Small Engine Repair:
Thirty-Five Years of the Annual Conference on the Great Mother
and the New Father, Organized by Robert Bly

A Personal Account, by John Rosenwald with help from
Jeanne D'Amico, Fran Quinn, Andrew Dick, Ann Arbor, and others

Commissioned by the University of Minnesota Libraries for their Celebration
"Robert Bly In This World" — Minneapolis, April 2009
copyright ©2011 John Rosenwald, all rights reserved
*

Small Engine Repair

Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father

It's a big name for a small organization that has had a longer life than anyone might have imagined. It all started in 1975 with Robert Bly. In the early 70s Bly often gave poetry readings that lasted three or four hours, moving from a monster-masked chant of the Campbell's soup jingle while he charged through the middle of the audience, to a Shakespearean sonnet accompanied by the dulcimer, to a falsetto recitation of his own anti-Vietnam War poem "Counting Small-Boned Bodies," this time in the mask of a shriveled scraggly haired crone, to psychological observations based on his study of Carl Gustav Jung, to love poems or verses expressing his own loneliness: "like a single man trying to cover a double bed."

At a reading in Denver Peter Martin heard Bly discuss Erich Neumann's concept of matriarchal societies and fantasize about gathering a group of people somewhere in the wilderness for a week or so to share poems, art, personal visions, and study of Jungian archetypes. Inspired by the notion, Martin drove to Bly's home in Minnesota and offered to help realize the fantasy. Bly responded: "If you'll do the organizational work, I'll recruit participants and teach."

By spring 1975 a bright red and yellow poster announced the Annual Conference on the Mother. In a letter to the Colorado Council on the Arts, Bly outlined some of his interests: Jung's discovery of a "matriarchal layer" in the mind, Robert Ornstein's left brain/right brain research, a longing for "the return of the Mother" as reflected in "changes in music, dress, and literature in the last few years in America" [letter to Barbara McLaughlin and Robert Sheets, dated 17 Feb, 75, University of Minnesota Archives]. At the conference Neumann's book *The Great Mother*, writings by Joseph Campbell and by Jung's associate Marie-Louise von Franz would provide material for discussion, as would Homer's *Odyssey* and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, whose prose had deeply influenced Bly and whose poems he was translating. In addition to considering the implications of possible historical matriarchies, Bly focused on Jung's complex vision of humans, comprising four functions—intellect, emotion, sensation, intuition—as well as male and female elements, *animus* and *anima* respectively, and a darker, wilder side, the *shadow*.

I first heard about the conference early that spring. I was teaching in Massachusetts, and working regularly with Fran Quinn, a leader of the Worcester County Poetry Association and Bly's unofficial agent for readings throughout New England. After one reading, as we gathered in a small Worcester restaurant, the poet talked about the project, soliciting support and participants. A few months later four of us—Quinn, Mary Fell, Ann Arbor, and I—piled into Quinn's Matador and headed for Colorado. In the rear window we taped a sign, "To the Mother or Bust."

As he traveled the country doing readings, Bly had informally but effectively advertised the conference and recruited staff. He invited the North Carolina artist Rita Shumaker to teach drawing, the Charleston artist, educator, and dancer Anne Igoe to offer classes on movement, the Cincinnati symphony and choral director Robert Sadin to discuss music. These invitations often came casually, the result of meeting someone after a performance. Peter Martin meanwhile had

located a site, a private camp in Conifer, Colorado, thirty miles southwest of Denver.

We gathered in early June. Accommodations remained simple: shared cabins, no heat, plain food. Shortly after we arrived it snowed. We held sessions in the round central building, with Bly talking, others listening and offering their own opinions. All of us assumed we would be part of all sessions. It didn't matter whether in the outside world we were poets or painters or dancers or psychologists. We danced, drew, joined in the discussion of poetry. Bly, not a skilled dancer, not remarkably comfortable in his body, did warm-ups with the rest of us. "Squeeze your ani," Anne Igoe would chant. The tone was participatory.

I can't remember if we began already that first year one of the richest dimensions of many early conferences, completing a tale only partially told by Bly and then acted out by numerous small groups of participants at night, each group adding its own imaginative interpretation to the mix, transforming bodies into trees, oceans, witches, queens. Soon, however, this type of inclusionary skit formed one core of conference activity.

The mailing list developed after the first conference includes fifty names. I remember the number of those who stayed the full ten days as about thirty-five. Each of us paid $100, all expenses included. At the end of the week, according to a request for funds sent out a month later, the conference "ran a deficit of $800" [letter to participants from Peter Martin, dated July 1, 1975].

