

Reclaiming Women's Sexuality The Intersection of Shamanic Practices and Sex Therapy

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Abstract

This paper delineates a treatment model for healing and empowering women's sexuality co-created by a psychologist and sex therapist and an elder in Shamanic work. The interweaving of perspectives and experience using yoga breathing patterns, movement, guided meditation, Mesa work, and Shamanic ceremony offers new pathways for awakening feminine sexual energy, creativity, and personal power.

Key words: Shamanic journey, spiritual sex, sex therapy, women's sexuality, sexual healing, Mesa, women's empowerment

I have been a practicing psychologist and sex therapist for nearly three decades and some years ago, I began to do Shamanic work which brought new awareness to my therapeutic practice. I was immediately attracted to the deep psychological shifts that I observed by those who participated. Shamanic journey work has the ability to develop awareness of self and the world beyond the limited western model of psychology. Because of this much broader perspective, I recognized the unique potential for healing and empowering women from this expanded awareness since the prevailing culture has portrayed limiting views of women for millennia which has significantly restricted female sexual development (Savage, 2004). As a clinician working with women for many years, I welcome methods that allow women to experience themselves outside "the box" of sexuality as it is defined in our culture.

My creative juices surged when the opportunity arose to co-facilitate a Women's Intensive Weekend with an elder in Shamanic work. I saw a unique opportunity to combine my knowledge about sexuality with experiential Shamanic practices. My co-facilitator, Ro, had thirty years of training and experience in non-linear awareness practices but had no formal training in my field of human sexuality. I had marginal skills in her world. It was a perfect interweaving of perspectives and experience. Her written comments will be noted throughout this paper in italics.

The participants for this weekend were all women who were part of the extensive Shamanic community to which I belonged. The theme for the weekend was “Energy, Power and Sexuality” and the flyer for the retreat stated:

“Energy, power and sexuality in women are inextricably woven streams. Yet our cultural formatting defines sexuality, even when liberated, as something to be contained until an acceptable act of sex. In such a context, no wonder women struggle with energy and power. Back when God was a woman and women were sacred vessels, girls would be sent to the temple to be initiated as a part of their coming of age. Through breath, movement and story, they would learn to build the inner vessel in order to support the awakening life-streams. Once a girl had opened to and tamed the natural currents that flowed through her body as her own... only then would she be ready to love and experience sexual initiation with a partner.” *(Gaden, 1989, Gimbutas, 1981, Redmond, 1997)*

Our ten participants for this weekend had an age range of 34 to 67. Each woman who enrolled was asked to bring two items: one which represented a part of her sexual story she wanted to let go of or transform and one which represented a part of her sexual story she would like to keep or expand. This process comes from Gina Ogden’s ISIS work and I have found it a powerful way to create community at the outset as women share their sexual stories (Ogden, 2006, 2013). The following is both a template for on-going workshops and a description of the extraordinary experiences of the event.

The Elements of the Weekend

The Mesa

In Shamanic work, the Mesa is understood as a dynamic, multidimensional energetic portal that builds power as the participants interact with it. Using the Mesa as a map for organizing areas of experience is a guiding principle for exploring the complexities of sexual stories (Ogden, 2008). Sacred objects are placed on the floor or table which has been covered with woven cloth; it looks similar to a Native American Medicine Wheel. It has separated quadrants for the four directions (North, South, East and West) with the

boundaries of the quadrants delineated in some way. The four elements (Fire, Water, Air and Earth) are represented by symbols such as a shell for water, a clay pot for earth and so on. Psychological meaning is associated with each element and in this Shamanic tradition, Earth is Body, Fire is Mind, Water is Heart (emotions) and Air is Spirit. The center of the Mesa is known as the place of transformation. As the women place their objects, the Mesa becomes a complex and lovely tableau. Many choose to set their objects across boundaries. Throughout the weekend the array of objects were moved as women shared their insights and their objects developed deeper meaning.

