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How do you do Your Rage? : A Qualitative Investigation Into Contemporary Women's Experience of Their Rage

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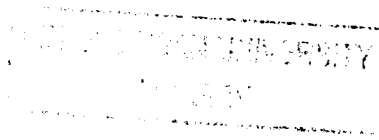
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How do you do your rage?

A qualitative investigation into contemporary women's experience of their rage.

By Verena Homberger

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Social Science (Applied Women's Studies) Honours, at the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup.

Date of Submission: October 1998

ABSTRACT

Feminist researchers investigate women's lives. This project is looking at a tiny thread embedded in a small section in the huge fabric of women's lives. The section is women's capacity for violence, and the thread within it is women's rage. This is a qualitative study of contemporary women experiencing and expressing their anger and rage.

Discussions of violence within feminist literature have been largely restricted to accounts of male violence against women and children, and may have inadvertently endorsed the mainstream construction of femininity, which perceives rage in women to be an inappropriate emotion. In this project, I argue that contemporary women do indeed experience anger and rage, and that these emotions need to be honoured and validated. The questions I seek to answer are about contemporary women's expression of these emotions. Do they express rage often, or sometimes, or never, or just keep it inside, relegating it to the shadow? Do they direct their rage towards others, or do they direct it towards themselves? Do they do both? Does rage vary over a lifetime? Is women's rage linked to women's oppression? How do contemporary women experience oppression? Do they have bodily symptoms associated with rage? Is there indeed a link between women's rage and women's violence? Is there frequently a link between women's rage and violence against women? Is an outburst of rage spontaneous, or is it the culmination of a slow, smouldering process?

Finally, are there ways of expressing rage creatively? Seeking answers to these questions, the study explores similarities and differences in the ways a small number of women in the community encounter their rage.

The case stories of six women who participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, together with a review of relevant literature, form the basis for this project. It is hoped it will raise awareness of women's angry and violent feelings and what we might call their dark side, and ultimately, contribute to an exploration of the much larger field of women's violence. This may in turn enable women to accept their own capacity for violent behaviour. In addition, this small sample illustrating that women with similar backgrounds do not necessarily share similar experiences of rage aims to contribute to current feminist theoretical debates about difference.

DECLARATION.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature ..

Date 14-10-98

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Most of all, I want to thank my Supervisor, Lekkia Hopkins, for her unfaltering support, her constant availability, her wise guidance, her constructive criticisms, her helpful suggestions, her knowledgeable academic input, and, last but not least, her inspired teaching which awakened my feminist consciousness and contributed to the redemption of my wounded feminine.

✱

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Definitions

Since this paper is about women's rage and I use the words, anger, rage, violence, aggression and abuse in various contexts, it is as well to define these concepts at the start. I see rage as passionate, deeply felt anger and according to the thesaurus, rage and anger are interchangeable:

Rage – anger, wrath, fury, vehemence, passion.

Anger – wrath, rage, passion, animosity

Similarly, abuse and violence can sometimes be interchanged because what is defined as abuse by the dictionary often falls into the category of violence as in domestic violence as follows:

Abuse - mistreatment, violation, injury, can be physical abuse (mistreatment), or verbal abuse (insult).

Violence – the exercise or an instance of physical force to cause harm, injury or destruction; unjust or unlawful display of force.

Philip Cook (1997) differentiates between minor violent acts – to throw things at others, push, grab, shove, slap, spank, and severe violent acts: to kick, bite, hit with a fist, hit with an object, to beat up the other, to use or threaten with a knife, gun or deadly weapon

Aggression: Assault, attack, injury, invasion, aggressiveness, antagonism, destructiveness, and hostility

Finally, the Sydney Family Violence Education Taskforce (1991) defines domestic violence as follows:

Violence in the home is any use of force - physical or non-physical - which is aimed at controlling another family member, undermining that person's well-being. Family violence encompasses, under the law, spouses, and a wide range of relatives, children and people who are or have been members of the same household.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the topic of women's rage was sparked initially by some newspaper reports. I was amazed to read a lawyer's comments that "women are just as likely as men to commit violence against their partners. Almost the same number of acts of violence were committed by men and women towards their partners *but more research into the context of the violence was needed.*" (West Australian Newspapers, 7/11/97, emphasis added). My interest in women's capacity for violence was aroused further when a letter to the editor claimed that "men are victims of domestic violence". (West Australian Newspapers, 11/12/97). As a survivor of prolonged emotional violence within a marriage, and as a feminist, indoctrinated by feminist literature on the subject of domestic violence and women as victims, I took a long time for me to realise that women's capacity for violence was not discussed in that literature. Interested in uncovering what is hidden and silenced, I decided to find out about women's parts in accounts of violence, and women's capacity for rage and aggression. Searching for more information on violent acts committed by women, I found reports of women abusing or neglecting their children, and others of women stabbing or castrating their partners, teenage girls on attack charges, and young women committing armed robberies. (West Australian Newspaper 26/11/97, 10/12/97, 11/12/97, 16/12/97, Sunday Times, 11/1/98, West Australian Newspaper 14/1/98, 30/1/98, and 18/2/98). Furthermore, I found some literature where violent women are discussed in connection with domestic violence, homicide, child abuse and neglect. (Bacon and Lansdowne, 1982; Rathus, 1986; Polk and Ranson, 1991; Tarrant, 1992; Stubbs and Tolmie, 1992 and 1994; Sinclair, 1993; Bettina Arndt 1993; Easta, 1993; Easta, Hughes and Easter,

1994; R. Clark, 1994; Currie, 1995; Ho and Venus, 1995; H. McGurk 1995; Ania Wilczynski 1996; Jocelyne A. Scutt, 1997).

Before embarking on this study, my instinctive understanding was that many violent acts perpetrated by women, rather than being premeditated, could be the consequence of deeply held anger and rage building up over a period of time and finally exploding into uncontrolled outbursts. The works of Sandra Thomas (1993), and Phillip Cook (1997) substantiate this understanding. Philip Cook, researching abused men in domestic violence, sees domestic violence as the result of somebody's rage and argues that it is important to demonstrate the range of the perpetrator's rage and its effect on the victim. (p. 23). Sandra Thomas (1993, p. xiv) argues that women are not expected to express anger forthrightly, and are often fearful of letting it out because it might be met with punishment and scorn; they choke it back until pressure cooker levels of emotional steam have been reached, and the resulting explosion, which has been long in the making, seems disproportionate to the event that caused it.

Talking with women about their rage, I noticed that many have difficulties acknowledging, let alone expressing it, because, as stated by social worker and transactional analyst Carol Middleton "there is a taboo on it". (Pers. comm., 1998). When telling people about the topic of my project, some reacted with surprise: "Rage? What a strange topic to investigate! Women don't rage!" When interviewing my participants, most of them used words to the effect that they were a good girl. "It was expected of me to do as I was told and be a good girl".

This entailed keeping one's anger and other 'negative' emotions to oneself. In an investigation of women's rage, I had first to address barriers that stop them from accessing it, and look at the taboo mentioned by Carol Middleton. The Literature Review will discuss some of the views held by feminist sociologists and psychologists, followers of Jungian theories, transactional analysts, health professionals, and others, around this subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My endeavours for better understanding human behaviour and relationships have first led me to study the Jungian concepts of myths, archetypes and shadow personalities. Later, I was introduced to Transactional Analysis. Whilst these models are useful when seeking explanations for human behaviour, I feel that they do not give enough consideration to what Florence Hollis, back in 1967, termed the psychosocial approach, which places people's psychological problems within their whole life situation, taking into consideration their social, cultural, and gender status. In other words, women's behaviour ought to be conceptualised as an expression of the social context. Jean Baker-Miller (1976) went further and advocated for a new psychology specifically for women, which would honour women's special traits rather than trying to adapt them to the male norm. This is in accordance with my understanding of radical feminist philosophy which is women-centred, affirms women's right to our own, innate power, and encourages women to reclaim, rediscover and celebrate

women in all their differences. Helene Cixous (1981) envisaged that instead of lying down, women will go forward in search of themselves, affirming the difference, the power and strength of the regions of femininity, rather than, as Mary Daly (1979) put it: "...seek reconciliation with the father". In addition to radical feminist philosophy I am also influenced by the feminist respect for difference as illustrated by Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (1993), and Chilla Bullbeck (1998). In the context of this project, this entails honouring and accepting all aspects of woman, including and giving a voice to the part which has largely been socialised out of the image of contemporary women, the part where her rage, anger and fury, reside.

As my participants' stories illustrate, many contemporary women find it difficult to express anger because of cultural taboos, because it is not acceptable for women to display anger in uncontrolled outbursts. Feminist research indicates that in our culture, women have not been taught outlets for anger, rage and aggression in a way that men have. For over twenty years, feminists, together with some helping professionals and social scientists, have been arguing that children are socialised into gender roles, in particular, girls are socialised into the traditional western image of woman, which, especially in Anglo Saxon culture, is gentle, controlled, polite, pleasing, caring and nurturing, and women who do not fit into this image are often regarded as 'mad' and institutionalised. (Betty Friedan, 1963; Germaine Greer, 1971;

Martha Vicinus, 1972; Phyllis Chesler, 1972; Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg, 1978; Adrienne Rich, 1982; Jill Mathews, 1984; Robin Rowland, 1988; Ruth El Saffar, 1994; Mary Valentis & Anne Devane, 1994; Ros Thorpe and Jude Irwin, 1996.)

The construction of current femininity largely still follows the traditional image of woman as the mother and nurturer and rarely, if at all, permits expression of so-called negative feelings, especially rage, in women. Nancy Chodorow (1978) was one of the early feminist researchers to write about the reproduction of mothering and the sociology of gender, explaining how upbringing and role modelling perpetuates the cultural stereotyping of gender roles. Jessica Benjamin (1990) also talks about the stereotyping of sex roles in interpersonal relations and both argue that women are relational and men are separate. Criminologist Anne Campbell (1993) in her study of male and female aggression states that men and women express aggression differently due to their different socialisation. The work by Elizabeth Wurtzel (1998), investigating why women remain in violent relationships suggests that this socialisation continues despite feminists' efforts to change it. Transactional analysis builds on socialisation theory: transactional analysts maintain that people are influenced and formed by parental and cultural messages absorbed in childhood which are internalised and continue to control people's behaviour in adulthood, causing them to suppress and replace unacceptable expressions of

emotions with other, more socially acceptable ones. Transactional analysts, in co-operation with their clients, aim to uncover and transform cultural and parental messages absorbed in childhood which are no longer appropriate. (Eric Berne, 1964, 1974; Stan Woollams and Michael Brown, 1978; Muriel James and Dorothy Jongeward, 1978; Thomas Harris, 1985).

Adherents to Jungian theories assert that parts of the self which are not allowed expression are relegated to what they call the shadow. I use these concepts to explain the barrier preventing women access to their rage. Combining transactional analysis and the concept of the shadow, it can be seen that, if cultural and parental messages prohibit anger and rage in girl children, these emotions are then relegated to the shadow, silenced, suppressed and unacknowledged, or masked with other emotional expressions. Various manifestations of suppressed anger and rage are discussed later in this paper. Jungian analysts Connie Zweig and Steve Wolf (1997, p. 233) explain how socialisation perpetuates gender stereotypes and bars women access to important aspects of their personality:

Many men cover up their shadow: they cover up their vulnerability using the shields of wealth and power to be accepted. Women, on the other hand, often cover up their authentic power and use a shield of vulnerability to be accepted. In these ways, both genders perpetuate the archaic cultural myth of the hero and the princess, or the victimiser and the victim. *Women's competence, authority and capacity for violence remain unseen.* (emphasis added)

Researching the subject of women's rage, I was particularly interested in literature on possible connections between women's anger and rage and women's physical and emotional health. I acknowledge that associations between emotions and physical symptoms are frequently discussed in the literature. (Carl Simonton, 1980; Louise L. Hay, 1984; Bernie B. Siegel, 1986; John Roger and Peter McWilliams, 1988; Deepak Chopra, 1993 and 1994). Anger propensity has been linked with specific diseases such as arthritis, asthma and coronary heart disease and the frequency of angina pain, however, for the purpose of this paper, it is of significance that none of these studies were based specifically on women's experiences; indeed, as Mary Anne Modrein-McCarthy and Jane Tollet (1993, p. 155) point out, many of the studies into the linkage between anger and diseases did not include women. At this stage, to my knowledge, the work of Sandra Thomas (1993) and her team of health professionals is the only such study based exclusively on women's experiences. Thomas and her fellow researchers view anger as an important women's health issue, and their study gives detailed information on the various ways that both expressed and unexpressed anger and rage affect women's health. Thomas (1993) argues that the dramatic changes in women's life styles contribute to increased stress and a decline in women's life expectancy. Having established that high anger symptoms occasion health problems, the research team found (p. 49), that women, for unknown reasons, have higher anger symptoms than men. As noted earlier, generations of women have been socialised into suppressing their feelings of anger and rage. Psychologists and health professionals suggest that suppressed anger manifests in many ways - including affecting mental and physical health - and I was surprised by the research team's findings indicating

that anger symptoms are likely to occur when women are suppressing anger as well as when venting it outwardly (not suppressing it). This differs from the study of Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994) who maintain that rage turned inwards results in physical and emotional problems such as depression, drug and alcohol addiction, over-dependency on men, and eating disorders. My own observations (discussed in the chapter on findings) of an apparent connection between women's anger and food are confirmed in the literature: Sheryl S. Russell and Barbara Shirk (1993) reviewing the relationship between emotional factors and eating disorders, take the stance that women may feel powerless to change situations that provoke their anger and instead, may swallow it with food. Russell, who has a personal struggle with weight, is writing a doctoral thesis on eating disorders, thus bearing out the theory that we study and research what touches our own lives. Like Naomi Wolf, (1990) Russell and Shirk blame the 'image-makers' for countless women's loss of self-esteem through struggling to attain ideal, prescribed, impossible body proportions. Susie Orbach (1990) and Sue Wilson (1994), also found that loss of self esteem, powerlessness and resulting anger are frequently related to eating disorders.

