

# Monday, May 10, 2010

## CSIIE Event(1): Decolonizing the Divine

As part of my work as Director of the Center for Spiritual Inquiry and Integral Education @ Gaia House Interfaith Center, Carbondale, IL, I'll post now and then event summaries (and/or interviews) of guest presentations. CSIIE is dedicated to the path of fearlessness and integral education, of which both are major parts of my own work and my new book. Our emancipatory mission at CSIIE is a sub-component of the mission @ Gaia House Interfaith Center (1).

In this blog post I interview Barbara Bickel, Ph.D., who presented Saturday night at CSIIE to some 12 people who attended. Her topic: "**Decolonizing the Divine: Art and Ritual as inquiry... the journey of women multifaith leaders.**" After a brief introduction to her dissertation study with these women leaders, and a review of some of the basic topics she covered, I'll begin the interview with her on what I think are some pertinent points relevant to what role art and spirituality play in decolonizing the Divine and women's leadership work in relation to that.

**Introduction:** Barbara (my life-partner) as a professional comes out of the field of Rehabilitation (working with people with mental and physical disabilities). She was never much of a verbal person, preferring to negotiate reality and relationships in bodily and visual ways. She also has been in recovery from a strong Lutheran background. Working with the populations in her rehab work was a perfect place for her to communicate because many of them were not verbal or minimally so. She also loved doing art with them and eventually she pursued a path to become an art therapist but veered from that direction, as she doesn't really like analysis, preferring to let art do the healing on its own through sharing creation-making processes. Her childhood love of art led then to finishing a BFA. To make this short, she followed the educational path to completing an MA and Ph.D. in Education (specializing in art education, for which she was hired at SIUC in 2008).

During her pre-graduate years she became involved in a women's-based Christian organization at The Vancouver School of Theology, Vancouver, BC, Canada (see website (2), where women from various Christian traditions came together to put on a yearly conference for women on spirituality. Barbara joined the planning team with a desire to bring art more into the conference and shared that she was a non-Christian but committed to women's spirituality. Over the next few years other non-Christian women were attracted to the ecumenical conference team. After conflict (some Christians leaving the team) and the co-sponsoring Christian institution agreeing to not exclude non-Christian women from the planning team, she decided to do her doctoral research on this group of women leaders. She was an "inside-outsider" researcher, and that pushed her to deal with many challenges in how to best represent and respect the women's voices and expressions and their views and ways of working together. The women were co-participants in the formation of the research direction, and that posed interesting challenges as well. She used art as the main medium to take this leadership group through a developmental period of nine months, and then she had to write her dissertation from there. At the presentation she showed video clips of various parts of this process; available on her website <http://www.barbarabickel.com>. Her work is multiplex but it is basically a way to use arts-based inquiry and ritual processes to encourage deeper self-reflectivity and growth among people in organizations (especially, spiritually-based ones). -R. Michael Fisher (RMF)

### Interview with Barbara

RMF: I thought it was a good turnout and good discussion followed. I want to talk about the feminist aspect of your work, the arts-based positioning as a researcher and teacher, and well, just too many things to talk about here. Where would you like to start?

**B:** My work always begins with the art. It leads the inquiry process.

**RMF:** Does that include leading your spirituality?

**B:** Yes, I spoke about that. My evolution as an artist is entwined with my spiritual path; art is a creation-making process that leads me into the unknown and places I wouldn't normally, or rationally go.

**RMF:** You mean because of fear?

**B:** Yeah, fear and caution.

**RMF:** Could you talk about the art-making, explain a little of what you did with the women, that took them beyond fear and caution?

**B:** Well, key piece is we didn't go alone. We went into the unknown as a community, which grew as we revealed and expressed more of ourselves through the art.

**RMF:** You also used ritual, how are these related?

**B:** All of our gatherings took place in ritual. What became clear in the study was that we were each faces of the Divine Feminine. Holding that awareness within the ritual and art-making allowed individuals to transcend a lot of the fears of intimacy. For millenium women have had to be background leaders within spiritual institutions, especially in the Western world. Males were the ones officially sanctioned to lead rituals.