Chaotic Meditation

This involves movements and sounds that literally shake the person free of tension, thoughts, and holding patterns in the body and readies the self for quiet meditation. Ro was trained in this form of meditation by various sources.

Transformational Movement

This is a healing practice with two parts: one that opens up the chakras (energy centers in the body) and another that clears out stuck energy. Specific breathing patterns, called keys, are blended with freeform movement and sounds for each chakra. As the woman discovers herself in the movement, she becomes aware of the body “speaking,” which allows her to listen to herself intuitively and develop trust in her body. Karen Troxell was our guest presenter and the originator of Chakra based Transformational Movement which grew from Kundalini Shakti Dance (Lilien).

Kundalini Yoga

Kundalini is a Sanskrit term meaning “coiled one” which is a reference to the life force energy that coils at the base of the spine and when awakened, becomes a powerful force for sexuality, creativity, and personal empowerment. One of the main branches of yoga, Kundalini Yoga focuses on the expansion of sensory awareness and intuition in order to raise individual consciousness. For this weekend we used primarily Kundalini breathing and simple stretching in order to open the energy of the body.

Dream Circle

*Ro writes: This is a women-only ceremony designed to build skills in "Second Attention" or nonlinear awareness. A dream is shared and then the dream-stone is passed counterclockwise to the next woman in the circle. The recipient shares what she saw, felt, or intuited while standing in the Teller's dream, then the stone is passed. Each woman explores her experience of the first person's dream until the sharing comes full circle and a round is completed. Then the next dream is shared and we each in turn report. It is not uncommon to have women reporting details of the dream that the teller had forgotten. Dream analysis is counter productive to the function of Dream Circle; in traditional dream gatherings the old ones hiss should anyone digress. It is a process gifted to me years ago by a family friend, Heather Valencia. A legendary Dreamer, Heather is author of *Queen of Dreams* (Valencia, 1993), and the former wife of Yaqui leader Anselmo Valencia.*

Some women judge their dreams as nonsense but through the intimacy and presence that the others bring to those dreams, many women find new value intrinsic to those cast off bits of dream. Women learn to use their non-linear awareness which is the same skill that is used to guide in journey space and to track the energetics connecting all things.

Integration

This is a term used in the Shamanic community to refer to a deep sharing the next day after a journey experience. The co-facilitators may choose to work with the person, similar to a "hot seat" approach, or allow the participants to build on each other's experience. Typically, advice giving is discouraged. Our intention for the weekend was to honor the weaving together that occurred with minimal interpretation or advice. The immeasurable trust that developed made it remarkably safe for women to share.

Journey

Journey work is a path of discovery through direct experience with the self in altered states. There are many ways to induce a journey state which can be likened to waking dreaming or an altered state of consciousness. Drumming, humming, chanting, toning with Chakra Bowls made of quartz crystal or bronze, dancing all night and day (such as the Native American Sundance) and ingesting sacred plant medicines are all part of indigenous traditions. The women gathered for the weekend were members of a Shamanic community and they were experienced in sacred plant medicines. The work is supported by clear maps of consciousness and a safe community with shared values of support and acceptance.

Many describe their journeys as heart opening, finding harmony with self, feeling a part of something larger, and redefining the self through a deep encounter with the mystery of life. There is a tendency for journey work to teach at profound levels and it has been described many times as more than a year's worth of therapy in one evening.

The following is Ro's perspective on journey work and plant spirits:

Nature has provided us many plants offering diverse teachings (Narby, 1999). There are plants that open the heart, peel back memories, and or awaken the spirit, body, or emotional fields (Passie, 2012). Many of these have been studied and tested, they are known to be non-addictive and produce generally positive human interactions (Hancock). The Native American church has their Peyote Road-Men, who can administer Peyote. Ayahuasca has been made legal for use in several traditional South American Churches: Santo Daime is one. As an elder in my church (defined as a widespread community of participants sharing a similar philosophy and desire for personal growth), I am trained in the use of these plants. This training is available to those who are interested in learning more about the specific plants and their uses but I cannot be specific in this article. I will say that all women in attendance at our weekend were seasoned in journey work; each woman was included in the plant selection along with considering her intention, her journey history, and any medical factors.