Mental health experts indicate that sometimes women's anger and rage are masked by other feelings, more generally acceptable for women, in particular sadness, tears and depression. (Vicky Dowd, 1991; Dana Crowley Jack 1991; Patricia Gentry-Droppleman and Dorothy Wilt, 1993; Ruth Harriet Jacobs 1994; Theodore Menton, 1995; Mary Valentis and Anne Devane 1994). Case stories from Carol Middleton's practice, and participants' stories shared during

interviews (discussed in the chapter on findings) substantiate the theory that anger and rage are often related to sadness, grief, and depression.

In their study of the social construction of emotions, Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Ganet and Benton (1990), suggest that women's anger needs to be validated and made visible if the problems it presents for them are to be eliminated, and it is in this context that I now introduce my own position.

My argument begins with a focus on the Jungian notion of the shadow. Just as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) has given us the concept of woman as the other to the male norm, so, I argue, women's rage has been relegated to the shadow, and their socially acceptable side made the norm. Putting together current constructions of femininity and the concepts of shadow, I assumed that there might be much more rage present in women than is usually visible, and many volcanoes might be silently bubbling under the surface of ordinary, everyday women, ready to explode and bring chaos. In this paper, influenced by radical feminists Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly, and the 1994 work of feminist scholar Ruth El Saffar, I argue for the reintegration, honouring and validation of the shadow part because to live fully is to experience the full range of emotions. Making their rage accessible to women enables its channelling into creative outlets, including change, rather than allowing it to wreak havoc and destruction. Women need to have access to their rage so that it can emerge from the shadow

and be transformed into empowerment and creative outlets, ultimately benefiting their physical and mental health, but, as discussed earlier, socialisation has not allowed for this, and only if we make space for a different, more encompassing popular image of femininity, will women feel they have cultural permission to access and own their rage and anger. The words of Audre Lorde (1984) clearly illustrate women's struggle with these shadowy emotions:

Women's anger is a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret. I know how much of my life as a powerful feeling woman is laced through with this net of rage. It is an electric thread woven into every emotional tapestry upon which I set the essentials of my life – boiling hot spring likely to erupt at any point, leaping out of my consciousness like a fire on the landscape. How to train that anger with accuracy rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life.
Audre Lorde (1984, p.145).

The above citation expresses Audre Lorde's feelings at a time when certain groups, particularly in America, criticised the women's movement for representing only white, middle class women and silencing others. As a Black woman, lesbian and suffering from breast cancer, Audre Lorde felt particularly marginalised and enraged. In Australia, Sneja Gunew (1990) deplores the lack of space made for a contribution to feminist theorising from Aboriginal feminists, and Kirstin Henry and Marlene Derlet (1993, p. 59) writing about consciousness raising meetings criticise some intellectual feminists for "feeling that they are better feminists than others because they are more radical or more educated". In the past decade, many feminist theorists have begun to argue for an understanding of feminist activism which would acknowledge difference and

create spaces for women from all backgrounds to speak for themselves (Hester Eisenstein, 1984; Rosemarie Tong, 1989; Sneja Gunew, 1990, 1991; Jan Pettman, 1991; Hilary Hinds, Ann Phoenix and Jackie Stacey, 1992; Laurel Richardson, 1993; Anna Yeatman, 1993; Chilla Bulbeck, 1998). In the nineties, women's anger and rage need no longer come from marginalisation by the sisterhood. Radical feminist theorising too, has embraced the need to recognise difference. As Diane Bell and Renate Klein (1997) affirm, radical feminist theory seeks to allow space for women of difference despite all the difficulties this task presents.

In spite of such theoretical acknowledgment of difference, my argument remains that anger and rage are still mostly invisible and edited out of the popular image of contemporary woman. Ruth El Saffar's (1994) fascinating study of Spanish women mystics, helped me to understand how such editing gradually and imperceptibly came to pass. El Saffar theorises that the collusion of religion and state, which occurred in Spain in the 16th century, contributed to the subjugation of women's power. She argues that Spain's move towards centralised government and imperial conquest radically reshaped the collective psyche of the period, forcing women into silence or masquerade. El Saffar links the editing out of female rage and desire with women's diminished sense of self, compounded by lack of access to property and education. She argues that those outer conditions barring women access to voice and power also function within

to forbid us the encounter with our rage and frustration. El Saffar contends that locked away into the subconscious, (the shadow) these edited out parts became a source of both fascination and terror. She connects the persecution of witches, also taking place during that period, to the official domination of female power in the modern era. Most importantly, El Saffar asserts that contemporary women still carry the cultural devaluation of the feminine and co-operate with this in refusing outlet for the forbidden, edited out energies, even though, she suggests, buried under layers of patriarchal civilisation with its consort of an idealised woman, there is a memory of the wild, powerful, angry and violent woman of the distant past found in mythology and legends.

Following that direction, I subsequently found traces of the wild, angry and powerful woman in myths of mother goddesses who complement their light, life giving side with a dark, cruel, murderous side and whose wrath is feared. Kali, the Hindu mother goddess of nurturance, the womb and birth, is also the destructive force who brings sorrow to the world through her unbridled sexuality, who devours and destroys things, thereby enabling gestation and the possibility of new life. In Greek mythology, the all-powerful earth mother Demeter in her rage ceases to make crops grow so that all life on earth withers and dies. In one myth, the two sides of the one goddess are separated into two sisters: Inanna is the queen of the day, the goddess of love and fertility, and Ereshkigal is the queen of the night, death and the underworld, she eats clay,

drinks dirty water, and is unprotected from her own instinctual nature including her rage. (Grimal, 1973). In Jungian terms, this is a symbolic splitting of woman's wrath and rage from her conscious nature and her socially acceptable image, and the relegation of those 'unacceptable' emotions to the shadow. But how did the powerful mother goddess, the wild, angry woman of the distant, mythical past, disappear? Jungian follower Marie Louise von Franz (1972, 1974 and 1975), is one of the earlier writers analysing shadow, evil and the feminine, demonstrating how the once powerful goddess over life and death was subsequently transformed into the wicked witch featured in countless fairy tales. More recently, Jungian analyst and collector of stories Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992), dissecting dozens of myths and folk tales from all over the world to unveil their ancient, pagan origins, discovers "the toes of the old night religions [are] peeking out from under the layers of the tale" (1992, p. 388). Feminist writers Mary Daly (1978), Riane Eisler, (1987), Patricia Reis, (1992), and Carola Meier-Seethaler, (1988 and 1994) talk of the patriarchal plot to consolidate and maintain patriarchal structures spawned by monotheism by 'demonising the goddess', converting her - and indeed, powerful older women - into wicked witches to discredit, ridicule and disempower the knowledgeable old crone.

There are indications that the power of women's rage and the importance of the journey back to its sources are beginning to be recognised. Lecturers on women,

psychology, mythology and popular culture Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994) see the emergence of female rage out from the shadow and the conspiracy of silence into the open in modern theatre and films such as “Fatal Attraction” and “Thelma and Louise”. Joining Naomi Wolf (1994) in her exhortation for women to embrace their ‘dark sides’ and stop being victims, they reiterate Estes' (1992) and El Saffar's (1994) encouragement to integrate the angry, wild woman, asserting that “the journey back to Medusa” is a woman's discovery of a powerful weapon, a gateway to self-assertion, to deeper psychological development and to emotional well-being. (1994, p. xviii).

Other studies also mention positive aspects of women's anger and rage: Ros Thorpe (1996, pp 162-172), focusing on the inter-relationship between power and anger, asserts that anger, as an emotional response and creatively expressed, can be an alternative to depression, powerlessness and loss of control. Her writings include creative ways for expressing anger such as self-help groups, demonstrations and lobbying. Others have written about the creativity in anger: Neilsen (1989) describes how women's pent-up anger was utilised in community action; Burbank (1994) in her study of Aboriginal women notes the positive implications of their refusal to be victims; Kathy Laster (1995) views violence displayed and received, and women's indirect aggression, as empowering examples of rebellion in indigenous cultures in Australia and Papua New

Guinea; and finally, Harriet Lerner (1994) guides women to use their anger creatively to transform their intimate relationships.

In summary, then, my reading has led me to understand that women's rage is frequently suppressed and relegated to the shadow. At the same time, from the literature discussed above, I perceive that women's rage can be an important tool for empowerment and transformation. From within this framework, I decided to explore further the ways in which contemporary women deal with their rage. In this small study, I am purposely excluding publicly known women who have committed violent crimes for which they have been incarcerated. I wanted to find out how ordinary, everyday women, who go about their business in an approved way, experience their rage.

METHODOLOGY

Sneja Gunew (1990), examining the relationship between knowing, knowledge and political change, discusses the interaction of feminist theory, feminist research and women's lived experience, and draws attention to marginalised groups within feminist theory. In the late nineties, feminist research methods have come a long way since Anne Oakley's earlier criticism of mainstream social research. (1980, 1981, 1985). Reiterating Charlotte Bunch's earlier concept of a spiral (1983, p. 251), Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p. 238) suggests that it is the open-ended process – rather than the result - of the research which

will assist in expanding theoretical frameworks, add to knowledge and contribute to theory. To keep the process alive, researchers must continuously stay in touch with the ever-changing life circumstances of the researched. Contemporary research methods incorporate participation and reciprocity and allow many voices to be heard as feminist researchers endeavour to accommodate difference and give women of diverse cultures and backgrounds space to speak for themselves. (Shulamit Reinharz, 1992, Pamela Cotterill, 1992, Hilary Hinds, Ann Phoenix and Jackie Stacey, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Joanne de Groot and Mary Maynard, 1993; Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman, 1993; Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones, 1998). Participation and reciprocity also contribute to the deconstruction of the power imbalance between the researched and the researcher as the researcher realises that she is not the god-like expert who holds the key to truth.

The methodology I chose is informed by the work of Shulamit Reinharz (1992) who presents a comprehensive analysis of feminist methods collected from a large number of feminist researchers; and also by Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993), because I identify with much of their radical stance, and I agree with their viewpoint that feminist theory must evolve from women's experience. I also concur with Stanley and Wise's (1993, p. 44) criticism of feminists who see their particular theory as the only right one. I support the argument for a feminism which encompasses all the differences and varieties of ideologies,

classes and backgrounds, and, I would like to add, the complete range of emotions a human being is capable of. In my own study, I was conscious of their critique of positivism where the researcher goes out to prove what she believes is the truth. In sharing intimate moments with my participants, I experienced first-hand that indeed, many people are experiencing many truths and realities each day. Feminist theorists Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (1998) and Anna Yeatman (1993) make the point that respondents must be allowed to think and speak for themselves, and in doing this, I discovered that many different interpretations are possible. I also support Stevi Jackson's and Jackie Jones' (1998) statement that women are not a homogenous group, as even coming from similar backgrounds, and being members of the same generation, my participants' experiences were frequently very different from each other's.