As in any small community tensions sometimes arose. One centered on the notion of the Mother. By 1975 the country had engaged a new wave of feminism in academic and non-academic circles. Neumann's exploration of possible woman-centered cultures paralleled this movement. Some participants asserted the conference emphasized historical matriarchies and male interpretation of Jungian archetypes more than the experience of the Great Mother herself or human manifestations of womanhood. Although the reading list prepared by those who attended included numerous works by women, Bly clearly remained the central figure, the organizer; Peter Martin served as administrator; Neumann, Ornstein, Bachofen, or perhaps more subtly Joseph Campbell functioned as prime theoretician.

Gender politics, however, did not dominate the ten days spent together. Somewhere in the middle of the week, responding to heightening tensions within the group, we gathered on a hillside, where each participant volunteered his or her impressions of and concerns about the conference: Food. The snow. Lack of privacy. Near the end of the session, one participant stood up and attacked the group as a whole. Not for its lack of artistic or intellectual commitment, not for the style of its poetry, but because, he said, you are "the cheapest motherfuckers I've ever seen. Your cameras are trash, your sleeping bags are old, you're not carrying any cash. My buddy and I came here to rip you off. You ain't got shit. We paid our way in and we're gonna lose money. We're outta here." And with that, the two of them mounted their motorcycle and disappeared.

Despite our apparent poverty, something amazing happened within these ten days: We became a community. Even the snow contributed to the sense of isolation and commitment and intensity and freshness. A few of us transformed a small cabin into a zendo, a space for meditation. We moved our bodies in new ways, saw the world slightly differently. One afternoon an artist who called himself Peter Papoofnik held a seminar on negative space. Stretching rope between trees, outlining the mountains in front of us, using whatever was at hand to fill in the spaces, teaching us to see perspective, foreground, middleground, background, he slowly created his virtual canvas. Only when he had finished did we realize he had used mostly his own clothes as props, and that now he was standing naked in front of us, transformed into a portion of his own work of art. It was, after all, the seventies.

The intensity had other effects as well. During one breakfast two participants, strangers to each other the week before, burst into the dining room to announce they were leaving immediately to get married in Indiana. "Don't do it," shouted Bly. But Ivana Spalatin, a Serbo-Croatian lover of love, leapt up to spritz them with the rose perfume she carried in her bosom, urging the rest of us, "We take up a collection for their flight, no?" For the two lovers had made up their minds.

Even as they informed us of their decision, however, it became clear they had not yet discovered all they might need to know about each other. “But I don’t fly,” said the male. “Fine, we’ll drive,” his fiancée responded. “Now, let’s eat before we go. You do eat meat, don’t you?” Later, long after they had left, we learned there had been some problems. It wasn’t so much that he was still married to another woman. A bigger problem was the woman, not his wife, with whom he was living in Montana, and who was expecting his child.

In a letter written some years later, Bly looked back at this first conference: “When we started years ago, it was as if everyone with a motorcycle or a ponytail was your family. How quickly that changed” [Bly, letter to Arbor and Rosenwald, July 6, 1996]. Moments of humor and pathos aside, the conference had, for many of us, accomplished a great deal. We had explored interdisciplinary dimensions of our lives and of our arts. We had engaged in intense, substantial conservations about gender, Jungian psychology, Rilke, our relationships to others and to ourselves. We had made new acquaintances and even friends. Despite tensions we had functioned relatively well as a community. As the conference concluded we talked about repeating the experience. A number of us, including Fran Quinn, Ann Arbor, and myself, offered to help if Peter Martin needed assistance the following year.

I remember clearly driving to that first conference. I remember arriving and remember being there. I don’t recall leaving. Maybe I never did.

Over the next eleven months those of us who had participated in this first gathering spread the word about its successor. We had agreed it would be valuable not to return to the same site but to move the conference around the country. Peter Martin located Camp Widjiwagen near the Canadian border. By now the poster read Annual Conference on the Great Mother, organized by Robert Bly and Peter Martin. The mailing list for 1976 includes more than eighty names. Logistics were terrible; the nearest airport was Duluth, much too far away for commercial needs or for convenient pickup of participants and teachers. But the site, located near a sparkling Minnesota lake, was spectacular, feeding our Jungian desire for sensate as well as emotional or intellectual stimulation and satisfaction. By the shore sat a sauna. We used it so much that the camp’s entire summer supply of sauna firewood disappeared within ten days. Robert Smyth, who would later serve the conference in many ways, as bookstore manager and recording master/sound system supervisor, spent much of his time at his first conference stoking the sauna stove.