The Setting

The 360 degree views at Ro's property and the gently cultivated grounds allowed a connection to nature; this type of natural setting is extremely helpful in order for women to experience their affinity to the Earth. We created three distinct areas in the home: one was a large area for movement, dance and journey-work. Another area was a ring of cushions and couches with the Mesa set in the middle. The third was the kitchen and patio where we prepared soups, made fresh organic juices, and enjoyed breakfast together on the last morning.

The Energetic Field

When you enter into working with multi-dimensions, the heart of Shamanic practices, there is an energetic field set in motion that allows for many things to occur outside ordinary experience. As we prepared the space, we began to get messages from the women and realized that strange delays were taking their toll. The plan was to open with the Mesa but because of the importance of everyone participating, Ro offered to lead the Dream Circle Friday night with the seven women who were there.

Ro writes: *We gathered women in a snugly relaxed nest by the fire and asked them to choose a dream from any time in their lives that had the themes of energy, power, and/or sexuality. Unconscious night musings become resonant empowered reflections by the circle's end. Often with Dream Circle, common themes emerge. This time it was birthing the self and personal potency, both of which were to become major processes in the journey-work the next evening.*

The women settled into sleep by 11:00 pm but in the middle of the night, all of us were awakened by a loud tapping sound—some heard three taps, one woman heard five. When we talked about it in circle the next day, a woman we shall call Esther told us that she knew it had to be her mother who had gotten her daughter's attention in similar ways after she'd died. When we were discussing the sound each one heard, Esther felt it was an

owl's beak tapping loudly on the window, owls being sacred to her mother. Our late arriving participant, whom we'll call Saman, was able to tell us it had happened very close to 2:22 in the morning as she had arrived at 2:15 and was just settling in when she heard the noise. Esther's mother had been born on 2-2-22 and the tapping sound came in the early hours of February 2nd. This extraordinary shared experience was one of many community-building moments of the weekend.

Saturday

We started the day with **Kundalini Yoga** as a way to begin to energize the life force energy that coils at the base of the spine. The purpose was to help awaken this energy that becomes available for sexuality, creativity and personal empowerment.

Ro writes: *This was followed by **Chaotic Meditation**. We began with fast-paced primal drum music, encouraging participants to move and shake their bodies free of tension, thoughts, and no longer needed patterns. After six minutes the music then shifted, melody added to the beat, inviting dancers to articulate feelings, energies, and ideals into movement. As we moved into a third and final track the group settled into stillness and quiet meditation. Even those who had traditionally struggled with meditation were able to slide gracefully into deep quiet of self.*

In traditional shamanic journey work, participants fast or eat lightly on the day of a session, so organic fruits, veggies, and protein powder were available for custom juice blends. The women each chose to add what best supported her own body. With glasses of juice in hand we gathered for Mesa.

Each woman blew her name into the **Mesa** and lit her candle (Ogden 2008, 2013); she began her story with the items she brought from home. As the women placed their objects, they told the group how they chose their objects and what each meant. It is always fascinating to see what women bring and how they weave its meaning into their sexual stories. These included loveless marriages, a husband permanently disabled from a

brain aneurism, a woman recovering from vulva cancer and multiple surgeries, and many other body image issues as well as rape and incest trauma. The process revealed the incredible courage of these women who chose to join together in the process of healing their sexual energy.

The items continued to take on meaning as they were added to the Mesa. For example: one woman brought a statue of St. Francis to represent the vow of poverty she wanted to release and her monk statue ended up facing a statue of Isis with her baby, Horus, which represented another woman's desire to relinquish mothering so many people. Isis is a goddess of pleasure and St. Francis was the ultimate ascetic so we decided that they were in conversation with one another about sexuality.