The data collecting method I chose was gathering case stories through feminist interviewing technique. Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p. 174) asserts that case studies are necessary to put invisible groups on the map, they are the exceptions, specific instances that render the generalised research complete because they reflect the variety of experiences in women's lives. She tells feminists to utilise the power of the case study to highlight obscured phenomena that generalisations overlook. I realise that white, articulate, educated, heterosexual and middle class women belong to the most highly visible of all groups of women. Yet, the part of their lives this project investigates – the expression of

rage – remains unacknowledged, invisible in mainstream and many feminist accounts of women's experience.

I believe that as a feminist researcher, focussing attention on women and their experiences, I must give my participants space to talk about their experiences in their own words in non-judgmental acceptance. At the same time, I had to document my own process because, as Reinharz (1994) and Stanley and Wise (1993) maintain, feminist research must start with the researcher's personal experience. The way this happens is that many feminist researchers select a particular research topic that relates to their own experiences, and investigating other women's, they gain greater clarity on their own feelings and circumstances. Thus, the presence of the researcher in the process of the research links the personal to the political and the theory to the lived experience. The process of investigating my participants' experience of their rage increased my awareness of other women's experiences, and also the participants' awareness of aspects of their own lives. At the same time, I was confronted with my own shadow in a journey of self-discovery, precisely as described by many of the writers mentioned under this heading, and, in accordance with feminist practice, I have documented my own presence during the research process. Some of the disclosures I heard during the interviews deeply affected me and the experience changed my perception and my feminist consciousness – exactly as feminist researchers Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993), Shulamit

Reinharz, (1992) and others have stated. As well as being present with my participant in the interview, I had to attend to my own emerging emotions at the same time, and I was interested to read how other researchers had done this. Catherine Kirkwood, cited in Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (1993, p. 25 ff.) describes a five-fold process of moving back and forth between her own consciousness and the participant's experiences. She talks of a sense of being overwhelmed, a shock of changing consciousness, the lack of vocabulary to express emotions, the gaining of appropriate support for exploring the researcher's feelings, and finally, an insight of how the research might have been empowering or disempowering. My own method of debriefing was to confide my thoughts on paper. Some of these thoughts are incorporated in the project where the writing in italics documents my own reaction to what I heard. I was inspired by Kirkwood's comments on empowerment which reflect Joanna De Groot and Mary Maynard's (1993, p.7) assertion that the researcher's involvement with the researched can have a transformative effect on the research, the researcher and the researched, and more important than just being raw data to be processed, may become a tool for challenging dominant ideology. This is in accordance with Patti Lather's earlier vision (1988, 1991) to use feminist research as a tool to help participants understand and change their situation, and ultimately to initiate individual and social change. I share her vision and hope that this small study contributes to increased personal awareness for all involved and eventually, change.

METHOD

The participants:

I chose my six participants because I knew from previous, unrelated conversations with each of them that they are interested in exploring personal development issues. I did not know their personal stories before the interviews. The women are all white, from Anglo Saxon background, and are all at some stage in the mothering process. They are from the same generation, their ages ranging from early forties to mid fifties. Some are tertiary educated, others are not. Some are currently in the paid work force, others are not. Only one is married; the others are, to my knowledge, living either independently from a partner or not currently in a relationship. I interviewed a community educator, a homemaker, a teacher, an artist, a single mother on social security benefits, and a businesswoman.

I had some amazing reactions when talking about my project after completing the interviewing process. Some women exclaimed, "Oh, I wish you had interviewed me!" Sometimes they spontaneously told me their experiences. This information is not included in the case stories, but forms part of the findings and helps illustrate the similarities and differences in the rich fabric of women's lives.

The process

I informed my potential respondents about my project, and upon their agreement to participate, asked them to sign an informed consent form before the interview (Appendix 1). Individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews took place at the respondents' homes or in my home according to the preference of the participants. Before each interview, I re-told the myth of Demeter and Persephone (Appendix 2) to give my participants a foundation, or grounding, on which to build up their own story. I hoped that drawing attention to the life-threatening extent of female rage would give them permission to encounter, acknowledge and own their own rageful feelings. I then asked the respondent whether and how she could relate to the myth. This was the starting point for the narrative. During the interviews, I was listening for Demeter themes of grief and loss, rage and revenge. I did not have set questions but followed my participant's exploration into her own life, mostly by reflective listening and sometimes, clarifying and probing questions, encouraging her to follow the thread of her rage to her childhood, youth, earlier and present life circumstances. Except for one, participants identified with either the mother Demeter or the daughter Persephone. Sometimes, participants were uncomfortable with the word "rage" which we then replaced with the word "anger." As the participating women began telling me their stories, during the flow of their words, they uncovered many different aspects of their present and past experiences. As anticipated, some women told of expressing their rage in violent ways and the

interview gave them space to explore their needs and emotions. Very strong feelings emerged in these situations, feelings of deep shame, shock, embarrassment and sadness. I turned the tape recorder off when it became too painful for a participant to recall and talk about certain incidents in her life. Stopping the tape, giving the person time to do whatever she needed to do, listening attentively and non-judgementally – or being silent and waiting for the participant to take the initiative - was usually enough to bring the flow of the interview back. Sometimes it was necessary for a participant to give herself permission to express emotions. I also felt that it was important to ask the participant what she wanted; and indeed, desires varied from wanting to be left alone for a little while, to wanting a glass of water. After the interviews, respondents had the opportunity to listen to the recording if they wished, but none did. I completed the series of interviews over a period of less than two weeks and immediately transcribed the tapes verbatim. Only two respondents requested copies of their transcripts. The others appeared to be pleased to be rid of some unwanted baggage, which they did not wish to be reminded of by reading the transcript. Later, converting the lengthy transcripts, I agonised over the task of constructing ‘orderly’ case stories out of the ‘messiness’ of the interviews without losing the authenticity and originality of the women’s voices. Considering that a transcript is only a poor rendition of a live in-depth interview because the flat medium of paper lacks the multidimensional aspects of live interaction, condensing such a transcript into a case story is an even bigger

distortion of an interview, and gives a very restricted view of a person's life. Mindful of Anna Yeatman's comment (1993, p. 229) about who is authorised to speak on behalf of others, I had difficulty with the editing process, questioning my authority to allow parts of the interview to come to the fore while omitting others. It was almost as though I was silencing those whose rage was often precisely about being silenced before and I felt uncomfortable with the power that I had over the interpretation of my participants' stories, but apart from quoting the transcripts in their entirety, I have no solution to this problem. To give them space to speak about their lives in their own voices, I used the women's own words, at times, quoting from the transcripts. The theme that emerged continuously was a sense of not being heard, not being listened to. In the decades since Simone de Beauvoir (1949), countless feminist works have reiterated the theme of the silenced, invisible woman. I was able to tell my participants that I was listening, the fact that their story was on tape was proof that it would be heard and listened to. I see it as my duty to tell their stories as they unfolded during the interviews. However, in doing this, I had to add my voice to their stories in condensing and putting them in some sort of chronological order, and in changing all names and other identifying information. I became the narrator, enabling glimpses into my participants' lives through the lens of a myth, zooming in to uncover aspects of their rage, which forms only a small part in the complex fabric of their lives. Much of the fabric remains hidden, and the visible thread does not tell about the rest of the fabric.

CASE STORIES:

TANIA, RENATE, KAYE, EVE, SUSAN, SHARON

TANIA'S STORY

Tania was the only participant who did not identify with either Demeter or Persephone. She explained this with her ability from a young age, to express her rage and channel it into her creativity, saying that art became her rage's vehicle. Reflecting on her childhood, Tania remembers that even at four years of age, she realised that boys were treated differently from girls and more was expected from her, a girl child, than from her brothers. She also remembers a sense of shame about being a girl-child and about her body, and a sense of frustration.

I was born with a really strong determination, and curiosity, and I think that part of my frustration as a child – which probably could be internalised as rage – was the inadequacy of my parents...the fact that they couldn't see who I was in terms of my personality, and what was needed for me to help me advance.

Tania associates her early rage with not 'getting a fair deal', not being heard, and not having any words to express how she felt. When she fell pregnant shortly before her 18th birthday, she again felt that she was not getting a fair deal:

Again, my whole life closed down, or so it seemed. Because of this experience. And you internalise the rage. You don't have the words for it. But you are hugely angry, because your life is being diminished enormously; you've been cheated of doing all the things that you thought you might want to do.

She recalls that after marriage, she felt trapped by the boredom of domestic repetitiveness, and even though she loved her children, she found it difficult to

believe that this was all there was. In hindsight, she feels that she was experiencing the 'problem without a name' described by Betty Friedan, (1963):

Feminine Mystique...and it wasn't until some time later that I read her book and I realised that what she was saying was what I was internalising –32 years ago. That stayed with me.

When she was about twenty, she discovered that she had an ability to work with clay:

I channelled this incredibly excessive energy which just wanted to get out there and kick the world in. And the anger, I guess, the anger was internalised into a form of creativity. Because that was the only way that I was able to escape from that sense of being angry, of being trapped.

The marriage ended when she was 26 and she tried to bring up two babies in a period when there were no supporting mothers' benefits, recalling feeling 'the rage of having to try and make your way without a support system'. She thinks now that one isolated incident of shoplifting was an expression of her rage at the system. She relates a visit to a psychiatrist and feeling uncertain and vulnerable when he made a pass at her. Again, she explains that she had no words and could not understand her feelings: 'Rage is something we weren't allowed to have', remembering a sense of not being heard, or counted upon as a real, human being. She entered another relationship with a man who had two children by a previous marriage, and by the time she was 28, was looking after four children ranging from 13 to 3 years old. Tania tells how life closed in on her as she dissolved the myth of the popular ideal of loving, harmonious families. The reality consisted of huge responsibilities, never-ending physical work, and 'one drama after another'.

I realised, not long into that relationship, that I trapped myself even deeper...than I was before... the amount of just physical caring, constant nurturing, constant giving, eats away at you. And...you can see a different lifestyle that men have...you actually feel also that women's lives, in some sense, are just so repetitive! And it was that repetition that really drove me insane. I felt very angry that men were able to live their lives the way they did. I felt angry... I felt very angry that as a woman I had to take on certain roles in a marriage, both marriages, and I did not like it.

Tania's rage and resentment expressed in her sarcastic tongue:

I think that this is how I've used my rage – I used my tongue to wound. I was just very clever at arguing my case and I guess I became controlling. In fact, the way that you are able to deal with your rage is to become addicted to it, and in the addiction you transfer that through language to diminish the other person.

She says that she survived by escaping for long periods of the day into her creativity. Tania is adamant that she did not necessarily want to go out and do the things men do: she wanted to discover who she could be. She says that her rage began to lessen when, aged 37, she entered University and through art, was able to access that part of herself which had been diminished:

I worked through all of my real anger doing all of those projects that were set for us at University. I actually articulated it... Every project that was set, I would always have another agenda, another way of looking at it, and have two stories going. One was always working out this rage, or guilt, or shame, that I felt, and one was satisfying the University.

Turning to the subject of sexuality, Tania is "hugely angry" at medical experts for fitting her with a Dalcon shield which damaged her insides so that she had to have a hysterectomy at 36 or 37, causing her to undergo menopause much earlier than the average woman:

Going through menopause at the age of 42, I grieved hugely for the young woman I felt I still was, and who had not yet experienced life, and who was not ready to be old

Asked whether in her opinion, female rage is closely associated with female sexuality, Tania affirms:

A huge part of my rage is my frustration over not being able to express and explore my sexuality. I never felt that I was able to fully express my physical sexuality... Partly because of my upbringing. And partly because of the inadequacy of the men ... And that enraged me.

Her rage has found a new creative direction in her current project, combining her consciousness as an artist, her understanding of feminist theories and her creative writing. Through exploring how other women express their experience of menopause through their art, she answers important questions for herself as well as for the women involved in her project. This, she says, appeases a lot of women's anger, and simultaneously, answers questions about her own life, appeasing her rage. Tania's project is nearing completion:

It's been the vehicle. I'm putting it together. It's my baby; it's been gestated for all this time. And in the birth of that, is the birth of this person that is already emerging now.

