

FROM GIRLS TO WOMEN

The Gateway Years

Alison Birnbaum

The year was 1979. I had been in Core Energetic therapy for three years. I worked with a Pathwork Helper, attended weekly Core Movement class, and was a member of a therapy group (which lasted four or five years). I had finished my first year of Social Work Graduate School and I wanted to join the Core Training Program. I was invited to an interview with John Pierrakos. Although I had certainly seen John, heard him speak, and maybe even had spoken to him in New York or Phoenicia, I had never spoken to him about myself, and the opportunity made me very anxious. One part of our conversation struck me as mysterious back then, but wonderfully predictive of the future. When I described my work, relationship and family background to John, he said (I am paraphrasing), “that is all very much in the role of the woman and your experiences are centered around that.” I was stunned. How did he get that? I didn't know what to make of John's comment. However, I knew that John was very cosmic and so I joined him in a moment of cosmic recognition and deep breathing, and never asked him what he truly meant by his comment. I did join the training program.

Yet, here I am today writing an article about material that has sung through me for all these years: understanding the particular role of women. Three years ago I entered my 40s, my younger daughter entered kindergarten, and my older daughter entered middle school. All three of us were coming out into the world. At about this time, I became aware of literature which had just been published about girls' experiences with the larger Culture.

The ideas that interested me were formulated by Carol Gilligan, Annie Rogers, Lyn Mikel Brown, et. al. Of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, based on research they had done at the Laurel School for girls in Ohio, published in the book *Meeting at the Crossroads*. Central to their thesis were three ideas: 1) the culture we live in impinges on each girl's development in specific ways at specific ages; 2) because of the demands of the culture, girls' development is different from boys', and 3) you can see the effects of each girl's development on the psychological health of the woman she eventually becomes.

The article you are reading began as a talk I gave at the Core

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Energetic Institute in New York in January. I have left in the experiential exercises so that as you are reading, you can pause and ground the ideas in your own history. I want to bring this important material into the Core Energetic community and I am adding to it some of my own thoughts about how these issues and conflicts appear in girl's and women's bodies.

I begin this review of girls development at age eight, where Gilligan, et. al. begin to chart the girl's psychosocial development. Culture really begins its imprinting process at birth (watch the face of the parent of a bald newborn when you accidentally call their boy a girl or vice versa if you question the impact of culture on gender). I believe this age is selected as the starting point in the literature because it marks the beginning of a girl's consciousness and her ability to reflect on and be articulate about the world around her.

I will describe girls age 8-9, age 10-11, and age 12-13. I want to stimulate your reading in two ways: think about the girls of these ages that you know and also take time to remember bits and pieces of your own childhood and life experience. For male readers, the task is slightly different. I'd ask you to think about female relatives, friends and patients of the ages I'm suggesting. Perhaps both women and men readers also will start to formulate the equally restrictive but different role the Culture plays in the life of a boy child.

What is so exciting about this work? The central idea is that women's psychology must be seen in the context of the larger Culture. There are predictable ways that the Culture interacts with each girl, and girls will have similar, predictable reactions to the Culture at given developmental milestones as they head towards adolescence.

I am expanding this idea by looking through the unique lens of Core Energetics. The girls' reactions are encoded into the musculature of their bodies, and the confusion, frustration or feelings of powerlessness that evolve from the struggle with the Culture can be located in the body itself.

Exercise

In order to help you focus on that earlier time, I will ask you to take a piece of paper. Jot down three things that you remember about yourself at the ages 8-9 (2nd and 3rd grades). Begin by imagining yourself and your body in the outer world, with friends, during time alone, in school, with extended family members and teachers, in community settings, in church/synagogue. Now jot down three things

about yourself and your body at age 10-11 (4th and 5th grades); then jot down three things about yourself and your body age 12-13 (6th and 7th grades).

The 8-9 Year Old

I will begin with the 8-9 year old. the age of wholeness and integrity. By the way, the ages are arbitrary and idealized. For many women, it is necessary to go back far earlier than the age of eight in order to find the qualities of wholeness and integrity of which the literature speaks. For some women, feelings of loss and sorrow are experienced because they can't remember a time when they felt the joy of the core self rather than the Culture's restraints. (For more about constructing a healthier 8-year-old, please see note at end of article.) However, theoretically, we are talking about a time when the child has a sensation of wholeness and personal power. You might have memories at that time: of playing hide and seek as night falls; of touching the world's magic as you explore a meadow; of knowing that you could do or be anything;. My 8-year-old daughter says, "I'll be the president, or if not. I'll be an orchestra conductor and a mother and an artist and an astronaut and an ice skater and a lawyer." It is a time of great capacity and capability. A time of expansion.