As we shared our stories, the mutual honor and respect was palpable; we knew that the individual experiences represented universal themes for all women. We closed the Mesa session with honoring the Divine Feminine in all her forms and welcoming the life force energy flowing through our bodies.

Ro writes: *We chose to build the energy on Saturday with breath, yoga, dance, meditation, and juice fasting because these are paths to self that women can duplicate by themselves. Our intent was for the women to access their power and aliveness before taking plant medicine. Taking into consideration that for most women, the path to "opening" is linked with sex which may have been combined with drugs and/or alcohol, we sought to avoid confusion or transference with the ceremonial plants which also open. I know the teacher plants being used Saturday evening and I trusted them to open the women to a deeper connection with their bodies and their personal power.*

*"The next offering was **Transformational Movement**. Building on knowledge from the Far East, the movement makes use of specific sounds and breathing patterns blended with freeform dance for each chakra. The seven chakras (root--groin, sacral--below navel, solar plexus--high belly, heart, throat, third eye--between the eyes, and crown) have long been considered centers of conscious awareness. Transformational movement opens and clears these centers and allows for a free flow of energy up the*

spine linking the centers into a cohesive field of awareness. Just about everyone present settled comfortably into a greater field of self.

We had just taken a break following Transformational Movement when a Cooper's hawk flew with a thunderous bang into the eastern glass door of the great room. The hawk lay limply with neck tweaked; by all appearances it was broken. Esther raced to slide the door open and grab the bird before Chester, the cat who had been outside to hear the sound, claimed his prize.

One woman in our group was an avian biologist and came out to examine the bird. As she turned over the hawk, it came to, dug in her talons to get perched upright and flew away. The two women who had had the speed and courage to help this magnificent bird shared a powerful process later that evening in journey space.

After the break, we gathered for Q&A on feminine sexuality and how it connects to our energy and power. For two hours we discussed whatever the women wanted. We framed the meaning of sexuality as our life force energy rather than as a genital act and emphasized the importance of this energy for creative expression (Wolf, 2012). The women asked questions that ranged from the basic mechanics of passion and orgasms to abstracts like perception of self as a sexual being. The factual information about women's physiology, neural pathways, and sexual anatomy and functioning is an essential component to empowering women. The participants became increasingly aware of the disempowerment that comes from being cut off from their sexual energy and of their desire to follow pathways to reconnection.

It is challenging to create the sense of safety for women to express what is in their hearts: to talk about their secrets and deepest yearnings. Perhaps it was the mysterious events that bonded the group or the exercises that relaxed them but the women were able to move very deep into feeling. Their stories became more revealing, self disclosure more vulnerable, and the energetic mapping with Mind/Heart and Body/Spirit more embedded.

Many universal themes were explored, helpful information provided, and tears were shed. It was an excellent entry for the journey night ahead.

Setting **intention** is traditional among the Shamans in the US and the Peruvian and Brazilian Rainforest and may come in the form of prayer, or in simply stated words, as was our way for that evening. When the women spoke their words of power around the Mesa, additional layers of meaning emerged and our collective intention was to support each woman's intent.

Ro passed out the spirit plants (prepared in gel capsules) that had been individually chosen with regard to each woman's intention and journey history. We said a prayer for a good journey and the women swallowed the capsules with a drink of water. Water bottles are essential and were at each woman's side. Throughout the night, the facilitators made sure each participant was well hydrated.

The women settled into their pads and blankets on the main floor as they waited for the expanded state to gently wash over them. With music in the background, I led the group in a guided meditation created to help women further awaken the Kundalini energy. The combination of breathing, pelvic rocking and imagery allowed their bodies to access this deeper awareness. The script for this meditation is available upon request from: lindasavagephd@goddesstherapy.com. Spiritual music maintained the uplifted feeling in the room as they waited for the journey to deepen.