The interview with Tania was enlightening for me (and I hope that she gained some benefit from it as well) because I discovered first-hand one of the benefits of feminist research and more particularly, feminist interviewing. In talking about herself and her rage, she unwittingly answered some of my own questions relating to areas and experiences in my own life exactly as she had said the women in her own research had done for her. One of the things she said was that we always choose a field of research that resonates with ourselves. This

provoked a lot of soul-searching and thought in me. How can I investigate other women's rage without investigating my own? What prompted me to research this topic, how do I connect to it? Where is my own rage, and how do I express and understand it? Have I healed it and channelled it into creativity, like some of my participants, including this one? Or am I still at the impotent, raging stage? Or is it perhaps not even acknowledged? Should I sit down and locate my rage and write about it? I am aware that for me, rage has changed over the years. Whereas in my adolescence it was an outraged, impotent cry about cruelty to animals and social injustice, during my marriages it became more ego-focussed. The rage was about gender expectations, role-stereotyping, silencing and put-downs: The things many feminists wrote about, but I was not aware of the movement at the time. My voice, and my rage, were still impotent, I had no words with which to express it. My only choice was to leave the scene of oppression. At this time of my life, I feel that there are connections between rage and the loss of the mother, menopause, ageing, sexuality and culturally defined female sexual images. And perhaps this is why, in this project, I'm looking for confirmation from other women, asking them questions relating to their rage. Tania used motherhood words: baby, gestation, and birth, to tell me about her project, which is near completion. I had a dream, some time ago (before I started the interviews) in which I gave birth to a little girl – a daughter (I have no daughters, I have two sons). I knew immediately, as soon as I awoke: I'm giving birth to myself. Tania's last sentence illustrates Valentis and

Devane's (1994) observation that women's rage can be a transforming agent, leading to greater self-discovery. What she does for menopausal women is really valuable and I wish more women had the leisure and awareness to become involved in such 'inward-dwelling' projects. I feel that, despite more and more literature emerging on the subject, there is still a huge denial surrounding this whole, very important time in women's lives, and most women continue busily in their "doing-state" of work and outward activities, instead allowing themselves to enter into a "being-state" of personal and spiritual development and self-discovery. Where do I fit in?

RENATE' STORY

Renate identified with Demeter's blackness of despair and not caring to live. Asked about her childhood, she told of a dictatorial father and a mother who never spoke up, never made waves, and like a timid, grey mouse, existed quietly in the shadow of her husband. As for herself:

I just felt crushed. Absolutely crushed. And in a sense unreal... because there was no chance of exploring what it was like... to be.... even to say no. Or to explore disagreeing. There was never any chance of that. . I had to be a good little girl. I just did as I was told. So, of course, that's how I grew up. I was a good girl, I did the right things, I complied with everything... That's the family message: 'boys are better'.

Renate also tells of the dark and shameful secret about sibling incest from age 13, which she was carrying around silently for decades. She now thinks that her efforts in excelling at competitive sports were to appease her pain, rage and

humiliation, and also to show the males in the family that she was as good as them. At 16, after years of abuse and oppression, Renate rebelled and contradicted her father in her first outburst of screaming rage. Her father beat her up. Renate left the parental house as soon as she finished school, travelling around Australia, and celebrating her newly found freedom with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. She says of that time that it was fun, very liberating and very necessary for her to act out, and that she was too busy getting drunk and stoned, and being promiscuous, to take notice of her feelings, which she suppressed for the time being. After some months of acting out, she entered a permanent relationship with an angry, aggressive drinker and gambler. Describing a volatile and violent relationship, she bitterly laughs that she “had recreated the situation at home with my father”. Eventually, she left the man and a relatively peaceful time followed when Renate moved in with a girlfriend:

That was a really new experience for me. I had a wonderful time. Learned a lot. Shared a lot. Laughed a lot. It was great. We supported each other. I think that's when I discovered what it was all about.... a little bit about love, about what it's like when people care for you. How they look after you, how they share, how you work in with each other.

Eventually she met D. Renate recalls how much her family liked the nice young man and how she married him after a couple of years because the family expected it.

I remember on my wedding day, staring at the altar... I had this nice wedding dress, with all these pleats. I was looking down at all these pleats, and I saw that they were all shaking. Shaking like shit. It was like I was saying inside: 'No!' But I told myself that it was just nerves. Living up to expectations, doing the right thing again,

being a good girl. I'm pleasing my mother and father even down to marrying the right bloke. What a good girl I am!

Of her marriage, Renate says that D soon adopted the fatherly role, bossing her around, putting her down, criticising her, becoming increasingly controlling and obsessed with status and appearances. The marriage deteriorated as their arguments became worse and worse. Despite the problems:

I continued to play happy little family for another year or so, mainly because of parental expectations

They had a daughter, built a new house; she went back to work. Her health was bad after the birth of her baby, complications made sex excruciatingly painful and she needed an operation to remove a vaginal lump. She says that even though he knew about her pain, her husband continued to force himself on her. The marriage's fate was sealed in Renate's eyes when D. publicly humiliated her and she initiated a separation shortly before her 30th birthday. Trying to make a life as a young single mother, Renate was stunned and angered by the unwanted attention she received from their married male friends, and her rage increased when she encountered disbelief and ridicule as people assumed it was her who was doing the chasing. Renate recalls some bad, difficult years as she was trying to come to terms with her failed marriage and building a new life as a single parent with a small daughter.

But of course in my parenting, a lot of my rage came out. Because I used to hit her... I feel a lot of shame talking about this. I was quite violent towards my daughter. ...She was not quite two when our marriage broke up. I guess that a lot of my rage, my internal rage, I wound up taking out on her, so that ... when I couldn't cope with things, or she was naughty, I would SCREAM at her, and I'd

push her up against the wall and I'd hit her, and she would just cower.

Eventually, she entered University as a mature age student, and remembers how she enjoyed studying and excelled, hiding her inner turmoil behind a mask of the perfect, A-grade student. A few weeks before the completion of her degree, shortly after her daughter's tenth birthday, she broke down.

And ... oh, it's so sick.... and when she was ten, the abuse stuff all came up... He... would...finger me. Make me go down on him. Stuff like that. He used to threaten me, that if I told... he would...but I can also remember – this sounds very sick – but I can also remember really wanting to please him, too... I had to send her to her dad's for a few weeks because I just... I just went to bed, I just crashed.

Overwhelmed, she sought counselling but feels that this was of no help and she ultimately found a way of dealing with these memories by herself. Later, her daughter told her that she and her brother's son had played sexual games. Renate, remembering her past experiences with her brother, was outraged and wishing to protect her daughter from the spectre of incest that she sees haunting the family informed the sister-in-law who was unaware of the past. At the same time, she wanted to hurt her brother:

I'm telling you: this is why I'm so upset, this is why I'm so angry. Because, I don't want these patterns to continue in this family. It needs to be out in the open. That was one way for me, if you like, of venting my rage. It was directed at my brother too, in a way... All I wanted to do was kill him...

Renate found no sympathy from her sister-in-law:

And she was raging at me, too. I'm the bad girl, I'm accused of trying to split their family up, just because my marriage is busted up, that I want to try and bust up their marriage, couldn't I stand to

see anyone happy, what right did I have to try and bust up their marriage...

Determined to be heard, Renate finally broke the secrecy and told her parents about the past sibling incest and her experiences with the old family friend.

Total chaos resulted:

..I told my parents. Mum... because I could remember things like bed spreads. Mum realised that they were the right ones and she remembered...I told my father. He goes: "If in fact it's really true..."... Anyway, it just escalated. Next minute, all the family is against me, I'm trying to split up the family, and they just went on, and on, and on. Sweep it under the carpet... never happened. Never, ever say anything. Sh.... sh. And there's another big lot of rage that came out then. Because I, then, would talk about it. What happened to me. Not so much to my daughter, because she felt ...it was awful because she had told me not to tell anybody. And she found out that it had come out in the family. And then she was raging against me: 'I trusted you mum. How could you...'

Finally, the family cast her out from its bosom. As Zweig and Wolf (1997, p.69)

state:

...to tell a family secret is no simple task, its repercussions may be earth shattering. For some, the family container cannot hold, and it breaks apart. For others, the powers of denial stand like a fortress around the family secret and the secret teller cannot be heard. The secret teller is not given credibility and is banished from the fold.

The interview with me about her rage confronted Renate with her shadows, and, in Jungian terms, the dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences when delving too deeply into the self, is, at bottom, the fear of the journey to the underworld. Because of this fear, Jung suggests that people seek help from another when attempting to descend into this underworld of shadows.

Unwittingly, I became this person for Renate, but at the same time, this interview also brought up some of my own shadows and this is why the interview with her was the most taxing one for me of all. When she wailed and screamed in painful shame as she recalled what she had done to her little girl, I remembered a time in my life that I prefer to forget. I abhor violence and yet...feeling the shame and guilt that Renate was feeling in telling her story, I remembered myself, as a young, inexperienced mother, taking out my frustration on a screaming, terrified baby, and later, on my two year old toddler. I had to deal with these tortuous memories and emotions at the same time as attending to my participant who brought to the interview (which was held at my house at her request) a whole range of emotions. During the few hours that we were together, she shifted back and forth between uproarious laughter, furious anger and rage, uncontrolled sobbing in deep, deep despair, and abysmal shame and guilt. Renate needed be heard, validated and held while she told her story and allowed letting the wave of emotions wash over her. She needed to be listened to without being offered advice or judgement. She needed someone to empathise with her and not show any shock when she became the ten-year old girl being sexually abused by an old man whom she actually wanted to please in her desperate search for love. Visualising that innocent little girl going down on an old man in her quest for belonging, I felt a mixture of disgust and impotent, searing and seething, blinding rage and anger in my gut and stomach. I suddenly understood the meaning of Susan Brownmiller's generalised statement that all men are

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rapists (1975) and at the same time, I thanked God, or the providence, or whatever, that I never experienced sexual violence. But the rage, the anger, the impotent frustration on behalf of women who did, and still do... I still feel it, every time I think about it. The rage that wants to kill and maim and rip the offending organ out of a man's body. I actually find it difficult to put into words the rage I feel at this. It is different and much more furious than the rage I feel at her older brother who violated the teenage girl and then had the audacity to call her a two-bob-slut-bag. I boil with more impotent, furious rage because she was not believed, because her experiences were belittled even by helping professionals, and because she is expected to keep her story quiet so as not to make waves in the family, so that the father can continue to dismiss her disturbing account as 'play', and the mother can go on with her mouse existence. Renate's experience is similar to that of countless women and children who are disbelieved and humiliated in the courtrooms, while the perpetrators are protected as described so poignantly by Robin Walshe (in Dani Stehlik, 1994), and Terese Henning (1997).

Telling her story has been positive for Renate: Long after the tape had run out, when she finally was ready to leave, she told me that she felt a lot lighter, as if a big load had been taken off her. She said that she now no longer needed to carry that story and could let go of it, it was now recorded on a tape, and that had somehow disconnected her from it. When I last had contact with her, she thanked me saying that the interview had initiated the healing process in her.

She told me that when getting home that day, she had felt that she had to undergo some sort of ritual to cleanse herself and accordingly, washed her hands for hours, and then sat in a spa-bath with lavender oil, music and candle light. She said that this consolidated the letting go and she felt now free and light and ready for new things. (A new relationship, I think).

As for myself, now that I've listened to this tape many times, transcribed it, read and re-read it, analysed the transcript and written out the themes, and written up these notes, I can now let go of it too.

KAYE'S STORY

Kaye identified with Persephone's grief over the loss of the mother over generations:

I went into deep grief... I took myself off – like Persephone. I just cried and cried, and started to write. The writing was about the loss of the mother. It was about... here I was, down here, and who was going to teach me. I'm sure it's generational, because it's so deep. My grandmother ...had been put in an institution at birth. She had very bad asthma. In those days, they prescribed morphine for asthma. So, she was on morphine. So, she would not have been present for her daughter... again like Persephone. My mother always longed for her. Always, she was always crying... about her mother.

She also talked about her rage against the Catholic Church, rage against the helping professions, rage against the injustice of the patriarchal system, and rage at being ignored and humiliated. She talked about her grief over menopause:

I think for me it's been more grief. I think I went into mourning. Certainly for six months, probably more. We become invisible, that's the hardest thing. And the body. I've put on weight. I don't feel good about it. I still got all my size 10 dresses in the wardrobe. Yeah. So.... all of that.

Reflecting on her childhood, she tells the story of an only child, frightened and starved of affection, and feels that she is carrying the shadow of both her parents: an alcoholic father and a raging, screaming mother, who probably felt somehow inadequate:

You know, my father had done well at school, he had awards for things he had done, and my mother left school in grade seven or something. So she always had this shameful feeling about never being quite... good enough. And that came out as a sort of contempt. And I think for her own father, because my grandfather was also an alcoholic: one day my grandfather sold her dog to buy beer... and she said: 'I hated that man from deep inside my heart'... my mother was very rageful. I was always the peacemaker. I was the one that tried to make it better all the time.

