



INTRODUCTION

A little more than two decades ago, I received a copy of Clarissa Pinkola Estés's book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. In the introduction I read, "No matter by which culture a woman is influenced she understands the words wild and woman, intuitively." Something about the way those two words — *wild* and *woman* — were placed alongside each other set up a commotion inside me, a response to a longing I couldn't name. "When a woman hears those words," Estés continued, "an old, old memory is stirred and brought back to life."

My husband had died a few years earlier, and I'd recently returned from a journey in which I'd effectively exiled myself to traveling the world solo, with one suitcase and no set itinerary. Call it a quest or a soul search; it was one of those times of psychic if not physical upheaval that most of us experience at some time in our lives. I was easy prey for seduction by such an old, old memory.

At the time, I'd taken up with a circle of women who were studying the old religions and folkways and creating celebrations to honor the seasonal cycles of the earth — the solstices and equinoxes. While it was not exactly primal, there was in our work a deep and intuitive connection to the wild feminine. And though we didn't actually break any laws, we did leave a few muddy footprints on some rules — spoken, written, and implied — of what the present culture defines as acceptable.

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At each of our meetings we set aside a generous amount of time for writing in our journals or notebooks. We'd respond to exercises or prompts that invited explorations into our experiences, our memories, our stories. We'd write in silence and then, if we wanted, read aloud what we'd written. There was no feedback on the writing, but you could feel in the room how one woman's words affected the whole. A web, strong and silky as a spider's, connected us. And though I've been a life-long daily journaler, it was the prompts, questions, and explorations initiated by our work that took me into the deep waters of memory and experience, where I knew how to swim as if by instinct and swore I could breathe underwater. I wrote with a passion I had only rarely experienced, though I've been writing since I was a child. Words poured from my pen onto the page in a language I didn't know I could speak. There was no struggle, no questioning, no doubting — just this unrestrained, ferocious, sometimes funny, always passionate wild voice. And it wasn't just me. Other women in the group found themselves writing with this same freedom and depth, each in her unique and powerful voice.

In these gatherings I discovered something profoundly empowering — and not only empowering, but holy. We weren't reciting prayers or singing songs taught to us in some long-ago Sunday school; we were making our own joyful noise. We were flinging off our shoes and dancing our own dances. And laughing! Until you've been in a roomful of women in which that bawdy laughter has been unleashed, you have not heard the howl of a pack of Wild Women. And if you are a woman and you've read this far, you know the open-mouthed, hold-your-sides, cross-your-legs-or-you'll-pee kind of laughter I'm talking about.

That howl of raucous laughter wasn't the only sound made during our times together, or during any of the times I've been in a collective of renegade women who felt safe enough to voice their anger, name their regrets, and weep for their losses.

But it's not only tears and laughter, impulses and memories, that link us to our authentic wildness. By nature we are creative. Creativity flows through us like the blood in our veins. In our natural state, we are writers, dancers, singers, poets, and makers of art, even though in our daily lives we may not practice our art or even acknowledge this part of ourselves. Still, our hands intuitively know the shape of a bowl; our fingers naturally curve around a pen or brush. We sing when we're alone in the car or the shower and dance by ourselves when we hear a certain song.

We know many things: why spiders like dark places, why moths are drawn to the light; we know the urging of blossom to break open every spring. Given a clear night and a blanket spread on the summer grass, we can translate the midnight language of the stars. We understand the necessity of sex, the order of death, the beauty of mourning.

These are intuitive knowings that we sometimes forget, but they reside just beneath the surface of our daily lives and come alive in our nightmares. Try as culture, politics, religion, or families might to eradicate it, this knowledge of our innermost Self — intuitive and rich and wild — is always with us. We may have forgotten how to express it or we might stutter when we try, but the deep song of our authentic voice still resonates within.

This is the ongoing and important work of Wild Women: to give voice to an authentic expression of thoughts and feelings that are often ignored or belittled or set aside for when

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we can finally claim some time for ourselves. To remember our stories and share them with others or keep them, safe and sacred, within the private pages of our journals. To value our creative nature and respond to its urgings.

After a few years our women's group disbanded, but our time together and the connection I experienced to a creative and fierce feminine spirit hummed inside me. I missed the dedicated time of what I knew to be soul work, and I missed the sound of my untamed, wild voice. I'd come to recognize a certain yearning that arose in me as regularly as the cycles of the moon. You may have experienced symptoms of this yourself, standing in front of the mirror unable to recognize your own face, wandering the burgeoning aisles of a store and finding nothing you want to buy. Or just the opposite: loading up your cart and discovering later that none of what you brought home satisfies you. Maybe you have shed those unexpected tears or felt that sudden anger or the loneliness that ambushes you when you're in a crowd. Dreamed up words that cannot find their way to the page.