Girls ages 8-9 speak about thoughts and feelings directly. When they feel disdain, their lips curl in disgust and they do not try to hide their feelings. When they feel love, their body sways with the feeling and they lavishly express their affection. They have direct access to their core. They express negative feelings: hurt, anger, resentment, frustration; or positive feelings: love, passion and loyalty. The feelings resonate and are experienced in the body.

Their attitude toward conflict is straightforward. Gilligan/ Brown call them the Whistle Blowers in honor of a little girl who, during dinnertime, felt that she was being crowded out of conversation by older siblings. She solved her problem by literally blowing a whistle to get her mom's attention. Girls this age have a resilience which appears in their ability to demand attention when they need it and to apply substantial physical energy to getting their needs met. They are undoubtedly the center of their own play and their energy is available for dramatizing their own experiences. "If my mom doesn't answer me when I speak to her, I will just have to yell louder to get her attention."

Healthy young girls stick to their core feelings even though they

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are already intensely aware of the reactions of peers and adults around them. You will hear them say, "Lindsay stands too close and talks too much, so they other kids don't like to play with her." They pick up subtle nuance and gesture as they read adult and peer approval or disapproval.

They already have ideas about "nice girl" behavior. They can anticipate adult reaction and often criticize each other for rude remarks or misdeeds. They watch adults very closely for clues to authentic behavior: so closely that they can tell the difference between a sincere and an insincere response. A very popular game at this age is "spying." I have been asked by my 8-year-old why I speak to a certain friend in one tone of voice and another friend in a different tone of voice.

The fact that they express a full range of feelings and thoughts and hold onto their experiences of relationship (whether or not it is "nice") is a positive indicator of psychological health and wholeness (Brown/Gilligan). This wholeness appears as body integrity: body and soul are experienced without much of a split. That is, the body expresses feelings directly from the core without blockages. These 8-year-old girls know how they feel. Their feelings reside in their bodies. There is strength and stamina in the expression of feeling.

They know a lot about conflict. They know that conflict between themselves and others will cause pain. They are capable of holding the conflict between what they feel and what they know others want them to feel without giving up on themselves. They do not have to deny the truth their body tells them, which gives them a physical grace and centeredness as they work and play.

This "sense-of-self-as-the-main-event" shows up in the girl's body as a physical vitality. She has lots of energy to use for problemsolving. Her auric field is harmonious and expansive: energy flows unblocked. There is a sense of expansiveness in the belly and the heart because everything is truly possible. This optimism gives the girl pleasurable energetic discharge. If you listen in to the chakras, you can hear a hum, her vibration is in tune with her surroundings.

A 9-year-old I know told me that she is fearless when it comes to standing up for something she believes in. She describes it this way: "My mouth would be shaking because I would be feeling that what I was saying was so important to me."

But speaking up does bring you into conflict. This same 9-year-old protested when her female physical education teacher told the boys to do 34 sit-ups and the girls to do 30 sit-ups. When the teacher defended herself by saying that the creators of the test said that a 9-year-old boy

was stronger and could do four more sit-ups. my young friend was not mollified. As she recollected this event, her chin spontaneously went forward and her fists poked the air with zesty feeling and righteous indignation. She said that conflict was frustrating but that expressing the conflict made her feel strong. Speaking your heart allows you to separate and individuate. The 8-9 year old is busy carving out her separate identity. She exercises her ability to say "yes!" or "no!" or "get off my back." She knows that conflict is inevitable if she is going to participate in her life without compromising her viewpoint.

Exercise

Close your eyes. Find that place in your body from which you could feel grand, even brag about yourself. Let that bragging sensation expand to fill your whole chest. Now let that bragging sensation—the feeling of grandeur—send power to your heart. Now, if you are willing, let that grandeur, that bragging sensation, expand to fill your entire body.... Gently and carefully reverse the process and pull that bragging back into your center and find a place where it may reside.... What was that like for you? Was that a familiar feeling? A dangerous one? A pleasurable feeling? Could you feel your musculature support or block the expression? Did you find a place for the feeling to reside in your adult body?

The 10-11 Year Old

When two 11-year-olds I know heard the 9-year-old's story, they said, "It would be too embarrassing to say something directly in class. The boys would jump right in anyway and criticize us." They told of holding the experience in. One girl thought she might mutter to herself, "that's sort of stupid." Another thought she might find a friend on the playground and tell her what a jerk the teacher had been.