Her mother had asthma and when she collapsed, was unavailable. Kaye looked after her – instead of being mothered, the child became the mother. Kaye was educated by the nuns, an experience which still triggers a lot of emotion:

... And the denial of my sexuality, and the rage about not having it, not having it fully, and the lies! The lies they used to tell! And the denial of the spirit, you know! Because, I've never, ever had any spirit experience in the Catholic Church. I had a lot of fear. I can remember being a little girl, going to bed at night, terrified of dying that night in case I went to hell.... the nuns were dreadful. Dreadful. I don't think I ever recovered, I mean, it was such a devastating thing...

Kaye links part of her rage with the archetypal feeling of rejection:

I was already rejected by god. See, this is where the impotence and the rage come from too, because I was impotent to do anything about that, it did not matter how many "Hail Mary's" I said, or whatever, he was not going to give me... I was not one of the chosen. And I think that's again an archetypal thing. I think that's very deep in terms of rage about impotence. And lack of power.

Kaye's father believed that girls should be educated so that they could economically support themselves, and consequently, she made sure that she never had to economically depend on a man, but now, Kaye feels bitter about this because she would be financially better off if she had allowed herself to be dependent. Kaye got married very young to a quiet man whose occupation took him away a lot. In her marriage, Kaye experienced loneliness and silence:

My husband was silent, he did not speak. Hardly at all. He was always... Now, he may have been depressed. But it was very difficult to live with him. I had... I was working full-time. I had two children. He was away a lot in his work. I was desperately lonely. He was never there, and when he was, he did not speak. I remember one night just saying 'please, please, speak to me'. He wouldn't. I just got... I just leapt up, out of sheer frustration. Grabbed the television set and threw it through the window.

Asked what happened after this desperate outcry, she says that it had no effect on her husband's behaviour, nor was he moved when she fell to the floor and just wailed and wailed.

It's denial of my reality. If someone denies your reality to that extent, you know, then either you go mad, or you don't exist.

Kaye remembers resorting to shouting to attract his attention, and slowly becoming someone she did not want to be. The marriage ended after 15 years. Kaye subsequently had a relationship with a man who finally paid attention to her – at least for a short while. She describes him as a 'charismatic and

diabolical man' who betrayed, manipulated and neglected her. One day they had an argument in the kitchen. She noticed that he was wearing a sweater she had painstakingly and lovingly knitted for him:

I didn't actually want to hurt him. I was going to cut the sweater off his back. That's what I was going to do. I thought: 'you have no right to wear this'. And of course I didn't because he...got the knife. I was going to slit the jumper up the back because I didn't want him to have anything that I had... that was... anyway. So, I left that night, and did not go back. So, you know, I could have probably killed him.

Kaye went to counselling and has been involved in different therapies ever since, but she is critical of therapists, saying that they tend to label her. She feels that this is forcing her to become somebody she is not, just so she can fit into a certain category. She wishes that somebody could see who she is and help her to see and accept herself.

Kaye says that at this time in her life her rage has changed and that a lot of the anxieties, the fear and the rage she used to feel, are no longer there. In becoming assertive and speaking out, finding a voice, she endeavours to overcome her perceived invisibility. Nevertheless, Kaye finds the new behaviour terrifying and says that she still does not see herself when looking in the mirror, or at photographs, "because I look so totally different from what I looked like before." Kaye is conscious of the generational issues and has attempted to shift the archetypal unavailable mother pattern by being available for her daughter.

In Kaye's story there are three generations of sick, incapacitated and impotent women (the grandmother's mother, the grandmother, and Kaye's mother) generating three generations of daughters (Kaye's grandmother, Kaye's mother,

and Kaye) who grieve for the loss of their mothers. I compared this to the archetype Ruth El Saffar (1994) presents with her theoretical explanation of women's separateness from their mothers. Ruth El Saffar asserts that the woman who wishes to function successfully in patriarchal culture is one who is separated from the mother and therefore split off from the source of power. She says that the separation from the mother does not affect boys/men in the same way because boys later have a mother substitute in the form of a wife. Girls, on the other hand, become mothers themselves as they mother their husband as well as their children. They have to become mothers without the benefit of the link back to their own mothers and their teachings of female power and mysteries. There is no continuity for women in their experience as being female because of this rupture with the archetypal mother. Thinking about this concept I suddenly understood the immensity of this separation, and the implication for generations of women. I felt a deep, primal rage emerging in me as I began to understand that the wounded feminine – and the wounded rage – goes back generation after generation – as women have no example of a whole, healed and powerful female model. I wanted to join Kaye in her cry for the motherly guidance: who will teach me now that you are gone? Who is teaching women how to rage, and how to age (is this a word-game?) when our mothers themselves either did not know how, or are no longer available to teach us? And their mothers before them? Some of the topics that came up during this interview were issues that I had been battling with for some time. In particular: religion and sexuality, and menopause and the grieving for the loss of all the things Kaye mentioned. I wanted to say to her: you don't have to accept invisibility and asexuality just because you are past menopause! I wanted to tell

her that it is possible to reject invisibility and become more vocal and visible than ever before in life. I wanted to tell her that I refuse to sink into the greyness of acceptance and inaction. And thinking about this further, it occurs to me that this is perhaps how I vent my rage against age and invisibility and powerlessness. Then again, coming to think of it, maybe she is the one who has shown more courage in accepting the greyness and the invisibility, the absence of colour and sexuality? Coming to think of it, perhaps my refusal is a form of denial – most probably it is - and I am not at all sure when I will be able to stop denying and face my own ageing, ie. allow myself to become old. The aggrieved, enraged face of my mother is still so much present and alive in my memory. I can still hear her voice, lamenting the unstoppable march of time, a mixture of sadness, anger and indignation. She had always taken great pride in her appearance and was still an attractive woman in her mid-seventies, before she became ill. She found it hard to witness the advancing signs of age, and every time she glanced in the hallway mirror, she would sigh in her dialect: “es ist nicht schön, wenn man alt wird!” Roughly translated, it means: there is no beauty in ageing. She did not want to face her mortality and suffered great distress when her illness ravaged her soft features and robbed her brown hair. She feared dying and fought to the last living instant, her face frozen in death in an angry Medusa stare. And perhaps, my mother’s rage lies at the bottom of this investigation into female rage.

EVE'S STORY

Eve is a cool, calm, controlled woman, highly articulate and intelligent, with a serene face that breaks into frequent smiles. As she related to Demeter's loss of a child, her composure collapsed a couple of times, and her ready smiles and pearly laughter turned into tears. Asked how she experiences anger and rage, Eve relates to her upbringing:

I don't really know how to express anger. I don't get angry. I control it. Mainly because I used to, when I was much younger. As a child, coming from an English background, with a very English family, it really was not done to have a tantrum.

She says that in her family emotions were kept to oneself and there were no open displays of affection or hostility. She also learned that it is acceptable to be competitive but it is of paramount importance to be liked, and therefore one must never be seen as being aggressive, but always hide behind a smile. She recalls that she was a quiet child at home and was encouraged by her parents to channel all her energies, her open and her suppressed anger, into competitive physical sports where she excelled. She says that she continued to do this as an adult when she found the competitive environment at the gym and in cross-country running and cycling helped getting rid of the anger generated at work. Turning to her marriage, Eve tells me that she and husband Graham were very compatible. She praises him for initially accepting her son Keith from a previous relationship, but says that when their son Tim was born, the situation changed completely, Graham spent much time with the baby and she and Keith were excluded. When Tim was about 4, Graham took the child overseas for six

months against Eve's wishes. When they came back, relationships at home were strained. Graham decided to escape the troublesome situation and proposed to move to the South West with Tim and for Eve, who worked in the city, to commute on weekends. Eve was not happy with this solution but saw no choice and the husband was unwilling to look at alternatives to save their relationship:

...So what I did was that I went along with what he wanted to do. That was to sell the house and remove himself. But this also meant that he removed MY home. And MY family. And therefore the relationship I had with my children.

She says that her weekend trips to the South-West every weekend were 'disastrous' because:

I am very touchy with someone that I am intimate with. I need to be like that. When my husband moved down to the coast, and I was commuting, I found that experience extremely difficult. I then felt because I was not being touched all of the time, that the physical side really was just to get rid of his pent-up sexual energy, and we did not have time to become intimate again. I think that added to the breakdown of the marriage. Sex became just something I had to do. I always felt that, as soon as I reached the house, that was all he wanted.

She tells how they grew apart, he found somebody else and so did she, for a short while. Eve relates another Demeter experience when Tim's father and his new partner again travelled around Australia taking Tim with them, and she had no idea where they were and for six months had absolutely no contact with her child. Eve describes what she did in her state of grief and rage:

I suppose that...I relied on friends. But...couldn't talk to them. Threw myself into work. And study. Other groups. I became state secretary and then national secretary in a women's group... I channelled my energy into my work...I put on a lot of weight...I ate my grief. Which is something that I tend to do. And I know it. So my body changed. In fact, it changed when I left Graham. I grew a

lot fatter. Fatter and fatter. And I did not do any exercise at all. I stopped doing that. And ate...the anger.

Eve did not say whether she sought more involvement with the women's group to forge friendships with women and gain their support, or whether the additional work was intended to distract her from her pain and distress related to the disappearance of her younger son.

Eve, a tall, strong woman, finally talks about episodes when she let her rage out and "flattened" men who enraged her. Shortly before their divorce, (which she says was precipitated by this outburst) she "went berserk" and had a physical fight with her husband because he had not kept his promise to her or to Tim. The other occasion was a work situation:

He abused me verbally. He used the f... word many times and called me a dimwit, and stupid, and he blocked my way. I wanted to escape from the office and he blocked my way... I wanted to get out of there, and I couldn't, he stood in the doorway. The final thing was the fact that he said ...that what I really needed was a good fuck. And I lost control. I hit him. Four times. I did not just slap his face. I smashed him in the face.

When she regained her control, she was extremely shocked, embarrassed and upset at what she had done and says that she was still distraught two days later. Eve feels angry that she had to seek alternative employment whereas he stayed there and sees this as a gender issue:

No-one heard what he had said to provoke the attack, I was regarded as the perpetrator of the attack and anger, and he was not, and he was allowed to do whatever he wanted and I probably would not have been listened to. And it happens to a lot of women. He was male, and he was allowed to stay there. And if I had attacked him, then I would have been sacked. Without being allowed to state my case.

A chiropractor raised her awareness of the connection between her body and her anger and she has learned to pay attention to its symptoms. Eve thinks that her mother died of a heart attack because of the repressed anger and realises that she needs to express her emotions, in particular anger, more than she does. She is in the process of learning to be assertive without being aggressive, and to honour her need for being liked while still being able to speak up and discourage people from verbally abusing her or wasting her time.

I have known Eve for a few years and always seen her as a competent, capable and assertive woman who is managing her life very well. Eve is different from me in that she always appears in control and unemotional. Not knowing very much about her private sphere at all, I wondered about her journey towards the assertiveness and competency that she displays now, as I did not think that she had been born that way. In the interview, I found out that the Eve who is good at chairing meetings, analysing and discussing facts and figures, feels extremely uncomfortable talking about feelings, showing emotions and talking about herself and her own experiences. I observed that the more uncomfortable she feels, the brighter she smiles, until the smile cracks and she breaks into embarrassed tears. Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994, p. xiii), talking about the variety of women's experience of rage, observe that enraged women may smile to hide their feelings, and may develop a strategy of pleasing everyone around them, except themselves. Eve herself says that she needs to be

liked, and this is something I can also recognise in my own behaviour. I can relate to her rage as the silenced partner in a marriage and also to her pain as non-custodial parent of a young boy. In her situation, years ago, I did not do what she did, but sought to deaden my pain with substances and sex. Because of Eve's strong boundaries, I felt honoured that she trusted me enough to let down her guard and allow me some insight into her private life and the pain that she hides so well. After the interview, I very much wanted to give her a hug to demonstrate solidarity and understanding, but then refrained because I felt the wall of distance go up as soon as I switched off the tape recorder and she walked out with great dignity and composure, in complete control of the situation.

SUSAN'S STORY

Susan, after thinking for a little while about Demeter's myth, connected not with the rage of the Earthmother, but with the daughter.

There is a certain amount of loss of happiness that I could have had, that's what I'm angry about.... separation from my parents at birth. Abandonment. Abandonment and loss of trust... I've always felt insecure.

She keeps her rage well hidden behind her quiet, totally unemotional behaviour. Telling her story in a flat, barely audible voice, prompted by many questions and falling into many silences, Susan describes herself as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and her husband as an ostrich who does not want to know. Dr Jekyll is the quiet person who wants to please everybody. As 'things build up', at PMT time, Dr

Jekyll becomes Mr Hyde who rages and kicks and jumps up and down and swears and yells abuse at partner and children. This Mr Hyde personality also damages the self in various ways and is suicidal.