It was this longing that led me to form the Wild Women writing workshop. Within these weekly gatherings of creative women I found I wasn't the only one who responded to the words *wild* and *woman*. We were a *mélange* of artists and teachers, lawyers and home-care workers, masseuses and physical therapists, businesswomen and stay-at-home moms, retired women and women just entering their adult lives. Some of us were writers by career or by life choice, others of us kept journals or were drawn to writing as a mode of expression but weren't regular practitioners. What we had in common was an itching curiosity, a desire we might not have been able to put a

name to, and an instinctual response to the coupled words *wild* and *woman*.

As happened to me in the women's circle and in any number of gatherings since — and ultimately in the privacy of my own writing space — *wild voice* was what was spoken in these groups.

As its name implies, wild voice is untamed and unbounded and holds the possibility of great beauty. It goes deep, like roots; it sings because it can. It is not domesticated or restrained. Wild voice can be dangerous; it can be outrageous. It is passionate, exuberant, and eager for life. It is turbulent and stormy, often arriving as unexpectedly as a summer squall. It can also appear as tranquil as an autumn breeze or a lazy river — but just try to capture either of these in a bottle and put them on a shelf.

Language erupts spontaneously with wild voice. The bird emerges from a cracked-open egg, the butterfly escapes from the chrysalis, fire explodes from the creosote bush. Wild voice is what gives you the sentence or phrase that seems to come out of nowhere. It is what wants to be expressed. When wild voice speaks, we pay attention. It tells you what matters and what you intuitively know.

The material in this book was drawn from the Wild Women writing workshops. Thirteen chapters invite exploration into all the varied aspects of our lives, times we lived our wildish nature and times we allowed ourselves to be domesticated. The path is not chronological, beginning with birth and ending with old age. Instead, we wander a road less traveled, looking at ourselves as girls and our initiation into womanhood, remembering and acknowledging ourselves as artists and creators and as adventurous travelers of inner and outer landscapes. Chapters are devoted to our relationship with our bodies; to psychic as

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well as physical geography; to the meaning of home; to family and who we are as daughter, sister, mother; to loves and lovers; to friendship with other women. We examine our dreams — both by day and by night — and we create our own myths and structure our own stories. Through accessing our wild voice, we see how our lives have been influenced by intuition and the role synchronicity may have played. We'll touch the dark edges of our shadow selves, exploring how this aspect is related to our creativity and our renegade nature. We give death its time as well.

Wild Women, Wild Voices is constructed as a guide to help you access memories and experiences, beliefs and imaginings, and write them from deep, authentic wildness. In our Wild Women writing workshops, this work was the territory where discoveries were made and memories resurrected and recounted in a new way. Writing explorations took participants deep into the vein of their own wisdom, where secret doors fell open and intuition connected seemingly disparate dots. These explorations have been added to and expanded in the book. Also included in each of the chapters are evocative poems and excerpts of stories and essays written by women in the groups as well as by other writers, some whose names you might recognize and others whom you may meet for the first time.

This book is an invitation for you to write your stories. We won't be talking about plot or character development or theme. Instead, each chapter will present a series of explorations that summon you to follow your pen on a narrative journey into memory and experience, with wild voice as storyteller.

Just as with other practices that take us deeper into our intuitive nature — meditation, yoga, qigong — we reap the greatest benefit from our work if we practice it daily. The first

chapter describes some tools and practices meant to aid you in your journey. They will call forth from you a commitment of time set aside and honored, a willingness to trust the process, an open mind and heart, and definitely a sense of humor. This is important work, giving time and expression to your deep and authentic nature and acknowledging your Wild Woman and giving her voice.

Recently, I asked some women from past Wild Women writing workshops, and others whom I identified as “wild” (was it the bits of leaves and twigs still caught their hair?), what the words *wild* and *woman* conjured for them.

They used words such as *free* and *unpredictable*, *strong* and *uncontrollable*, *natural* and *fierce*, *deep dreaming* and *farsighted*. “It’s a part of me that knew what was true before I learned words to describe it,” said Helen, one of the participants. *Boundlessness*, the women said, *energy* and *creativity*, *joy* and *freedom*. *Risk taking*, *curious*, *brave*, *wise*, *feral*, and *extraordinary in her splendid glorious way of being*.

Maybe you would use some of the same words. Or others of your own conjuring. The thing is, something has drawn you to this work. For each of us, this catalyst is different: maybe it was the sound of the wind in the trees, a gathering of birds, a line in a poem. A nightmare in which a voice spoke to you, expressing an inner urging that your life was “too much” or “not enough.” Or perhaps it was simply a longing, a yearning, a restlessness with no name that was calling you to listen, and to speak in the voice of your wild and authentic self.