handful of us hand made gifts to present her and her baby. We also invoked love through meditation and each spoke our blessings for her and the baby. This simple celebration then closed with song, eating and drinking.

Another friend gathered a circle in her pain. She was going through a divorce and was grieving for herself and her husband and she wanted the support of friends to plot the next stage of her life.

Yet others turn to more regular groups to get in touch with their feminine side. There's a holistic women's circle where women share and explore natural healing and the Goddess Within workshops which helps women to recover and delve into their feminine strength. Once a month, they also gather in what they call the Sacred Women's Circle.

Women's circles are considered sacred because none of the women's experiences and stories leave the circle. Safety for women to speak their minds and hearts is paramount says Saleemah.

In my own experience, the circle is seen as sacred because there is a sense of respect for all women and all life in these circles. Each and everyone is seen as part of the divine.



So they may be women-only groups but often male bashing is frowned upon.

While women's circles are a great support for the recovery of the feminine, women still need to make individual journeys into their own feminine psyche.

Often, it requires women to understand how they are imprisoned by roles they play. According to Diane McCann who has taught 400-500 women in Singapore how to get in touch with themselves in workshops called the Goddess Within, "Most women, were someone's daughter, then they become someone's wife and then someone's mother. Who are they underneath all those masks? Most women have no idea!"

Once the roles have been stripped away, they learn to find self-acceptance for what they are at the core.

"Women come seeking to fill the emptiness inside, to re-connect with their core—the essence of who they are, to honour who they are and where they have been and to heal the past and move into a different future," adds McCann.

Beyond the Mask

Often, getting in touch with the core and filling the emptiness inside requires women to identify their masks and break out of it.

Leow learnt to wear the pants in the family—a role that helped her career shine but left her family chilled by her coldness.

"I've always been seen by people as very masculine. People would say I was very aggressive...Men usually see me as one of them, but I was struggling actually," says Shirley Leow, a General Manager in charge of 600 people.

After years as a high achiever, Leow's marriage was on the verge of breakdown. She was also so stressed out that she started getting stomach ulcers, she says of herself 12 years ago. "I had my mid-life crisis early so to speak. I wanted to really search and (asked), "What am I doing? Where am I going from here? I didn't like what was going on with me."

Her search for self-knowledge led her to various courses in Reiki, Alpha Dynamics and the Goddess Within. She began to realise that, "At a subconscious level I had made up my mind that what my parents wanted was a boy. I was the first born, my parents needed a son and I was behaving like a son.... All my life I was responsible for everything and I realised that I didn't like that beast."

Leow often took swift decisive action and had little time for the emotions of others and herself. Years ago when a very close family member first discovered he had cancer, sobbing family members rang her at the office asking her to return home immediately. Leow refused because this would interrupt her meeting with her boss. She just told them, "All of you stop crying because you are not helping by crying." Even when her boss urged her to leave, she refused.

When Leow got home she swiftly took charge. While the family grieved Leow found the best doctor there was, got a second opinion and when the diagnosis was confirmed, she had her relative in the operating theatre the next day. "The doctor said it was the fastest decision anyone ever made about an operation," she said. She acknowledges now that "my family loved me but they thought I was cold."

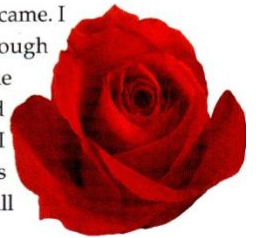
Since she was a child, Saleemah took the role of family caretaker. Her father had died when she was merely nine. From then on, she decided to be as self contained as possible. "I realised that my mother needed a lot of help to move on. She's illiterate. She can't speak English. She worked as washerwoman. So all of us individually recognised that we need to help my mother...I took care of myself so that she did not have to take care of me at all."

She even took responsibilities beyond herself. She took on all her family's emotional burdens and when she was older, financial burdens as well. "Even though I was the youngest, I assumed the role of the peacemaker or the caretaker of the family. They didn't ask me to. If they had a problem I always felt that I needed to help them solve it."

Then three years ago, everything crashed. Everything became too much of a burden. Her boyfriend of five years, her first, broke up with her. Her older sister, after years of keeping things secret, revealed that she had been assaulted. True to type, Saleemah emotionally supported her mother and sister to help cope with the trauma. Her sister refused to seek professional help, so Saleemah bore the emotional brunt of her sister's pain—even though she admits she was ill equipped to cope.

As tears were shed around her, Saleemah shored up her invulnerable front. "It was a very bad low for me. I could not show my sadness to my mum or sister because I have always... been the pillar of strength they all look to. My mother confided in me so I cannot show any sadness or depression. So I put on a front where it is all hunky dory with me. So it was all very, very hard for me."

The suppression of Saleemah's own emotional needs took their toll. One evening when the burden became too much, "I stood at a roadside wishing that a car would knock me down ... I'd stand at the traffic light, but no car came. I thought OK. I've waited here long enough maybe this is sign...my time hasn't come and I can't go on (like this), she adds. "I'd reached the edge where I realised that if I don't seek help, I will fall into the abyss and never be able to save myself and I will never be able to help anyone."



