

Pagoda, Temple of Love

1977 -

Practice Ground for the Matriarchy

First, I want to thank Dr. Goettner Abendroth and Dr. Keller for inviting me to this miracle of a conference. The theme of this conference is TIME IS RIPE – better to build a lifeboat than wait for the patriarch Titanic to listen to reason. In 1977, a group of women in St. Augustine, Florida built a lifeboat. We built an intentional community that is matriarchal at its base and intention and, matrifocal in its function. It is a community of Lesbian Feminists who decided to make the personal truly political by immersing themselves in Lesbian culture.

Choosing to live in a women only community, with Women's Spirituality at its base, was (is) nothing short of revolutionary. Exploring the notion of how life could be lived among women, with core feminist ethics and intention, was a cause that was taken up by thousands of women in the 1970s. Most of these communities quickly dissolved, some lasted through the 1980s, and a few, like the Pagoda Community, lasted into this century.

Intentional women's communities were and continue to be practice grounds for the matriarchy, glimpses of how life could be lived among women here and now. Pagoda women trudged through murky, treacherous waters to build bridges between women at a time when we were just beginning to find each other. For the Pagoda Community, it meant years of joy in living among women in an idyllic seaside setting, together with the chaos that comes before real

change. It also meant dealing with issues left over from the patriarchy. Issues of class, race, able-ism, and myriad other issues that the Lesbian Feminist community at large were grappling with invariably surfaced at Pagoda.

My intent here is to offer a glimpse into just one of the many women's communities that began in the 1970's, the Pagoda Community. It was "a practice ground for the matriarchy", established in 1977 in the oldest City in the United States, St. Augustine, Florida.

Having been robbed of our herstory, most women have also lost our matriarchal families of origin. In order to reclaim them, new affiliations have to be forged. This is the story of one womens communities' attempt at reclamation.

The energy of Lesbian Feminist activists in the 1970s was boundless. The joy of finding each other for the first time fueled the flames. We created an vital alternative culture. Lesbian Feminists started the bookstores, the presses, the production companies, the festivals, the movie companies, the theatre troupes, the newspapers, the shelters. We became mechanics, academics, sound engineers, poets, writers, carpenters and anthropologists. In short, we created a culture built on the promise of a new way of being in the world that puts women at the center. In the periphery at first, were another group of brave, visionary women who put forth the idea of Women's Spirituality through their music, astrology, research and ritual. They insisted upon their place in this burgeoning world of women.

We embraced this new movement like a lover. We were unstoppable. We met at the bookstores, in the bars, at the universities and proceeded to change the world for women. Then, largely, we went home to our individual lives.

Some decided to take another step to explore what living together as a community would look like - a matriarchy re-defined. Certainly not a matriarchy in the way that we generally define it as scholars, but a practice ground for life lived exclusively among women. As Lesbian Separatists, we had no divided loyalty. Our world was for, by and about women. We were building lives by, for and about Lesbians in particular, and women in general. Now, we needed a home.

In 1976, a group of four "renegade" Lesbian artists went in search of a place to build a Lesbian artists' colony. They discovered four little seaside cottages, just outside of St. Augustine, Florida, in a little resort called "The Pagoda". Synchronistically, The Sanscrit definition of "Pagoda" is "Divine Female". This resort operated with that name since 1937, and it had obviously been built for it's eventual purpose!

The women all fell in love with the cottages, the weather, the ocean, and, each other. Living beside one another became overwhelmingly compelling - they shared meals, ideas, and lovers, and no one wanted the vacation to end. So, in 1977, the original four women persuaded the owner of the cottages to sell the cottages to them for 4,000 dollars each, and the Pagoda Community was established.

The first Pagodians invited their friends, and more and more women were drawn there. It was the 1970s, so for the first couple of years, it was sheer

anarchy with parties, drugs, too much drinking, a lot of heated drama over the issue of non-monogamy, and myriad other issues that surface in communal/semi-communal living space. Lesbians run-amuk! They were women from different classes, different places, and many times, wildly different values. The only thing that we could all agree upon at any one time is that Pagoda was lesbian space.