I was stricken by the 11-year-old's responses. "What happen-ed to you?" I asked. "In 4th grade when I told you about these changes, you immediately made a pact never to lose your voices." One girl replied, "When I was that age I thought it would never change, but now it's too embarrassing."

Voicing the full range of emotions is no longer safe. A girl at eleven is faced with a choice. She can pretend to agree, pretend not to notice the conflict. But the potential cost is huge. When she quiets her

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voice, she risks losing her outrage and her own authentic inner reaction. She risks abandoning herself. These girls fully comprehend the relational consequences of speaking out and the endangered position this behavior puts them in (Brown/Gilligan).

Why is it that the time when girls are beginning to be able to see the world from someone else's point of view can lead to a silencing of their own viewpoint? It is touching to see the hesitant way these girls have of holding their bodies. Some of the physical patterns you can see are: tension along the will centers, constriction around the heart, muting of facial expression and voice, and loss of mobility in the hips as girls learn to hold themselves back from expression.

Girls experience the culture in a new, stifling way and they are now able to articulate society's expectations, quite often introduced by adult women in their lives. Very often these adults are trying to protect the girls by instructing them not to make waves, to behave in a "ladylike" manner. In their important book on gender in the classroom, *Failing at Fairness*, Myra and David Sadker talk about the tendency of teachers (even teachers who are aware of gender issues) to make connection with girls based on their appearance and to make connection with boys based on their abilities. For example, a girl shows the teacher a new hair barrette, is told by the teacher that it is pretty, and becomes engaged in a conversation about where she got the barrette. A boy shows the teacher his new sneakers and she says, "Bet you can jump high and run fast in those."

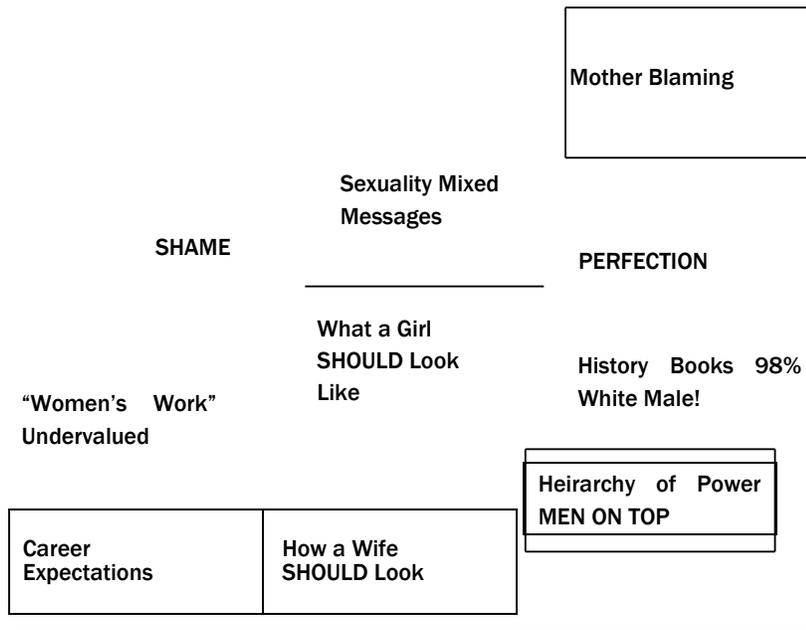
Girls at age ten know there is a list of what a girl "should" be. When I asked a local Girl Scout troop about this, they generated a list of some 40 adjectives in a matter of minutes. At the top of the list are descriptions of the perfect body: blond hair, blue eyes, perfect nose, skinny, tall, long legs. Some descriptions had to do with idealized versions of feminine caretaking behavior: perfect, generous, loving, quiet, happy, caring, sweet, cheerful, nice. Some descriptions perfectly capture the sense these girls must have of straddling an impossible fence: helpless and helpful; not wimpy but not strong; not too smart but not stupid.

Girls' awareness of this list can be seen in the constricted way girls start to move. Imprinted on their tender bodies is information on how they match or don't match the cultural ideal. Some of the wonderful "can-do" 8-year-old energy is drained by the exhausting task of meeting an impossible, ever-shifting cultural ideal.

Gilligan and Mikel Brown say that Culture at this point protrudes

into a girl's world and stands there like a huge unscalable wall.