Within a half hour, I went to check on one of our women, we shall call Amy, who was experiencing intense discomfort and tension in her body. I motioned Ro over and she sensed that Amy's energetic pattern appeared similar to labor contractions. The metaphor felt right so Ro tested her theory by having Amy bear down as if pushing in the act of birthing. Sure enough she stopped writhing and then, even though she had never given birth to a child, Amy settled into the work of birthing with fairly rhythmic contractions.

Amy was encouraged to breathe and push and several other women surrounded her to help her lift her shoulders and bend her knees in order to push. From an angel on

the ceiling it would have looked and sounded for all-the-world like a birthing scene. The helping women, whom we dubbed “the Doulas,” pushed and roared with her—deep guttural sounds—that truly moved her energy. They continued to help her make sounds and movements until she finally felt she had birthed herself.

Here is Amy’s description of her experience, written a few days later:

“First, I want to thank all of you for holding such a gentle safe space for my birthing. For the first time in my life I feel my life is actually my own. Your love and support for me physically, emotionally and energetically was exquisite. I really don’t think I could have done it without all of your love to hold and envelop me. Thank you for loving me through my messy needy process. It was a little strange to be a 51 year old infant, but better now than never & I am now emotionally maturing at a pretty fast clip. Each of you offered gifts from your heart that I will always treasure. Thank you for enriching my heart with your love!”

Although Amy was worried that too much time was centered on her process, during the integration on Sunday each of the “Doulas” described how powerful the experience was for her own expanded awareness. After this birthing and throughout the night women continued to go within or to move about, relating to other women, sharing stories, experimenting with playful movement, and holding space for each one in her turn. One woman we shall call Miriam wrote:

“For me the experience reminded me of the importance of bonding with the feminine energy. I have not bonded well with the feminine, in myself or in others. I came away with a huge desire to connect with the feminine. If I could paint the picture of what that looks like for me: it would be women coming together in a puppy pile just sharing in laughter and tears.”

Ro writes: *Years ago, while pregnant with my son, my mind freaked when it realized that I did not know how to make a baby but the body did it anyway. Guiding is a lot like that. A guide must be comfortable in not knowing and in holding space. Much like standing in the dream of another without pre-text or agenda, to guide is to be so present with another that the world becomes translucent and only the energetic web that connects everything is left. Once in the field, one can look around and “see” or “feel” the*

wholeness of a person and map her backwards. This usually looks like just the right question popping in that once asked and answered from the client's journey-self can form new ground and enhance the woman's ability to shape her experience.

As the journey energy was cooling, I checked on everyone: all was well in journey land. A couple of women called me over, as they were not in as deep as they would like to be and thought they should take another capsule. Rather than add more, I helped them to go deeper since the point with a journey is to find new paths to self. I lay down between them, taking each by the hand. I knew that Miriam had been shadowed in loss and sadness for some time. The other, whom we shall call Chloe, was a brainiac research biochemist in need of a holiday from mind. I asked if they wanted to visit the land of Fairie (which is a dimension of Earth spirits). They both said yes and were hopeful.

Dimension-hopping is easier when journeyers are in deep. I explained to them that in order to shift dimensions, one must energetically dial it in, like the tuner on a radio. I told them that to dial in the dimension of Fairie, the price of admission is pure joy. Chloe had a fabulous toddler son at home and was quickly able to dial in her joy by thinking of him. Miriam had to work to find the feeling of joy, eventually going back to before her father was killed in Vietnam when she was three. Once Miriam accessed this earlier innocence, she had a big smile. From the look on her face I'd say it was her first return to joy since she lost her father and was subsequently molested by her stepfather. Miriam had told this part of her sexual story during the Mesa process and had described the shadow of depression that followed her throughout her life. If nothing else happened I knew that Chloe and Miriam already felt joy... which is its own point of arrival!