Recovering the Feminine

Once Seleemah and Leow looked beneath their self-imposed roles and connected with their emotions, they found a softer and more compassionate strength within.

Seeing her behavior clearly then, she admits that being aggressive “was not a natural part of me. And when she prioritised the things she truly loved and valued in her life, who she truly was became even clearer, “I’m basically a very feminine person. For example I am very maternal. Even though I am a very successful career woman, family is still the most important priority to me...I am very caring. I go around counselling and talking to people (at work)”

In accepting herself, softness and all, Leow found she could also be more accepting and gentler with her husband. “I expected him to respond to me the way I wanted him to. I made a decision and I said ‘No’...I will not throw tantrums and have drama with him. If I didn’t like the way I respond to him, I make an effort to change the way I respond to him rather than I control him and say he should have done this and he should have done that.”

She became conscious that her husband had his own needs too, and began to take them into account. For instance instead of regaling him with her work problems and expecting him to place as much emphasis on them as she did, she would actually find out if he actually wanted to listen. If he declined she stopped feeling offended. But invariably, she found that he was more willing to listen and accorded the same respect for her feelings as she did.

Leow’s own transformation renewed and saved her marriage. “People even noticed that my husband had changed his behaviour towards me...Even my mum commented. “ Wah. Your husband, how very attentive where you are concerned.”

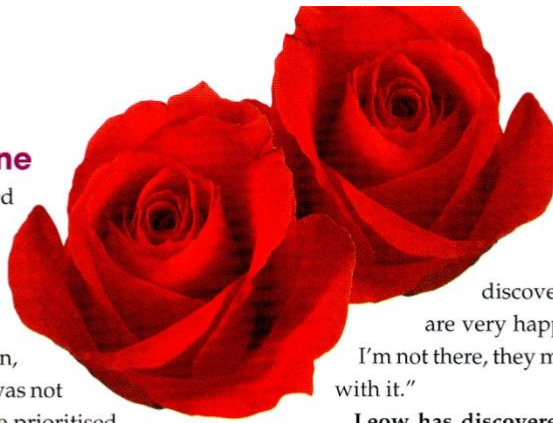
Saleemah’s recovery finally came when she learnt to have compassion for herself and her pain. This is where the women’s circle helped tremendously. It was a place where she did not have to put a false front on strength. “The sacred circle is a place where I don’t have to be strong, where I don’t have to be a caretaker and a saviour. I can show all my weakness...I thought that showing anger, showing sadness, showing depression is not strong. Now I know that all emotions are a part of me.” After the emotional release, she has ceased wanting to kill herself.

Empowering Self and Others

Saleemah soon saw clearly how she became so unhealthily burdened and why her relationship with her boyfriend finally dissolved. She had abdicated her own power to him rather than relying on her own strength. “I was looking for a partner. I was also looking for a saviour to save me from the life I see around me.”

Conversely, in running around being family saviour, she too had prevented them from exercising their own power and ability to care for themselves.

Saleemah has now returned them their ability to make their own decisions by moving out. “I felt I needed to be away to



allow them to make their own mistakes, to allow them to solve their own problems.”

Her sister and mother too now have discovered power in self. “On hindsight they are very happy that I moved also because now that I’m not there, they make a wrong decision, they have to deal with it.”

Leow has discovered the satisfaction of shared decision making—enjoying the process rather than just swiftly coming to a conclusion. Her family no longer regards her as cold. “The truth is the family is very much happier that I don’t have to be in charge all the time. There are many times when I say “OK Shall we discuss.” It takes a longer time, sometimes it irritates me...But I learnt we need to go through the process to allow people to speak their minds.”

Leow and Saleemah with their inner strength, emotional intelligence and acceptance in force now share their strength to help other women on their journey just as they once were helped.

Completing the Circle

Saleemah and Leow have created personal circles of sorts among close friends. “All my close friends are women...at some level I see it as my calling to share with other women what I have learnt about myself and I am very open about myself...I am happy to say when I meet up with my women friends, we do not gossip about other people. We talk about what’s going on in our lives and how we can make it better,” explains Leow. Says Saleemah, “I feel that I have become stronger. I am now in a position to help other women—listening to them the way I have benefitted. I will still continue to go to the sacred circle, but now I go in a different state of mind. In the past, I really needed to go. It was like a support group. (Now), I feel full of love myself that I want to share with everyone. I’m always telling anyone new that we are here to support each other. It comes from the heart. I may not even say it, but I always say it with my eyes, with my action.”

*The valley spirit never dies
It is called “the mysterious female.”
The opening of the mysterious female is called “
the root of Heaven and Earth.”
Continuous, seeming to remain.
Use it without exertion.*

From verse 6, Tao Te Ching

After much mutual appreciation among us, the women cover me in a crimson cloth, wrap me in flowers and lay crystals symbolising new beginnings around me. They wrap me up tight so I am comforted and protected. They call out their wishes for me in my passage to womanhood. Then there is silence. I feel centred in my core, full in myself. The drum beat of music makes its earthy call calling me outwards. And I slowly emerge from my crimson cocoon. The goddess is alive! ❧