Chart of the Wall



Cultural Expectations for Girls and Women

How does this silencing of women play out in our national Culture?

- ◆ 11 % of the seats in the House of Representatives is held by women
- ◆ 8% of the Senate seats
- ◆ of the 100 largest cities. 1 7% have women mayors

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Women are 51% of the US population; 63% of all eligible women are registered to vote; 60% of all eligible men are registered to vote. Some of us reading this are undoubtedly thinking, "Well, it's better than it was." This is certainly true, but we are talking about an initiation process, and the feelings a girl experiences when she is initiated into our Culture. The wave of shock when a 10-year-old understands for the first time the inequity she will face for her whole life is followed by a wave of powerlessness and despair.

I went on a school trip to the State Capital with my daughter's 4th grade class. I was acutely aware of the disaffiliation the girls expressed non-verbally as they looked at portraits and statues of "important" men. The only women visible in the senate building were mythological. Some had wings. One had a partially bare chest and no head. In another building which was full of portraits, a painting of Ella Grasso, the sole female governor, was on a far wall, and word traveled fast that, yes, one woman was valued highly enough to be represented amidst all these culturally valued men. (Of course, this dilemma can be felt in terms of race, too.)

The role of adults in the lives of 11-year-olds is a complex one. Adults often want to protect girls from painful feelings. They often remove girls from the very conflict that they need to learn how to express (*Mother/Daughter Revolution*).

Girls in fifth and sixth grades are very often told to "ignore what the teacher is saying when he makes that comment about there being no women mathematicians," or "don't get into it" when the physical education teacher flirts with the prettiest girls in the class, or to "pay no attention" when the woman teacher doesn't wait long enough for a girl to answer a question but instead propels her class along by allowing boys to "out shout" each other with the correct answer.

Learning how to handle conflict and learning how to voice disagreement or varying viewpoints are essential tools for separation and individuation. But here the culture is brutal to girls: politeness and kindness are society's rules. When girls succumb to polite and kind, their authentic feeling is killed. Then, when conflict emerges, girls learn to feel bad about themselves if they step straightforward into the conflict rather than "gracefully" avoiding it. Instead of strengthening her heart and her voice (4th and 5th chakras) by making a genuine connection to her "gut" self (3rd chakra), she pretends to have altruistic feelings which have to be manufactured from her will, or from her mind, but which do not flow

authentically from her core self.

According to Brown/Gilligan, the result of all this silencing is that girls find it more and more difficult to tell the difference between genuine interaction, genuine pleasure and genuine love in a relationship and the pretense of interaction, pleasure and love. This is an inner compass, but it is essential for finding a healthy love relationship or a deep friendship. The lack of genuine connection with others leaves a profound sense of loneliness. Many women have struggled with trying to be loved by someone who looks loving and who says the right things, but somehow the real love and exchange doesn't penetrate. The missing inner compass causes, or at least facilitates, codependence. So many women share that uncanny ability to be able to read and then put everyone else's feelings and needs before their own.

"When adult women enter to protect girls from open conflict, or to give them idealized models of selfless love and perfect kindness, the result is that girls feel that if they speak openly, or have bad feelings, women will not want to be with them" (Brown/Gilligan). My 11-year-old friends ask that in dealing with girls, adult women "put themselves in our position" or "if we do something really bad, give us another chance."

Anyone who meets a 10-11 year old girl is struck by her desire to know all there is to know about relationships. They scrutinize your marital relationship, they want to know all about your friendships. (I remember being asked during this period whether this woman was my friend, and if she was really a friend, what would I talk to her about, what would I not talk to her about.) They are capable of applying substantial amounts of energy to making connection with you.

In the 10-11 year old girl's physical profile, you begin to see very clear body blocking and armoring. Vital energy is repressed as there is a reaction to and an accommodation of the outer Culture. This can take many forms, such as: a left/right side split, a log-jam of energy in the upper back and in the will center in the back of the neck, or even a tendency to walk on tiptoe, signifying the loss of solid footing these girls are experiencing. An 11-year-old I know spoke about the appearance of an eye block at this time. She said she was having trouble seeing clearly; she could see everything double. Her symptom was an accurate response to a Culture that was asking her to develop a double standard as a less- than-equal member. She recognized that on some level her eye problem was connected to her "I" problem. She commented that one of her friends told her that he was surprised she wasn't as outspoken as she had been the year before. Other typical energy blocking at this age are jaw tension

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as words are repressed there, and an overall posture which reflects the need to be invisible in order to avoid shame.