Looking for links between her rage and previous events, Susan talks about her childhood, describing a cruel, authoritarian father who enforced his laws with a grey rubber hose and nearly beat her two-year old sister to death, and a quiet, unassuming, subservient mother who never spoke up, and a quiet, obedient little girl who followed her mother around and did as she was told:

Perhaps I wanted to avoid what happened to my sister. Part of it could be the early separation from mum. Perhaps I thought that if I displeased her, I'd be separated from her again. The other part...I know I was hit. That was just what happened if you did something wrong.

She feels that part of her rage stems from episodes of sexual abuse by her uncle when she was nine or ten, and subsequent silencing. She recalls what happened when she told:

Everything changed after that. Family relationships altered because the family split off after that, I mean, after it had come out...I felt terribly responsible because, if I had kept quiet, the family would have stayed together. There was just this big strain in the family. The doctors advised mum and dad not to talk about it. Pretend it never happened. That was the idea then.

Part of her rage relates to what she sees as a marriage which is "not quite normal" due to ongoing problems with sexuality and intimacy:

It's sort of like.... There are times when I feel great embarrassment when my husband has to see me...naked. Because, I've found out in therapy, at that time I'm actually the child again and here is...him...looking at me. I feel shame and embarrassment and humiliation... The terminology is 'frigid', isn't it.

She feels that she is not being heard by her husband, whom she describes as a hardworking man who is never available, nor by therapists she has been seeing over the years. One psychiatrist, when faced with the extent of her pain, very recently told her that he did not know what to do, but he wanted her to be available for her husband when he needed her! She feels her rage in her body as tension builds until she explodes.

Susan is concerned about sending out confused messages to her own daughters, one of whom suffers from various stress-related physical symptoms. Although she tells them verbally that they can do whatever they want, because the power is within them, she is aware that this is not what she models for them.

I approached Susan because I knew that she had issues around anger, and I am honoured that she trusted me enough to disclose her life's story. I don't know whether I handled this very well. I need to remind myself that all I have to do is give my participant a space to explore her own rage. I don't have to fix anything! But it is difficult for me to remain detached, particularly when I feel so strongly about certain issues. The interview with Susan was deeply disturbing for me; it is a very sad story and one which does not seem to have any healing in sight. I am disturbed - not only because of her disclosure about being sexually abused as a child. Her admission that she is suicidal came as a shock and I worry about her. She reminds me of a little bird who wants to fly but its wings have been clipped and its efforts to take off are continually thwarted. Or of a petal which cannot blossom out into a full flower because there is a kink in the stem, and so it is unable to get the nutrients it needs to

unfold. I am disturbed because Susan laughs a lot, but her laughter is not merry. It is what transactional analysts call "Gallows Laughter", a symptom of a person who is laughing at self or others getting hurt in some way, making light of something deeply serious and traumatising. (Woollams and Brown, 1978). It means "don't take me seriously, I'm not worth it, I'm not worthwhile..." It is reinforcing the silencing. It comes from parental messages – which Susan has confirmed in her interview – that certain feelings are not ok. In particular, it is not ok to express negative feelings. She said that she was not allowed to sing, or to cry, but it was ok to laugh. This message is so ingrained in her that the only expression of feeling she allows herself is laughter, even (or especially) when it is not at all appropriate. So now, she tells her story in a flat, dispassionate voice, as though reading from a statistical column and from time to time, laughs her gallows laughter. Susan is being treated for depression. Dana Crowley Jack (1991), Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994), Patricia Gentry-Droppleman and Dorothy Wilt (1994) established links between depression and rage which will be further discussed in the findings.

Susan's story of child sexual abuse and subsequent silencing may not be unusual, but that does not make it acceptable. On the contrary: it is an outrage that the system, through silencing and disbelief, continues to condone grown men sexually assaulting young children resulting in many of these children's sexuality being warped or destroyed forever. Some women overcome these childhood experiences to live 'happily ever after', and yet, others experience depression and sexual dysfunction, as in Susan's case, or become promiscuous

as in Renate's case, or feel a deep, nagging hatred of men as in the example of a young friend of mine; and may also lead to criminal behaviour in later life as suggested in a study by Mary Gilfus (1987). Interviewing 21 incarcerated women she traced histories of child sexual abuse, submitting that these experiences prepared them for exploitation by others and destroyed the women's ability to distinguish right from wrong. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993, p. 85,) label sexual violence perpetrated by men on women "an instrument of power", and the penis, when used in such a way, as a power tool. Seen in this light, it is understandable that women who find themselves at the end of this power tool may eventually retaliate with acts that society views as wrong. Susan's story reminds me of the Medusa myth (Appendix 3) where the old god of the sea rapes the young girl. She is the one who gets punished and must remain asexual forever. Susan is being punished for the insult and breach of trust perpetrated by her uncle: A large, important part of herself has been denied expression; her sexuality, the enjoyment of sexual passion and intimacy with her partner remain out of her reach. It is a sad reflection on some members of the helping professions (who form part of the system) when, after years of therapy, all she can look forward to is more of the same and more silencing!

SHARON'S STORY

The myth of Demeter touched a raw nerve with Sharon:

I can relate to this story. I also lost a child. I know what this feels like. This was the greatest, deepest pain in my life. I'm only just

now getting over it. You know, I had to give up a child for adoption.

Aged 15, Sharon left her parental home because:

Oh, it's just that.... There was no loving in that family. Mum and dad hated each other and this meant that I never had a role model of what a relationship between a man and a woman is supposed to be. I never experienced any love at all – there were just put-downs all the time. They always told me that I was hopeless, I was no good, I was not worthwhile, I would never amount to anything, I could not do anything, I could not learn anything... Nothing I did was ever right, and I never heard a word of praise from anybody... I used to cry. It was not sadness, it was anger, anger and frustration, and a feeling of powerlessness.

Looking for the love and acceptance that she lacked in her family, Sharon found a crowd of other youngsters who were seeking a sense of belonging like her, and fell pregnant at 16. Sharon was happy about the pregnancy because

...finally I'd have something just for myself, someone I could love and who would love me in return.

Not knowing where to turn for help, she returned to her family in the later stage of her pregnancy, but instead of support, encountered hostility and was forced to give up her child for adoption. Sharon says that immediately after her baby's birth, she was made to sign the adoption papers and the nurses whisked the baby away. She remembers coming home from hospital alone and has no memory of what she did or what happened for the next two years except:

The most intense, deepest pain in my life: all inside me, it just felt like this huge, physical pain. That whole time is just one huge, black haze.

She remembers that later on, she blamed herself and at the same time, became very angry and bitter, feeling that the world was out to get her.

I blamed myself. I felt everything was my fault. I felt that I did not deserve anything other than punishment. I carried this big guilt around with me. But... I also had these other feelings. I felt angry and bitter... I hated everything and everybody. I remember a song they used to sing at the time: stop the world, I want to get off. I used to sing: I hate the world, I want to get off. Pissed off, – that's how I felt.

In hindsight, she says that she punished herself with a series of violent relationships. She married a man who, like her father before him, constantly put her down and pushed and hit her. She stayed in the marriage for many years, partly because she had two children, and partly because:

I believed that I deserved to be treated like this. I saw myself as a victim, a bad, stupid, ugly and worthless victim. I believed that if it pleased him to hit me, then it was my purpose in life to be hit. As I said before, the only thing I knew about relationships was what I had seen in my own family. And my mother had this conviction that it is women's duty to please their husbands.

She now says that becoming aware of her own part in the violence was the turning point which enabled her to eventually leave her husband.

I began to understand that he hit me because I allowed him to do this. I had been taking this victim position. I had been feeling that I was unworthy...

More unhappy relationships followed. When the third relationship was in tatters, it was too much, and, like Demeter, she no longer wanted to take care of anyone – including herself.

I became anorexic. I sank into depression and just stopped eating. It was a terrible time, I wanted to die. I felt guilty, because I had the kids and I could not be a mother to them.

Finally, she went into therapy where she found help not only to overcome anorexia, but also a way to her the pent-up anger and rage which she says had been “festering inside for all that time”. She began to study to become a nurse. She undertook steps to locate her daughter and after twenty years of separation, finally found her in another state with a life story very similar to her own. When her daughter’s sad story emerged, Sharon’s rage was rekindled:

It hurts not having been able to protect her, my first one. I keep thinking that if I had been allowed to keep her, ok, she would have been poor, she would have had to go without many things that other children have... - which it turned out she did not have anyway - ... but at least she would have been loved. Do you understand how furious I am?

Today, ten years later, Sharon says that she has learned that anger can be a very positive energy and does not have to be destructive, at least not self-destructive. Instead of internalising her rage, these days she uses it in constructive and creative ways; in political activism, teaching anger management in the community, and involvement in the legal side of the adoption procedure.

Sharon’s story is one of courage and transformation. She is an attractive, bubbly person who loves public speaking and easily captivates her audiences. I admired her confident, assertive approach when she gave a talk on the topic of relationships. I approached her afterwards to clarify a passing comment she made about recognising her own responsibility in a violent relationship. Sharon explained her own experience, adding that women who stay in violent situations

have a deep-seated belief about themselves and that it is their responsibility to recognise this deep-seated belief and do something about changing it, and this will enable them to leave. Lori Heise, quoted in Margaret Schuler, (1992), criticises methods that see women as co-partners or co-dependents in what she refers to as a dynamic of abuse saying that women may be endangering themselves when following advice for greater assertiveness. On the other hand, Sharon's ideas sound similar to those expressed by Bud and Robin Wileman (1997) in their practical guide for persons in violent relationships who wish to regain their power in the relationship. The Brisbane couple have worked with survivors and receivers of domestic violence over many years. They teach women skills to analyse the cycle of violence and recognise that they have the power to interrupt and stop it. The writers focus on giving practical advice and discussing the psychological background of perpetrators, enabling the victims to analyse their own part in the cycle and allowing them choices rather than leaving them at the mercy of others. Wileman & Wileman (1997) base their ideas on the assumption that perpetrators of violence not only want to have the relationship with the abused, but do actually desire to improve it. Sharon outlined a dynamic of abuse in her marriage, and also confirmed the warning that assertiveness can be dangerous and is not always recommended.

When Sharon's amazing story of her great rage unfolded during our interview, I began to understand how she had been able to turn her life around to become the confident, bubbly person I admire. I empathised with the little girl who could

never do anything right in the eyes of her family, and the angry, rebellious adolescent, running away from home to seek love and belonging in reckless promiscuity. I know about bursting into silent, frustrated tears and feeling like a victim when someone else has a louder, more powerful voice. I recognise the pattern still now, at this time in my life when I have learned how to be assertive. Sharon's heartbreaking story about giving up her baby for adoption without having any choices moved me deeply. I know from experience of the pain and guilt which come with giving up one's children willingly and after making an informed decision. I can only guess at the rage and pain of being forced into relinquishing a child. Again, I can only guess at her daughter's pain and rage when she found out that she had been adopted and then cheated out of her childhood. It is a Demeter/Persephone story: one lost a mother, the other lost a daughter. Shortly after my interview with Sharon, I saw the film "First wives' club", which relates to women's rage and what they do with it. The three women are angry and bitter and furious about being silenced, unjustly treated by 'the system' and put aside, in one way or another, for younger women. One of them is an alcoholic; her rage turned against herself. They seek vengeance on their ex-husbands, but ultimately, they find no satisfaction in revenge and turn their rageful energies towards a community project to help women in violent relationships. Sharon's story illustrates that rage and its expression can change over time from angry, silent and impotent tears to an assertive voice. I found Sharon's spirit and enterprise contagious and uplifting. I admire her for not letting bitterness and animosity get the better of her. I am encouraged by her example showing that female rage caused by all sorts of adversities and oppression in earlier life can be turned into constructive and creative outlets.

Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994, p.xviii), who collected many stories of angry women, assert that female rage can be a gateway to transformation, enabling women to leave toxic relationships, heal eating disorders and discover more about themselves. I am thinking that if somehow all the female rage in the world could be transformed from angry, impotent and silent tears to assertive voices channelled into political activism, it would be a different world.