I found the dimension of Fairie as a kid and never lost the trail in, so I began to generate the doorway that lives in me, hoping that Chloe and Miriam were still enough "in" to track. I opened my eyes and checked to see if they were following. Chloe had her eyes closed and had the biggest grin I've ever seen on her. She later shared her visions of fabulous adventures in sprouting wings, becoming a butterfly and sipping dew from flowers. It interested me that she had no doubt that she could find her way back. The

spirit plants are good that way; they make sure you mark the trail and can return to places of value. Looking at Miriam, I saw a little girl with the sweetest smile of pure enchantment!

Esther's journey took her into the dimension of her very anxious one and a half year old self with the temperament of a wounded animal. Not trusting to be in the big, noisy room, she retired to her own bedroom in the house. Both Ro and I checked on her from time to time, knowing that she was an experienced journeyer who had safely navigated this dimension many times. Towards the last half of the evening, the avian biologist, whom we shall call Sally, came to tell us Esther needed her sparkly bracelet. Sally remembered that her hawk rescue compatriot had placed it on the Mesa to signify that she wanted to expand her "Sassy Self." We immediately sent Sally to bring the bracelet to Esther. We didn't hear the story until integration the next day but Sally, who had extensive experience in the field working with wild animals, was able to meet Esther in her one-and-a-half -year-old dimension and slowly but surely win her trust, just as she would a frightened animal. It was a profound experience for both women and their mutual sharing at integration was filled with laughter as they told the story from each one's vantage point. Sally wrote:

“[The weekend] created this amazing feeling of connection to everyone else, and that feeling of connection is something that is frequently missing or difficult for me to tangibly feel. It helped me to trust myself enough to reach out to Esther during her process, something that was so completely out of my comfort zone because a) I didn't know her and b) she was already in what appeared to be a very fragile and fearful place that I didn't want to hurt her in any way. Yet, in just relaxing and going with the process, we created this awesome bond together and really connected, even though we were both (I think) scared out of our wits about what we were doing and didn't know what came next. It was a chance for me to not get scared and just run away, but to hang in there with another person, to honor and respect where she was and yet find a way to be with her simply because I was feeling so much love and compassion for her and wanted to be there for her so she wasn't alone in her fearful place. In the process, it had nothing to do with me, and yet everything to do with me. It created this really cool cycle of energy and I was able to completely let go and have some fun with it. I am so thankful

for our time together. In doing this in the safety of the space we created, it has helped me to bring this into my relationship with [my fiancé].

After midnight, most of the women were ready for the chicken soup we'd prepared the day before and many wandered out to the dining patio, wrapped in blankets and ready to share or just to enjoy the beautiful surroundings, lighted by the stars and a last quarter moon. By then Saman, whom we fondly referred to as "the teenager of the group" (though she was 34) came out of her room and shared her most remarkable story. Having emigrated as a girl from Iran, her previously privileged family had made its way through different countries until finally being granted asylum in the US to start over again. Saman had left home at fifteen and after many harrowing experiences with her rebellious nature, managed to finish high school and go to community college while holding down two jobs.

That night was the first time during this weekend that she had revealed anything about herself below the surface and Saman told us the next day that it always took a great deal for her to trust anyone. As it turned out, she was very intuitive. After this powerful entrance into our weekend Saturday night, she was able to speak to each woman during the integration the next day and accurately read each one's energy.

Sunday

We practiced Kundalini breathing once more in the morning and after a sumptuous breakfast, gathered for the final time at the Mesa for **Integration**.

By now, there were many bonds and all had found a sense of inclusion. Amy, the one who had given birth to herself, was emotionally tender and raw. She was hesitant to give her emotions free reign yet everyone extended love to her. It was the universal mother energy finding expression as each woman found a special time to hold Amy. Because of the group's collective experience with journey work, women were not trying to fix her. They instinctively knew that gentle loving and acceptance were the powerful healing agents she needed.

Amy apologized for not sitting up and talking at the Integration. She said “It isn’t easy being a baby, we are so needy.” Yet as I told her “it’s okay to be needy,” it was a message for all of us: that in a safe place of open-hearted women, we can let down the burden and be held by one another.