Exercise

Let's assume that each of us has introjected this Cultural Wall. That it now exists within each of us. Hear for a moment what the Culture has told you about yourself as a woman (or man), feel how that has created its own body posture. Find your internal wall posture. What does it look like? Feminine (masculine) perfection? Covering yourself with shame? Are you connected to the power in your lower body? Is your pelvis free to swing forward and back, or is it frozen in the "I give up" forward position, or the "I'll never give it to you" retracted position? Are your legs capable of holding you up or do they feel spindly or numb? What about the upper body? Does the area around your heart feel vulnerable, accessible, or is it walled off? Is your will engaged or have you given up on yourself?

12-13 Year Old

While girls at 10-11 are aware of their own and others' double standards, girls at 12-13 have normalized and solidified this behavior. For their own physical and emotional safety, young women must be vigilant of the Culture. Unfortunately, this vigilance removes them from being in the center of their own drama. Their experience becomes one of watching themselves from the outside. They lose connection with the imperfect, but authentic girl and mimic the culturally approved look and the culturally approved behavior of the perfect girl. There is now a gulf between their body experience and being able to access and express the feelings in a safe and accepted manner. This gulf makes young women more dependent on peers and on the Culture to generate acceptable feelings.

Girls send their authentic selves into hiding because they realize the danger of speaking from the heart. A 13-year-old says, "Pretty much everyone knows what to say and what not to say. You wouldn't want to say something that would make other people tease or ridicule you." A common statement at this age is, "I don't know." "I don't know" signals confusion but it is also a denial of inner authority and an identification with outer authority. At this point the Culture is telling a girl that it is better for her if she borrows her viewpoint from the larger Culture and denies her trouble-making and upsetting inner reactions.

It is worse still when we exhume one of the culture's favorite archetypes for women: the Selfless Caretaker. Selflessness in women is woven into our mythic culture. Being loved and approved of is conditional on the young woman's ability to take care of others. The girl's own desires and needs (if she still has access to them by this time) are called "selfish." This is powerful archetype for women: Clara Barton. Florence Nightingale, Mother Theresa, Jane Addams. For many of us, these were the only women who made it into our classroom textbooks. Incidentally, a Core student recently asked me, "What is the male counterpart to this female cultural icon?" Could it be "the Marlboro Man," who rides off into the sunset all alone, the man who needs no one? This couple is familiar to all of us who practice marital therapy. The couple represents a perfect paradigm for our culture: the woman who can't separate and feel for herself paired with the man who can't connect and care.

However, if an authentic, genuine relationship is offered, these young women have the capacity to connect, and to describe to you the underworld in which they live. A group of 13-14 year olds I worked with at a local school began talking about the way "in groups" and "out groups" worked at their school. Everyone had strong feelings. Finally, one girl began to talk about having been in the "in crowd" and suddenly having been dropped. She cried as she spoke about how painful that experience had been for her. Other girls began to speak about their admiration of and feelings for her. At the end of this meeting, one of the group members wiggled loose a square tile of floor carpet. Immediately, the girl wrote on the floor beneath the carpet "we were here" and each girl signed her name with great feeling. It was symbolic of their underground status as well as a statement of solidarity.

The hallmark of this age is numbness. Gilligan and Mikel Brown say that the girl has to "pretend not to know what she already knows." At this point, a girl develops a healthy resistance or an unhealthy psychological resistance to this restrictiveness and illness in our Culture. Healthy resistance to Cultural illness depends on the girl's level of consciousness. Healthy resistance can: 1) Transform into creative expression; 2) Remain open and turn political;; or 3) Move consciously underground where it is secretly shared or held privately and protected.

When a young woman has unconscious, psychological resistance, it manifests in self-harming behavior which is meant to uphold the images set forth by the wall. I would include eating disorders in this category. Actually, eating disorders are one of those impossible

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straddles like the ones that the Girl Scouts identified: a young woman can appear to be following the code of perfect feminine appearance but also secretly enjoy the power of being able to be in control at last. Unconscious resistance also manifests in acting out behavior meant to avoid the wall, such as drug use and teenage pregnancy.

The body armoring at age 12 and 13 becomes more solid as the wall is internalized. There is armoring against dangerous excitement (hips, thighs), armoring against deep feeling: splitting of the heart from the genitals. For some young women, the terror of abandonment sits in the center of her being (3rd chakra), dislocating her from her heart, which could guide her expression, and from her legs, which could support her expression. For some young women, there is an overall feeling of numbness: she has been severed from her deep well of authentic energy. Quite often the numbness is maintained by the use of drugs or repetitive self-destructive behavior.