FINDINGS

The following findings provide an overview of some of the themes emerging from this study, as to analyse all of them would far exceed its limits. In addition to details emerging from the interviews with my six participants, as mentioned earlier in this paper, this section also informs on how six other women experience their rage. The findings seek to answer the research questions which included: How do contemporary women express their rage? Does rage vary over a lifetime? Is women's rage linked to women's oppression? How do modern women experience oppression? Do they have bodily symptoms? Is rage expressed in spontaneous outbursts, or does it come after a period of silently stewing, provoked by a 'last straw'? How do women feel after they have expressed rage? How can it be expressed creatively? In addition to addressing these questions, in an exploration of similarities and differences, the findings exemplify that a handful of women with very similar backgrounds frequently experience their rage very differently. This finding contributes significantly to the contemporary feminist theoretical discussions on difference.

1. Rage factors

The question regarding contemporary women's oppression and its connection with rage is partly answered when looking at some of the rage provoking factors mentioned by the participants, and it is disturbing to notice that women still suffer many of the oppressions that feminist writers mentioned throughout this paper have highlighted for decades, including silencing and sexual abuse. Sandra Thomas (1993, p. xiv) relates women's anger to situations of subordination where women frequently have no control over their bodies; they frequently make less money than men with the same education, responsibilities and experience; they are recipients of abuse more frequently than men; and the culture still largely denies them direct expression of anger. She summarises women's anger and stress sources in the following humorous recipe:

1 cup of crushed ego
 1 pinch of job discrimination
 ¼ teaspoon of chauvinism
 1 well beaten path to the washing machine
 ½ teaspoon grated nerves
 1 pinch of man from the street
 1 dash from the dentist and home in heavy traffic.
 Mix all the ingredients together and stir violently. Cook until you get a slow burn and add one last straw. Serves 53% of the population. (1993, p. 113)

The participants' stories told of Demeter/Persephone themes of grief, loss, and powerlessness. Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994) group these issues together under abandonment, stating that the sense of separation creates feelings of deprivation and loss, "those psychologically deeper wounds that engender rage" (p. 7). At the top of the list of grievances were thwarting, silencing, not being heard, not having the words to express needs, as one participant put it:

There's the sense that, as a real human being, you're not really heard, or counted upon...not having a language with which you can express yourself.

While the themes were similar, actual experiences and expressions varied; one woman said that she felt like shaking her partner: "Wake up! Hear me!" Another woman wondered whether her reality existed:

If someone denies your reality to that extent, you know, then either you're going mad, or you don't exist...

Transactional analysts maintain that when people feel not heard and unable to state their needs, they begin to believe that they are unimportant, their needs do not count, and ultimately, that they have no right to exist. (Stan Woollams and Michael Brown, 1978). Indeed, another participant said that she felt she was "a total waste of space".

Participants described their experiences of abandonment in the form of gender inequalities, gender expectations and the system at the time:

And he was allowed to do whatever he wanted and I probably would not have been listened to. And it happens to a lot of women. He was male...

A sense of boredom... I couldn't believe how boring this all was. Women's lives are just so repetitive! And it was the repetition that really drove me insane. I felt very angry that men were able to live their lives the way they did.

There was no supporting mother's benefit...to try and get back into the workforce... there were no child-care centres.

I feel that it is very unjust. I think that women... like, we know the statistics. Women are the poorest in the society.

Participants told stories of different experiences of loss of children and mothers. One was forced into giving her child up for adoption. Another one suffered frequent separation from her youngest child when her estranged husband took him away for months at a time. One woman's son had an accident which left him a paraplegic. Participants frequently felt abandoned by their mothers in various ways: one woman had been left in hospital for three months after birth, and throughout her childhood, had to be hospitalised and separated from her mother many times. Another woman's mother was unavailable through illness. Women described mothers as unloving, even cruel and violent, favouring siblings, constantly criticising, never listening and not standing up for their daughters. Several women in the study see their mothers as mouse-like grey, obedient, little individuals who never made waves, never asserted themselves, never contradicted their husbands and whom they did not wish to emulate. Gender socialisation is discussed elsewhere in this paper and many feminists have written about the silencing of women into the Victorian lady, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon culture. On the other hand, I know that it is quite acceptable in Italian households, where the matriarch is held in high esteem, for women to scream, yell, and throw tantrums – certainly in working class environments. My own mother and other strong, hard-working women in her family (from Swiss farmer origin) do not fit into the grey mouse category. This makes me wonder: Is the 'mouse-woman' a particularly Anglo-Saxon trait? Is it a class-related phenomenon? The mothers of three women in my study had died, and these women expressed feelings of grief, abandonment and rage at unfinished business. Many have explored the complexity of mother/daughter relationships, including Nancy Chodorow (1978), Adrienne Rich (1982), Estela Welldon

(1988), Janet S. Hyde (1991), Shelley Phillips (1991), June de Vaus (1992) Nancy Friday (1994), Ruth El Saffar (1994) and Shere Hite (1994). Personally, I spent much time trying to understand my mother, her rage, and the complicated bond, the love/hate connection, between us, and this is not the place to delve further into it.

Four respondents spoke about their feelings of powerlessness in the medical, patriarchal system where frequently, the health professional is the expert and the client is intimidated into silence:

I did not understand why a psychiatrist had to have me completely undressed and needed to actually touch my breasts...

I was fitted with a Dalcon shield and got septicemia from it. I was very angry that I did not understand enough about contraceptive devices... so this is just another thing to add on your list of being angry at the system.

I had a psychiatrist telling me that it was no big deal and to get on with my life and forget it. I was quite put off by that. I mean, how would she know? How would anybody know that has not been there?

I feel that I'm not getting anywhere, time won't cure it, counselling won't help. I was so distraught... I just wanted to finish it off.

I went to see a counsellor...She said: ... "I think you seduced me into believing that you are better than what you are". That's what she said: seduced. I was there for sexual abuse. She should not have said that to me. She should have been used to people who are really good at covering stuff up. Another time, she yelled at me to sit up straight. Like my father used to! I immediately sat upright in my chair, like a little child. After that, I did not want to see her any more.

The power relationship between the traditional medical establishment and women clients has long been discussed in feminist literature. (Barbara Ehrenreich, 1973; Anne Oakley, 1980, 1981, 1984; Germaine Greer, 1993; Linda Gannon, 1998).

In addition to the above themes, sexuality was repeatedly mentioned. Valentis and Devane suggest a close association between female sexuality, shame and female rage, surreptitiously weaving the Medusa myth (Appendix 3) through their analysis, maintaining that “anguish turned to shame is a root cause of female rage” (p.7). The works of radical feminists Mary Daly (1979) and Adrienne Rich (1982, 1993) are full of women’s rage about man-imposed sexuality. Some of my participants’ rage came out in their stories of fear, anger and shame around sexuality as the women told of their different experiences relating to male-centred, male imposed sexuality:

He knew that it hurt and yet, he continued to force himself on me...I hated it.

I then felt because I was not being touched all of the time, that the physical side really was just to get rid of his pent-up sexual energy...Sex became just something I had to do. I always felt that, as soon as I reached the house, that was all he wanted.

I never felt that I was able to fully express my physical sexuality... partly because of the inadequacy of the men I happened to bed. And that enraged me. I know what it can be like, and I did not have that. I have had 35 years of a sense of deprivation.

He was having affairs but he was depriving me to do it... you know?

The denial of sexuality, and the rage about not having it!

Two participants experiencing male ideas of the ideal sexual woman said:

I did not understand... all I understood was that I was somehow inadequate because I did not have breasts...

The worst thing is that you become invisible... you are not a sexual being any more...

Two are survivors of childhood sexual abuse. One of them traces current relationship problems back to childhood experiences:

Well, I've always found it difficult to ... But what I see, what you see, on the TV as the normal, loving relationship in marriage, I don't feel that our marriage is quite like that. There is something else. It's sort of like.... There are times when I feel great embarrassment when my husband has to see me...naked. Because, I've found out in therapy, at that time I'm actually the child again and here is...him...looking at me. I feel shame and embarrassment and humiliation.

Jo Oppenheimer (1998) is one of numerous women writing on child sexual abuse and incest. A survivor herself, she emphasises the importance of speaking up and coming out, feeling very strongly that survivors must become public in order to be healed. She recommends self-help groups and art such as painting and play writing.

The above explores some of the major rage provoking factors. The following sections investigate the similar and different ways in which the women in my study express their rage, think about it, and feel after they have expressed it.

2. Rage expressions

(a) Directed towards others

Verbally: All contributing women reported using their voice as an instrument of rage in different ways. Two highly articulate women said they used their sarcastic tongue to wound their partner. Others told of yelling, screaming and shouting, and a few reported swearing and verbally abusing and threatening partners, children and others. Two said that they “just burst into tears”. Two women reported not communicating and withdrawing affection. One woman said that she does all of the above. One said she often gossiped about people who had enraged her, spreading rumours in revenge.

Physically: Not all of the participants reported expressing rage physically. In most instances, the women said that physical expression was preceded or accompanied by verbal outbursts. Physical expression varies: One participant reported jumping up and down on the spot and throwing her arms about while raging verbally; another one exclaimed that I should come and see the marks on her walls testifying to her clawing and wailing with rage, two women reported throwing objects (ranging from pencils to frying pans) either aiming at the offender or elsewhere, several told of slamming doors as a forceful full-stop or exclamation mark during an argument. One woman throws things and slams doors - wordlessly. One woman told of taking a knife to her partner, another one, of pointing a gun at him. One participant had “flattened several men” and punched another one in the face. Some women told of venting their rage on children, pets and possessions: one participant related episodes of forcefully throwing her toddler out of the room and violently thrusting her baby into his

cot, kicking her teenage son in the groin and kicking the dog in the head; another told of hitting and pushing her small daughter. Three women reported destroying their partners' clothing and other possessions, one related how she threw a television set through the window, another one did the same with her partner's stereo set. Women are also expressing – and diffusing – their rage physically in various, non-destructive ways: two told of becoming very competitive in sports; two regularly work out in a gym, one says that she bursts into a frenzy of house-cleaning: “you should see my floors and walls when I’m angry”; one goes for long walks; one seeks release of rage by screaming in the shower and in the car, tearing up newspapers, and writing down her rage in big scrawly letters “until I exhaust myself”; one exhausts her rage dancing wildly to loud music. Some of the latter activities are taught in anger-management classes, and also recommended by Sandra Thomas and her team. (1993).

(b) Directed towards self – rage and the body:

Sandra Thomas (1993) and her co-authors found that women with high anger symptoms often tend to have low self-esteem, more stress, and more depression. All of my respondents mentioned low self-esteem and being depressed at some stage in their lives, and one is currently being treated for depression. This complaint is increasingly linked to anger: Patricia Gentry-Dropleman, doctor of nursing, and Dorothy Wilt, nurse and psychotherapist, (1993), assert that the link between anger and depression is often overlooked or inadequately treated. They define depression as an “I don’t care any more” attitude combined with feelings of worthlessness and guilt, self-incrimination, feelings of powerlessness

and suicide thoughts or attempts. This description fits at least one of the contributing women in my study. Mary Valentis & Anne Devane (1994) also list depression as one of rage's disguises. Dana Crowley Jack (1991), therapist, found that many depressed women had silenced their real feelings, stifled anger and censored their thoughts. Carol Middleton, social worker and transactional analyst, confirms that in her therapy work with depressed women, she often finds that depression is covering up rage and anger. (Pers. comm., 1998).

Food seems to provide an important link between emotions and the body: One participant (and myself) cannot eat when angry, but the others in my study associate anger and rage with increased food intake and subsequent weight gain. The comments I heard were: "I eat...my anger". "I swallow my rage. With food, yes." "Rage? Women's rage? You mean, when we stuff ourselves?" "When I get angry, I turn to the fridge". "I got fatter and fatter." "I get so angry.... and then, of course, I eat..." One woman who says she that she has 'huge problems with anger', deploring her inability to access it, complains of health problems caused by her excess weight which she says is a consequence of her food addiction. Sheryl S. Russell and Barbara Shirk (1993, p. 178) assert that eating is often a method for repressing feelings, including anger, adding that sometimes, the stuffed down feelings are so painful that relief is sought in addictive behaviour. Further, Russell links eating disorders to "generations of women rejected by their mothers". Susie Orbach (1990) relates eating disorders

to powerlessness and resulting anger:

They feel safer using their mouths to feed themselves than using them to talk and be assertive. They imagine that their fat is making a statement for them while the suffering prevents the words from coming out...

Participants are quite aware of connections between rage, whether expressed or unexpressed, and the body:

Well, I just know that people who hold things in are more likely to get cancer. People who are overly aggressive and are fiery and violent in their anger are more likely to have heart attacks.

