

Daughters of the Goddess Celebrate Their Ancestors

By Sophie Braccini



Daughters of the Goddess gather around the temple before the ceremony. Photo Sophie Braccini

Nearly 100 women gathered at the Orinda Masonic Temple Oct. 25 to celebrate their female ancestors. The gathering was organized by and for the Daughters of the Goddess, a spiritual Dianic group led by Lafayette resident, high priestess and kahuna Leilani Birely. Mixing Hawaiian and Dianic traditions, the Daughters of the Goddess want women to reclaim their feminine spiritual powers and mysteries.

The word that most characterized the Spiral Dance ritual open to any female that night was joyfulness. The air was filled with the sweet scent of burning sage, with a diverse group of females in attendance, ages 4 months to 76 years.

Surrounding the entrance of the temple, female merchants sold jewelry, teas and beauty products, whimsical and feminine attire, books and candles. Then the participants started gathering in the temple where an altar was raised on the back stage, with pictures and written memories of female ancestors. To one side, drummers played and chairs lined the walls; people either sat in them or on the floor.

Many ladies seemed to know each other and there were many embraces. A dozen women and children started dancing and free flowing in the middle of the room, following the beat of the drums. The diversity of the participants was refreshing: all colors, shapes and ages with a variety of styles in dress, from lace and velvet flowing fairies to more relaxed looks of pants and sweaters. There was a feeling of complete freedom and lack of judgment; even for a first timer like this reporter, with no guide, it was easy to go with the flow and enjoy the event.

Then the structured ceremony began, which was centered on honoring ancestors, calling to them from all directions, honoring the more mature and wise daughters, the "crones," and moving into the Spiral Dance – an inclusive ritual sending intentions for healing the world and empowering women. Dancing, chanting and med-

itating were all part of the evening.

"I am part Hawaiian, a hula dancer, and was initiated as a kahuna (Hawaiian shaman)," says Birely. "Then in my 30s, my spiritual quest led me to explore women's spirituality." She adds that female deities and spiritual movements always existed, but that since the '70s in this country there has been a revival of studies and practices around feminism and earth-based spiritual wisdom.

"In my studies I felt a calling for the female part of deity," she says, "the female healers, the shamans, the fire of life. That opened my whole life and I studied the pagan communities that bring back traditions from Europe, from Africa, and reclaim the sacred feminine with its mysteries and powers."

The group of women was never aggressive toward men during the ceremony. The only incantation calling for "an end to patriarchy," was asking for social change rather than as an attack against men. But the Daughters definitely want to regain the power of their female heritage.

"We also want to reclaim some words that have been demonized," says the priestess, "such as the word 'witch.'" For Birely, the word "witch" can be characterized by the acronym "with intention to consciously heal."

The yearlong training that the Daughters offer is within the Dianic Witch School. "We cultivate the ability to create and manifest the things we want," she explains. "This is along the same lines as creative visualization, using herbs that have been traditionally associated with certain energies such as peace, energy or protection." She says that the witches call forth things for themselves and their community, with the focus on the higher good of all involved.

The next open ceremony is scheduled for Friday, Nov. 15 at the Orinda Masonic Temple to celebrate Laksmi, Hindu Goddess of Fertility, Abundance, Prosperity, Beauty and Health. For more information, visit www.daughtersofthegoddess.com.

Author's Life Far from Normal

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Anyone meeting Schonborn today would be hard-pressed to detect even a slight facial anomaly, or hear any nasal overtones marking him with what his early tormenters cruelly called "harelip" speech.

He writes about himself as someone who developed "risk aversion stemming from enduring a lot of psychic and surgical pain as a kid," yet Schonborn constantly took risks, allowing himself to graduate from Yale, enter medical school, and travel across Europe and the Far East before settling into marriage, a teaching career and finally a family.

"I'm blessed to have the outcome I did," Schonborn said, admitting he "lucked out" with good speech therapists. He marvels at the incredibly complex facial surgeries occurring today, saying they make cleft surgeries "no big deal."

Ironically, Schonborn notes there is still a tendency to show someone with facial deformities as evil. He cited a recent movie with a cleft palate villain as an example. Locals will appreciate the book's early 1950s Palo

Alto setting, Schonborn's acquaintance with the Hewletts, Packards, and Joan Baez, as well as school friendships he developed with Olympic swimmer Steve Clark and politician John Kerry, whom Schonborn called "a skilled wordsmith and darned good debater."

"I think his story is an important one for our young people," said Joy Walker, who attended Schonborn's Orinda Books appearance. Asked about a sequel, Schonborn admitted writing book two "would be the ultimate catharsis," before quickly adding that he is "under strict orders [from his wife] that there will be no second book."

It seems the peace-loving professor of crime and violence has learned something about conflict resolution, perhaps even finding a bit of the elusive "normal" he's often sought.

"Cleft Heart: Chasing Normal" (Wayman Publishing, 2013) is available at local bookstores. Visit the author online at www.karlschonborn.com.

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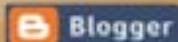
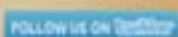
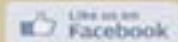
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