Some young women hold their bodies as if they were made of glass. Ironically, the more Culturally ideal a woman's looks and body are, the greater tendency she will have to center herself around the impact she has on others, rather than centering herself around her own body sensations. Instead of feeling her own pleasure, she is more aware of the pleasure of others, what they are seeing when they look at her. She sees herself from their point of view. Quite often the reward of winning the Cultural beauty contest is to become imprisoned by the way others see you. There is a plastic, dreamlike quality to the young woman's movements and a dissociated look in her eyes. One woman I know describes her longing to be seen for who she really is, but is frightened to give up the approval she gets for who she "appears" to be. As she makes her basic decisions based on who she thinks she "should" look and be, she increasingly ignores her body's requirements. This results in a head/body split and chronic neck/upper back issues.

Young women are afraid of self expression during this very vulnerable time. Negative Cultural interest in the young woman (i.e. a focus on the bodies of young women in the media, a bearing down of the Culture and its imprint), heightens during puberty, a time of great physical vulnerability for young women as their bodies develop into a new, "softer" shape. How confusing it is for a young woman to be developing physically in the receptive centers (heart and pelvis) at a time when she is being bombarded by outside attention and being told to deaden her inside experience. This is a truly perilous point in her physical growth, and it is not hard to imagine that she might need to dissociate

from her heart or her pelvis or, for that matter, her entire body. Not coincidentally, this is a prime time for sexual abuse. Some figures indicate that one third of all women have negative sexual encounters at this age (New Moon Magazine).

A young woman moves from the conscious underground to the unconscious underground when she loses touch with her thoughts and feelings. Let me tell you a story that illustrates the progression from unhealthy to healthy resistance. I worked with a young woman who was the image of perfection. She was from a well educated, wealthy family, was a naturally gifted athlete with a beautiful face and body. The only problem was that she was spending long periods of each day worrying about what she was eating and then throwing up afterwards. This young woman spoke with great pathos about needing to prove each day that she was worthy and beautiful. She reported feeling "empty and dead" inside. After much embodying work, she was able to find a little girl inside of herself, all huddled up in a ball. Eventually, this little girl inside of her grew stronger and became keeper of the core self, which she had lost when she had interacted with the Cultural wall and developed unconscious resistance. The inner girl was available to center her and to provide her with a compass. When old bulimic and anorectic patterns kick in for this young woman, she now knows that there is probably a genuine feeling, a feeling that had been too anxiety provoking to be experienced because it would cause fear of abandonment ("you might lose someone you love"), or fear of loss ("it would show how vulnerable I am"), or "fear of disapproval" (if I concentrate on my own feelings, I will be seen as selfish"). This young woman trained herself to organize around the truth-telling internal little girl who now mostly stretches out luxuriously within her, making her feel lovable and loving.

Exercise

Imagine that you are bringing your 8-year-old girl into a living and accepting space. Imagine that she is as strong and resilient as you have longed for her to be. Imagine for a moment that she is fearless. Imagine and embody the fact that she is sometimes bitchy, sometimes crazy, sometimes wild. Allow her to take up all the space she needs within you. Now bring into this scene the Cultural Wall and help your girl maintain her stand, regardless of the Wall's demands, regardless of what is "proper" or "nice." Allow your 8-year-old, if she will, to say anything she would like to the Wall, and do anything that seems right for her to do. Imagine that she fights the Wall, that she tells it off. Let this

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strong, courageous 8-year-old girl write the script....

What happened? What did you notice in your body? Did you notice that pleasure and energy are released when you activate your fighting, optimistic 8-year-old? And when you wrestle with and make conscious your ideals with the Cultural Wall?

A note on locating your 8-year-old self: Some women feel tremendous loss because they cannot find the integrity of the "ideal" 8-year-old. If this is the case, I recommend that you begin by borrowing a healthy, thriving 8-year-old. Ask a friend to lend you hers, ask a daughter, or a great grandmother. You could also breathe life back into your ailing 8-year-old by mirroring her and honoring her needs. Another place to find a girl spirit guide is in the great outdoors or in the angelic realms. Finally, you could call in an archetype from our culture: Dorothy who scolds the Wizard of Oz, or Pippi Longstocking who lives alone in the Villa Villakoola, or Artemis, Athena or one of the goddesses whose virginity signified that she was a woman whole unto herself.

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