Many of the same teachers and participants returned: Bly of course, and Shumaker, Igoe, and others. The Minneota Minnesota poet Bill Holm showed up and taught us music, making his huge Icelandic hands dance across the keys of his tiny clavichord. Coleman Barks came for the first time; Bly introduced him to translations of Jelaluddin Rumi, asking the poet from Georgia to “release…them from their cages” [Barks, personal communication], thereby transforming not only Barks’ life but also the landscape of American poetry for the next quarter century. The Jungian mythologist Nor Hall gave talks, perhaps too academic for this environment and audience. Daniela Gioseffi demonstrated the art of bellydancing. And Etheridge Knight joined us as well. Knight’s impact was huge. I recall no persons of color at the first conference. Knight changed that. His booming voice as he read “Ilu, the Talking Drum”; his streetsmarts as he did the dozens on “I Sing of Shine”; his life as a Korean War vet, junkie, ex-con; his physicality, his presence as a street singer, his commitment to the oral tradition, all made his weight felt. Even in comical ways. Not all participants were Finn-friendly, not all experienced sauna users. When Anne Igoe, the dancer, who had grown up in rural South Carolina but married into Charleston money, ventured down to the sauna for the first time she wore a discreet swim suit; ladies did not sit naked in public, even in a sauna, even in the dark. Knight also was not conversant with saunas, but he had no such compunctions. As this large midwestern black man sat down next to this slim southern white woman, the magic of bodily response was inevitable. Sensate, indeed. Soon Knight, following the lead of others and sensitive to the immediate circumstances, lunged out of the small steamy space and plunged into the freezing lake, shouting, “I’m goin’ to the water. I’m goin’ to the water.”

The physical world manifested itself in other ways as well. Isa Drennin discussed the Sufi tradition, but even better, in the evening, Andy Dick instructed us in Sufi-dancing, spinning us around, our eyes linked with those of another person, until a balance of Jungian sensate, intellectual, emotional, and even intuitive functions appeared not only possible but also immediate and actual.

Lest it seem that all conference experiences relate to archetypal psychology, let me add that during the ten days of this second conference Ann Arbor and I learned the best method we know for moving a canoe, the Widji Flip, which we have practiced now for more than thirty years at our own small cabin on Garland Pond, Maine.

One characteristic that has helped the conference survive probably emerged during the first session but certainly contributed to the second: a pleasure in self-deprecation, the ability to laugh at ourselves. At one of these early gatherings the Massachusetts poet Tomas O'Leary recreated Bly's poem, "Tongues Whirling," which starts, "You open your mouth, I put my tongue in / and this wild universe thing begins" [*Jumping Out of Bed*, unpaginated]. O'Leary, swinging his long arms, bowing and bending across the floor in a limber-limbed version of Bly's tentative dance steps, began: "I stick my nose into your eye and this weird thing happens." The group loved it. More significantly, Bly loved it. Though the implicit critique of Bly's deep imagism and quasi-romantic language was real, the effect remained not negative but appreciative. As Oscar Wilde observed, to parody effectively one has to love the subject. This self-deprecation would serve the conference well in years to come, often in the form of "The Players," a cluster of participants who satirize the week's events at an evening performance no one would wish to miss.

O'Leary in a long "evaluative report on The Second Annual Conference" identified the fundamental "task of the conference" as a need "to generate a dialogue which would stress the common evolution of members of both sexes, and at the same time cast some light on the societal perversions that have divided men and women and caused them to distort their basic sexuality." But, he would assert, "there is no real war between the sexes; it exists only as a figment of the contemporary imagination. The struggle against all manner of oppression—sexist, racist, generally political—is *very* real" [O'Leary, pp. 4, 15]. He praised the presence of the many teachers, but also emphasized that "all of us (including Bly…) participated both as teachers *and* students" [p. 8]. O'Leary would identify "our basic energy" as "sexual" [p. 18] and commented explicitly on the contrast and perhaps conflicts experienced within both the group and individuals as a result of dealing with an imbalance of Jungian and other forces:

> So off we went around the floor of the lodge of Camp Widjiwagen (owned and operated by St. Paul's Y.M.C.A.), sophisticated pagans throwing our bodies into a frenzy of fertility, invoking the blessings of the Great Mother to ourselves and to the fruit of our wombs, and all this under the warm and WASPish visage of a framed, unblinking Jesus Christ, whose mild gaze travelled the length of the lodge apparently fixed in contemplation of what hung there on the opposite wall: the hairy hide of a big black bear.
>
> I have to address those two figures briefly, since they struck me as such outspoken symbolic polarizations for the energy of the conference. The portrait of Christ…represents the western world's collective projection of enlightenment (or heavenly beauty) in a human being. On the other wall, the remains of that poor old subhuman creature, the bear, hung like a reminder of the beast that inhabits the primal darkness of the human mind, and which our more aggressive warriors symbolically stalk and kill when they indulge in the joys of the hunt….
>
> As we danced—jabbered, sang, socialized, improvised, ate, drank—in the great lodge (between those ever-present figures of Christ and the bear) we were nurturing some trust towards the darkness in our minds.
>
> [pp. 22, 26]