By mid-day Sunday, as the women reclaimed their Mesa items during Integration, they weren’t just telling individual stories, they were weaving themselves into new patterns that would continue to activate within them as the days, weeks and even months would unfold. As it happened, the birthing journey paved the way for Amy to be with her previously estranged mother a few weeks later as she breathed her last breath. In response to an email Amy sent to all the women, telling this story, a woman we’ll call Diana wrote:

“For all of us who made the decision -- heeded the invitation that came to many -- to gather that amazing weekend, this was a life-giving time together. [Amy’s] experience may be the most dramatic, while at the same time; it is a manifestation of changes that occurred for all of us. We have to wonder how her experience of her mother’s death might have been, had she not experienced the death of what had not served her or her mother, and her own rebirth . . . I have to believe that the loving, courageous work you have allowed had to be very healing for your mother as well.

This is coming to you from [Hawaii], the place that has meant so much to so many of us. You and all of us have been on my mind and in my heart this entire time, actually since we were together, but especially here. The healing that I experienced with you has flowed into an unparalleled time with [my husband] these past few days. All of the experiences we shared seem to be at the cellular level -- my body is cell-abrating. OK, lousy pun, but I hope you can feel my gratitude and love.”

At the very end of integration, I made a circle with my arms, encompassing the energetic field that we had opened and played in, deepening our connection with one another. I said “this is the Divine Feminine and we are not only healing ourselves but we are helping heal the masculine as well.” I told the group that reconnecting to our energy, power, and sexuality accesses both our strength and vulnerability, allowing us to express our creative energy in new ways.

In summary, the intersection of Shamanic practices and right brain sex therapy techniques such as movement, breath-work, pelvic rocking, guided imagery and

meditation offered an extraordinary opportunity to raise awareness of energy pathways for sexuality, trauma release, feminine creativity, and personal power. Working with multiple dimensions set the field for the participants of this weekend to enter into deep experiences of Kundalini energy and also set the field for optimal experiences with expanded states of consciousness. Although this weekend was unique in terms of the natural setting, an established community of participants, and collaboration with my co-facilitator Ro, it holds lessons for therapists working on their own in other settings, with different clients and using alternate forms of journey induction such as drumming, chakra bowls or dance.

Framing sexuality as energy, rather than a set of behaviors, removes the performance based definitions that have held women accountable to live up to cultural images focused on pleasing the partner. In shifting the attention away from the “other” as reference and using “self” as reference, the context in which women judge themselves dissolves. This model allowed participants to experience their energy through breath work, movement and guided imagery, reconfiguring pathways that connect to sexuality. Journey opportunities can be accomplished through simple rhythmic drumming (Ingerman, 2004) and can unite these experiences into holistic knowing.

The use of symbolic representations, such as the objects placed by each woman on the Mesa greatly can enhance self understanding (Ogden, 2013). Offering the framework of Mind/Heart, Body/Spirit adds many layers to women’s narratives and may interrupt stories that are stuck. For example, the meaning of the St. Francis statue evolved over the time and multiple spaces in the Mesa, creating surprising sharing opportunities. The combination of symbolic representations and an expanded framework can help participants “feel into meaning” or sense a change rather than simply reporting a story in linear fashion.

Sharing in groups where emotional safety is developed over several days creates a sustained momentum. The presentation of a beginning story can be likened to dipping one’s toes into water. Practicing exercises to enhance the participant’s awareness of her energy centers can be likened to feeling the water, breathing and becoming comfortable with the temperature, and then entering deeper into the water as the feeling of comfort grows. Finally, releasing blocks and allowing energy to move freely can be likened to

swimming, fully aware of senses, emotions, and expanded connections to self. This sustained momentum can set the stage for profound and instant shifts.

Experiential learning has great power and once the woman's story is explored, it is the experience with her own energy that allows her to move into wholeness; the body fully alive to sensing, the mind noting and recording the experience, the emotions becoming more freely expressed, and the spirit felt as connection to expanded inner joy or whatever else needs to be explored, released, and embraced.

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