Other people have cancer, or heart attacks, or whatever. My mother died a few years ago. She had heart problems. I think because of that anger, repressed anger. Oh yes, and she had a choice: either a heart attack, or cancer. So, I think she chose the heart attack. Not deliberately, of course. But she did.

One finds that PMT aggravates her rage:

At PMT time I turn into a different person. Very tearful, very highly strung, can't handle any criticism at all, I just fly off in self defence: you don't understand me, you don't know me, don't you know that it's this time of the month again? Be gentle to me! My breasts get very tender, I can't even bear a hug, don't touch me, don't come near me, they are so sore, it's just terrible... I scream at my husband: "I can't understand me! I don't know why I am like this!"... At PMT time, it's like letting off steam. Then I'm ok for a while, then I need to let off steam again.

Gayle Denham and Kaye Bullemeyer (1993, p. 75) talking about PMT symptoms experienced by their respondents, warn that one way to overlook a woman's lack of power is to shift the focus to physical problems. Carol Tavris (1989), on the other hand, asks whether PMT could be an excuse for venting anger and aggression?

Venting anger and aggression was associated with strong bodily sensations by another woman:

I thought my heart... my chest was going to break open, and my head was going to explode. Because I was just screaming so loud. I remember that feeling: the pressure on the liver, on the head, I could just feel these veins here, and I thought they were going to pop. It was like... ahhh... I still remember it.

Other women described different feelings: "It feels like an explosion in my stomach. And it's volcanic. It is just... pchch!"..."I feel sick in the stomach"..."I have a knot in my throat – I can't swallow. I can't breathe, either"..."There is a rush of blood to my face"...."I feel the blood draining from my face"... "A prickling sensation on the scalp, like my hair is standing up"..."I get really cold all over"..."I feel this heat coming up, like a wave"... "A prickly feeling on the back of my neck..." Others experience tension in the body:

I would have my fists clenched like that, my jaw would lock like this, and my teeth would clench.

In my back and in my shoulders. And arms, so it goes up, and comes down. Eventually, it comes down to my legs, because it changes the... my muscle system is compensating for it, it affects my balance, and I get real problems in my shoulders.

Tension builds up in my shoulders and neck, I feel a sharp pain between my shoulder blades, and finally it goes to my heart, I feel I suffocate with pain... and I explode...

3. How do women feel after they have expressed rage?

Some of the women I spoke to reported that after expressing rage against others they felt disbelief and embarrassment. Others mentioned feelings of shock,

shame and guilt. One in particular felt that it was totally unacceptable to act ‘out of control’, and that she needed to regain control.

There were also positive feelings: Two women reported feeling powerful in being able to inflict wounds with their sarcastic tongues. Another woman said that after she had released some of the pressure which had been building up, she felt much better.

Participants concurred that expressing rage, venting rage, was not a spontaneous, on-the-spot occurrence, nor was it something they had planned carefully. Rather, it was like a subterranean building up of emotions over a long time, as one participant put it:

I might go on with that for years and years and years and years. Until one day – it will be too much. And it won’t be the incident itself, but it will be all of that accumulation ... will be just finally blowing out.

Another woman confirms Sandra Thomas’ (1993, p. xiv) earlier quoted statement likening women’s rage to an explosion when pressure cooker levels of emotional steam have been reached:

It’s like a pressure cooker. The pressure builds up...I can tolerate just so much, then I have to let off a little bit of steam...

4. Can rage be expressed creatively?

This section investigates possibilities of channelling rage into creative outlets

and also addresses the question whether rage changes over a lifetime. Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994) give practical strategies for achieving the transformation of rage into energy, determination and strength. Three of the women in my study have achieved such transformation: one is a political activist and also teaches anger management; two use their rage as a vehicle for artistic creativity, both through the medium of clay:

I did not actually have an outlet for the anger until I was twenty, and that was when I discovered that I had an ability to work with clay, and so through the tactileness – through the body – that body became my body, if you like, and I was then able to channel this incredibly excessive energy which really wanted to just get out there and kick the world in, I was able to then deflect it back into a much more productive and creative energy.

For years I was raging impotently at the medical establishment...I was consumed with rage and frustration...Then, about 18 months ago, I had this dream of a naked woman, covered in red dirt, in a cave below the ground. The next day, I bought a lump of clay and a potting wheel. Over a period of 8 months, I learned to make pots. I threw my rage into the clay. I don't have any more rage now. It gradually disappeared as my pots became more beautiful and more artistic.

Two participants are learning to be assertive, one of them finding the new behaviour quite threatening. Other respondents tell how anger and rage changed over time:

I have recognised that anger can be a very positive energy. It does not have to be destructive. Not self-destructive, anyway. Instead, it can be channelled into creative outlets. ... I think the way I used to fall into depression, and at one stage anorexia, that was certainly self-destructive. That was rage expressing negatively directed against myself. I was giving my power away. I was the victim. I was not taking responsibility. Finally, after years of damage and destruction, I discovered that I could actually have a say in it all. Take responsibility for my life.

I think I've been that person in the family to break lots of cycles. I'm not going to keep the secrets any more. Stopping the cycles. Because it's standing up against the whole thing. And I do... I still feel scared. And I'm 43 years old! Anyway.... I find that now, I move away from situations that are violent.... Or, I know that I have a choice of whether I stay or go. It was really good for me to recognise that I did! I realise: I have a choice! For me, that was really healing. Really, really healing: I had a choice. And I feel that now, in my life, I have a choice.

I know that I no longer have the anxieties, the fear and the rage that I used to. Now, whether that's because I'm here by myself, and life is relatively good, and I've done lots of work on myself, or whether it is hormonal.... Because you do that, you deal with issues.... And also, I find myself getting angry when at other times, maybe I would not have. Like on Sunday, getting caught in a traffic jam, I went up to the police and was very assertive and very angry... because I was late. So, you know, I can handle it, I have an appropriate way of expressing anger. I've learned that.

CONCLUSION

In this small study, I have argued that powerful proscriptions against expressing aggression and rage prevent contemporary women from reflecting images of enraged women in literature, popular culture and mythology and that it is necessary for women's empowerment, in the words of Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994) to "find our way back to Medusa". I have endeavoured to show some of the ways in which contemporary women encounter their rage, express it, mask it with other emotions, and direct it towards themselves.

As is often the case with research projects, more questions arise than answers. Due to its limited size, this study drew upon the experiences of a few women of similar background and age and from very visible social categories. Sandra

Thomas (1994, p. 59) investigated women of different cultures and found that Black women feel more hostility than white women but express it less openly, and that the Chinese, Latin, Portuguese and Vietnamese women in her research were inclined to be more depressed. Clearly, further research is needed into the experiences of women of different classes, sexual preference, ages, religious beliefs, abilities, as well as different cultures.

Finally, while each woman deals with her rage in her own, unique way, it has been shown that rage can affect women's health and can be a destructive element in women's lives. The question arises as to what strategies would help in avoiding its negative aspects? Sheryl Russell (1993) suggests that when women can identify and fulfil their own real needs they will be able to stop compulsions. Sandra Thomas (1993, p. 248) recommends doing self-nurturing things and deplores the fact that many women are too busy caring for others and neglect taking time for themselves. Most importantly, she found that anger cognition has greater effect on physical health than anger expression; in other words, unhealthy attributions and ruminations can lead to stress and depression and overall anger propensity. This explains her findings that women who can talk about what causes their rage (anger-discuss) do not have as severe anger symptoms as the ones who swallow it (anger-in) and the ones who direct it towards others (anger-out). Mary Valentis and Anne Devane (1994) concur with other authors that assertiveness is an important tool and the first step in the transformation of impotent rage to an empowering force:

Assertiveness is an antidote to rage. When women are assertive, they abandon their position of helplessness...They stand up for themselves... Asserting and declaring your rights moves you out of the role of the victim and teaches others that you are unwilling to be victimised. (p. 203).

The next question is, how do we, as feminists and members of the community, ensure that all women know their rights and their needs, and feel confident in assertively stating them so that they can be heard?

In conclusion, it is hoped that this investigation of similarities and differences in the ways a small sample of contemporary women experience their rage will contribute to feminist analysis and exploration of the much wider area of women's violence, as well as to current feminist acknowledgment of the need to honour and explore difference.

Appendix 1

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project: How do you do your rage? A qualitative investigation of contemporary women's understandings of their rage

Researcher: Verena Homberger. Tel. 9409 1963.

At the outset, I want to make it quite clear that this paper does in no way want to condone violence, nor discount the strong association of violence with masculinity that has received so much attention because the empirical evidence supports this link. Nevertheless, there is a silence surrounding women's violence, in both mainstream and in feminist literature. This project will help to remove the silence which surrounds women's capacity for violence, especially in feminist accounts. My aim is to contribute to an exploration of the much larger field of women's violence by focusing specifically on exploring the ways in which a small number of women deal with their own rage.

Interviews will be conducted in private and will be taped. Participants will be able to stop the tape at any time during the interview or request that certain comments be edited from the tape. No individual will be identified on the tape, the transcript or the final report. Transcripts will be read only by the researcher and her supervisor. The finished project will not contain any names or identifiable quotes.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT I.....

hereby agree to participate as a volunteer in this project. I give permission to be interviewed and the interview to be tape-recorded. I understand that only the researcher will have access to the tapes and there will be no identification on tapes and transcripts. I understand that in any published information, my name will not be associated with the research project.

I further understand that I am free, at any time, to decline to answer any question, or to withdraw my consent and terminate my participation.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions I like, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Participant.....

Date.....

Researcher.....

Date.....

Appendix 2

THE MYTH OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

Demeter is the earth mother, a matriarchal goddess. She taught men the arts of ploughing and tilling the soil and women the arts of grinding wheat and baking bread. She is the ruler of all nature and protectress of young defenceless creatures. In the myth, Demeter ripens the golden grain each year, and in late summer the people offer thanks to her for the bounty of the earth. Demeter's task is to govern the orderly cycles of nature and the life of all growing things, which includes presiding over the gestation and birth of new life, and blessing rites of marriage as a vessel for the continuity of nature. Demeter and her daughter Persephone were living in harmony with their surroundings, a peaceful, contented existence, sheltered from the conflicts and quarrels of the world. But one day, this peaceful, happy life was violently changed. Persephone had gone out walking and did not return. In anguish Demeter searches everywhere for her daughter, but there is no trace at all of Persephone. Demeter almost loses her mind with despair and for many days and nights, forgets to eat, drink, change her clothes, or wash while searching high and low for her daughter. Finally, after her tortuous ordeal of hopeless wandering, Hermes brings word of Persephone's fate. The messenger of the gods who has access to both heaven and the underworld, tells the horrified mother that Persephone is lost forever - seduced and abducted by Hades, the dark lord of the underworld, and now his queen. Demeter, knowing that her daughter is lost to her forever, because those

who live in the underworld have no longer access to the world of the living, is overcome with grief and rage. She no longer cares for herself or anyone or anything else in the world. Demeter's rage is so great that she allows the earth to fall barren, and refuses to restore it to its former abundance. Because of her grief and rage, the entire planet earth is in danger of perishing from lack of food. (Pierre Grimal, 1973).

Demeter, the earth mother, is not only the good mother, she is also the mourning mother who cannot relinquish her possessions and who avenges any intrusions of life's conflicts into her ordered world. This Demeter can be full of bitterness and resentment, taking out her wrath on everything around her. Demeter's dark side causes widespread death and destruction on earth, illustrating that woman's rage has no limits and can be life threatening.

Appendix 3

THE MYTH OF MEDUSA

Medusa is usually depicted as a gruesome mask with snakes as hair, tongue sticking out and fiery eyes. This mask has become a symbol for female rage and female autonomy. But Medusa was not always a gruesome mask of anger. According to Greek legends, Medusa was a beautiful temple virgin with long, blonde curls, serving in Athena's temple. She caught the fancy of the powerful water god Neptune (Poseidon) who tried to seduce her, but the young woman did not want to have anything to do with him. Thwarting her resistance, he raped her in Athena's temple. Athena was furious at the desecration of her sanctuary, and would not listen to any explanations. Enraged, she banned Medusa from her temple and froze her lovely features into a frightful mask of fury, and her long, blonde hair into a nest of vipers. Any man who looked at Medusa's face would immediately be turned to stone by her icy stare. It was Medusa's fate to remain single, unloved by any man, and chaste for all eternity. This was her punishment for desecrating Athena's temple.

(Pierre Grimal, 1973)

The themes emerging from this myth have to do with power and sexuality, and ultimately male defined sexuality imposed on women, lack of solidarity between women, betrayal, silencing, and unjust punishment.

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