ALONG CAME THE GODDESS

In the 1980s, one of the Pagoda founders, Morgana, was ordained as a Dianic Priestess by Z Budapest. Morgana knew that if the community was going to continue, it needed some structure: a few guidelines for peaceful co-habitation and a healthy infusion of the Goddess. At that time, it became an intentional community, and new women who joined the expanding Pagoda Community all agreed to the feminist principles that guided our every day lives.

Morgana began to organize rituals on a regular basis, exposing most of the women there, most for the first time, to the idea of Women's Spirituality. Women were hungry for an alternative to the male divinity. We celebrated the rituals associated with the Dianic, woman centered spirituality. These became central to the Pagoda community, a kind of glue that held us together. Rituals became a focal point. The ritual gatherings became a safe space for all of us to gather as a community, despite differences. Arguments, disagreements and hurt feelings that may have surfaced in our consensus based monthly meetings were all put aside when we met in communion with the Goddess. It was the beginning

of Pagoda's evolution. Because of the increased emphasis on Women's Spirituality, the structure was profoundly changed, a necessary step for the community, at that time. Even those of us who didn't initially believe in any sort of organized religion, female based or otherwise, attended. It was a neutral space for most.

As we wandered closer to our dream of our idea of women's space/Lesbian space, it became clear that we had to do something to protect the legal integrity of the Pagoda. At that time, men were beginning lawsuits, demanding entry into the few, precious, women's spaces that existed, and they were winning. How do we keep it women only? How do we keep our sacred space?

Z Budapest, founder of the modern incarnation of Dianic spirituality, gave us the brilliant idea to incorporate the Pagoda as a church. In 1980 we were able to incorporate as one of the only church in the United States dedicated to the worship of the Goddess. We became "The Pagoda, Temple of Love". As a church, therefore, an "affinity" group, we could legally gather without male encroachment. Our community center was now legally protected.

The community rapidly expanded. The remaining cottages and the Center was purchased. The Center, and the pool that was attached to it, became our meeting and gathering spaces. In 1987, we were finally an intact, whole, Lesbian community. As another synchronicity, there are thirteen cottages in all.

The Pagoda Center became a beacon for women from all over the world who would come to vacation at the Pagoda. We usually had potlucks after very long rituals and meetings. It was a very exciting time. We wanted to continue to welcome women from everywhere, from all socioeconomic backgrounds, but this required resources. We had to come up with a creative way to keep the Temple financially solvent.

FIFTEEN DOLLARS AND A PRAYER: A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABILITY

For \$15 per month, any woman could become a "Supporter". This entitled her to spend two weeks at the Pagoda Center, with no extra costs per night.

This system made it:

1. Possible to run all year.
2. It allowed for a greater cross section of women to be a part of the community, regardless of income.
3. Gave women the opportunity to buy a cottage as they became available by being put on the "Cottage Eligibility List".

If a woman was just passing through, she could stay for \$10 - \$15 per night, again, still keeping it very economically accessible. If a woman had no money, she could stay for a couple of days with a work exchange or was subsidized by the women who paid more than their \$15 share.

At it's peak, the Pagoda had 350 worldwide members, so we were able to pay for the building and to maintain it.

In order to buy a cottage on the rare occasion that one came up for sale, the women pledged a `Gentlewomen's Agreement`, an agreement that was morally but not legally binding in Patriarchy.

1. This was Lesbian only space.
2. Men are not permitted inside the grounds, this included the individually owned cottages
3. If a woman needed to have an immediate, male family member visit, it would only be during the day, on a very limited basis, and she would have to first ask the permission of all of her neighbors, with at least one week's notice. (This permission was seldom solicited or granted, and men were not allowed, under any circumstances, to stay overnight). And a flag flown upside down was raised at the Center if there was a MAN ON THE LAND. This included workman and postmen.
4. You could only re-sell your property to another Lesbian.
5. In order to keep the community open to women of all socioeconomic backgrounds, you could only sell your property for what you bought it for, adding only the cost of repairs/improvements to the cottage
6. The cottage had to be offered only to those on the "Cottage Eligibility List". You had to be on that list in order to purchase a cottage, preserving the integrity of the Community and the Center.

7. If a disabled Lesbian, an old Lesbian or a woman of color were on the list, they would be bumped to the top of the list in an effort to balance the community in terms of diversity when a cottage came up for sale.