**RMF:** So was there healing that went on?

**B:** Some of the women would say there was. There was definitely stretching of familiar limits; one was the shift from private gatherings and circles to going public in presenting and performing our art. Not all the women were able to take this step and needed to retreat-- acknowledging they were not ready for that step. The challenge for the group was to accept and respect that those women had to do what they had to do. However, we always took their contribution in whatever capacity as essential as everyone else's. We kept them in our hearts and consciousness whether they participated directly or indirectly with every event in public and private spaces.

**RMF:** What kind of public events happened?

**B:** First we presented a performance ritual piece as the annual conference of the Women's Spirituality Celebration, as an introduction to what we were doing with this research. That ritual was developed further and performed again in the university gallery with a wider public invited, including mixed sex and gender. We also performed at a national education conference. Again, which ever women felt able to participate did in each of these. We're basically performing for the whole group. As well some of us have co-written articles that may be published. We wrote them also with the whole group in mind.

**RMF:** I know you also talked about some of the women being part of an artist collective recently formed.

**B:** Yes, four of us have recently formed and named an artist collective, although at a physical distance from each other, this continues an intersection of our lives as women, artists, and spiritual leaders. It is called Gestare Art Collective.

**RMF:** What positive and/or negative impacts did your nine months with these women have on the planning team of the conference?

**B:** A renewed commitment to the event was evident. We more fully developed an understanding of the importance of it. We acknowledged the importance of nurturing and mentoring women multi-faith leaders through this event. A difficult part is that my doing such an intense project together, after it was over, led to a 'hole' for a few of the women when they went back to just planning the conference. Every year new members come on to the planning team, and they don't have the history of this group that I worked with, so it is difficult for them to feel the same connection. Some of the women I worked with in the study left the next year because of their disappointment and loss around this depth of connection.

**RMF:** I was wondering about the quality of the art produced in this study by these women, as I know you said most were not artists at all? How do you approach a group like this in terms of teaching art skills and traditions?

**B:** Well, the study was not about teaching arts skills or turning the women into artists. Some of them have chosen to pursue art skills since the study but the art was more of a vehicle to express, in a nonverbal way, what the women's experiences were.

**RMF:** Can you link the role of women making art for women (in a sense) with women performing their own rituals for women? How does that impact upon the patriarchy that has so dominated these.

**B:** Patriarchal art and religious traditions have dominated and inhibited the growth and development of women's art, spiritual ritual, and leadership within public spaces. In my own art training I was introduced to very few, if any, women artists in the contemporary and art history courses I took. It was after completing my degree that I began to look for women artists and discovered the work of the feminist artists of the 70s doing performance and ritual and body based art. For example, Hannah Wilke, Mary Beth Edelson, Carolee Schneeman.

**RMF:** You recently invited Edelson to Carbondale? Why?

**B:** She came as part of the visiting artist program at SIUC. She's in her mid-seventies from NY. Only now is she coming into full recognition within the art world for her role in organizing the feminist art movement in the 70s in NY. One of her best known pieces, *The Last Supper*, ended up in my dissertation as a prime example of the decolonization of art and religion. In 1973 she took a paper reproduction of Da Vinci's *Last Supper* and collaged the heads of living women artists over the heads of the disciples and Jesus. This caused a lot of conflict amongst Christians who tried to have it banned in the Women's Studies department where Edelson hung the piece. The reproduction of this collage piece was spread widely and in 2000 university chaplains protested again that this piece is offensive to Christianity.

**RMF:** Yeah, that's the kind of fear I mentioned earlier. I see your study was a means of assisting women further along the path beyond the religious fear that is so embedded in the West-- as well as men's fear of women as artists of serious importance to the development of ideas and culture itself. Any last thing you'd like to say?

**B:** I really appreciated the openness and curiosity that the interfaith group at the talk came with. I've presented this material lots at academic conferences in short time frames. It was really nice to dwell with the work and show several clips from the videos. The fact that there are two women directors, as of this spring, at GHIC, I'm looking forward to where the Center may go with this new leadership under women.

**RMF:** I'm sure they'll be interested in more dialogue with you. Thanks.

**End Notes:**

1. Go to [www.ourgaiahouse.com](http://www.ourgaiahouse.com)

2. Women's Spirituality Celebration [www.wscelebration.com](http://www.wscelebration.com)