The community was comprised of women from many class backgrounds, so making consensus decisions, particularly about money weren't always easy. Also, because of the proximity (cottages were only 10 feet apart), agreements had to be made between neighbors regarding noise levels, aesthetics, and other co-habitation issues. Arguments were common. Disagreements expected. It went on this way for years. There were constant struggles about the way things "were to be done", how to pay for them, and how to be good neighbors in community.

Since decisions were made using the principles consensus therefore each woman having a voice, the process of making collective decisions were often agonizingly drawn out, and sometimes unfair, considering difference in class, educational levels and level of commitment to the community. We stayed committed to the idea of consensus, and we struggled with it for twenty years. Our monthly meetings sometimes lasted for 12 hours. Living an experimental matrifocal model was exhausting.

There were always variables in the monthly meetings. New tenants, old owners, visitors, new owners, old community members all had an equal voice in the community meetings. The few crones' voices were heard and respected, but consensus was necessary to make changes or amendments to policies. These

decisions could range from whether to allow women to display their tattoos in the common area, to who is responsible for keeping our well and laundry room running. The issues were endless. Consensus meant that decision making was often slow. This became frustrating and problematic for some of the women.

Finally, after living in intentional community for over twenty years, the community realized that they had to radically change the way it did things in order to stay viable. Once we pared down our list of common decisions by dividing the expenses into individual households, we functioned much more successfully as a community, for awhile. Our monthly meetings became shorter. We continued with our rituals. We continued to celebrate Cronings and other holidays together.

The Pagodians attended to their own individual finances, but did work as a group to keep the Pagoda Center viable. "The Pagoda, Temple of Love" became a beacon to the world of women, a visceral manifestation of a matriarchal vision for lives lived here and now, under the palm trees. It was a visceral manifestation of women's space. Our GNP was the joy of providing a safe space for women, to rest and to recharge. For many women who walked through our doors, it was the first time in their lives that they felt safe. For many, it was their first and only experience of women only space. It was a healing space.

The product that Pagoda produced was the awakening of the consciousness that life could be lived happily and successfully outside of the gaze of men. In one definition of Matriarchy, it has been defined by Lyn Webster Wilde - in her book, *On the Trail of the Women Warriors*, as: "Societies in which the

Great Mother Goddess is the central religious power, and in which, women hold political power". The Pagoda, incorporated as a church of the Goddess Diana, certainly fit that model, with our priestess in residence, the honoring of our crones and our essentially feminist method of creating our rules for community. The Pagoda's structure, under this criteria, could be described as uber matrifocal, in that men were taken out of the equation entirely, which I have no doubt, made way for more feminine creativity and expression. We tried our best to avoid patriarchal pollution by not reading standard newspapers (we called them the olds papers because it was always the same old patriarchy repeating itself, in print), most women did not own televisions or computers, and most of us read books by women, exclusively.

In the late 1990s, Real Estate prices started rising, and our little cottages were suddenly becoming valuable. So, the "gentlewomen's" agreement we all had, primarily, keeping the Pagoda as Lesbian space, began to erode. First, one woman sold her beachfront property to a man, and one by one, our Lesbian Nirvana by the sea was dismantled. Life as we knew it at the Pagoda was over, co-opted by capitalism.

Although the cottages and Center are still standing, and many Lesbians still live in the cottages, it is now a community of mostly cordial neighbors. The Center is privately owned by women and remains largely vacant. It no longer functions as a harbinger to women in search of women only space. That space, sadly, exists in only in precious memories. I now find it hard to even visit my cottage. Too many ghosts of dreams past.

The Pagoda community was a great Feminist experiment. It was an attempt by women to live co-operatively, together and intentionally. As women are piecing together our herstories and our scholars are uncovering evidence of matriarchies cross-culturally and world wide, I have to look at the Pagoda community in a positive light - the positive being the fact that it still exists, although now in a much different form. In the context of 1977, at a time when there was no “accepted” evidence of matriarchy, and the male anthropologists were strongly negating their existence, the Pagoda women were visionary, tapping into a deeper imagining of how life could be lived among women, here and now, with women's values, women's ingenuity, and women's spirituality.

I'd now like to present a short glimpse of our Lesbian shtetl, with music by our pioneer Lesbian musician, Alix Dobkin. Danke