Not all dimensions of the second conference went smoothly. Another concern surfaced when this "darkness," the shadow side of Jungian thought, appeared in a late evening dance that some felt threatened to become, using Bly's later

terminology, more filled with destructive savagery than creative wildness. The logistical difficulties of feeding, housing, and scheduling a large group of artists without a firm organizational structure had also become apparent. Dissatisfaction over food, and eventually over finances, surfaced during the conference as well, leading to a confrontation between Peter Martin and others, and to an eventual decision to place some participant control over Martin's use of funds. By the next spring he had argued that though volunteer efforts greatly assisted his work, the conference should hire him, and him alone, to run it. Despite these difficulties, however, as the second session ended, it was clear we would try to do it again.

For some of us a week in summer did not satisfy our needs. Following the 1976 conference, pleased with the combination of Jungian thought and actual performance of the arts—dance, music, mask-making, drama—three of us, Andy Dick, Ann Arbor, and I, asked Bly if he would be willing to join a small cluster of conference participants for a weekend and explore with the general public the ideas and practices we had been investigating in relative isolation. For three of the next four years the Great Mother Travelling Troupe barnstormed the Midwest. In the spring of 1977 we did a single workshop and performance in Madison, Wisconsin. More than twenty of us gathered, borrowed costumes from the Beloit College theater collection, rehearsed briefly, and then, the next day, performed what might best be described as Jungian vaudeville on the stage of La Creperie restaurant. In 1978 we grew more ambitious. Using a Celtic tale as a base, Bly wrote a playlet, "The Thornbush Cockgiant," which we performed in three locations with Andy Dick as a young boy searching for his magic piston rings, Bly as the Giant, with Julia Hainline, Anne Igoe, and numerous others in supporting roles. Improvisational Jung delighted some of our audiences but profoundly distressed others, who wanted polish rather than exploration. In 1980 many of the same group, now joined by the poet Connie Martin, ran at Beloit College a three-day workshop on oral performance of poetry, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. As they relate to the Mother Conference as a whole the significance of these experiments lay 1) in the desire to make available to a larger community the joys and insights we were discovering in our isolated summer experiences, 2) the willingness of Robert Bly to expose himself to the rigors and probable failures of improvisational theater, 3) the desire of some conference participants (especially the mask-maker Pat Apatovsky) to explore transforming members of the community into something like a permanent theater company, and 4) the power of these annual gatherings over the lives of many of us.

In 1977 the conference convened in Maine for the first time. Fran Quinn had contacted Davis van Winkle of the Luther Gulick camps on the shore of Sebago Lake, initiating the relationship to Maine that remains strong to this day. During these thirty-five years, Maine has hosted more than a dozen conferences, first at Luther Gulick, later at Camp Kieve on Lake Damariscotta. In the late 1990s Robert Bly and others even contemplated purchasing land and buildings in Maine as a permanent Great Mother Conference location.

For 1977, perhaps partially in response to increasing sensitivity about gender issues, the conference poster expanded its scope, announcing The Third Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father, organized by Robert Bly, Peter Martin, and Elsa Wycisk. True, Elsa Wycisk played some role, and Peter Martin retained his position as primary administrator, but others, notably Fran Quinn, had begun to do the bulk of the work.

By now food had assumed a larger role in conference planning. In Colorado we ate simply and well, but did not pay much attention to the needs of vegetarians. At the first Minnesota session conflicts between Peter Martin and the hired kitchen staff threatened the future of the conference, and near the end, an altercation led to a rapid change in staffing. By the time we gathered in Maine, Jamie Stunkard had emerged as camp cook; he would exert a powerful influence on the group during the next few years through the quiet force of his personality. In Ann Arbor's journal stands a tribute to Stunkard, a transcription of the Sanskrit ritual/blessing we often chanted before meals:

Brahmarpanam. Brahmarhavih. Brahmagnan. Brahmana hutam.
Brahmainatena gantavayam. Brahmakarma samadhina.
Om Vishnatma priyatam. Om tat sat brahmar panam asta.
Om Shantih Shantih Shantih Om.

As we concluded the third conference, praising teachers, leaders, and organizers, our applause rang loudest for the cook. Furthermore, with Jamie had arrived his cousin Marcus Wise, who, when not working in the kitchen, practiced drumming on the Indian drums we soon learned to call *tablas*. In addition, Wise had introduced David Whetstone, a young musician/composer who at the time was auditioning for symphony positions as a French horn player, but also developing his skills on the *sitar*. Robert Bly had already shown his willingness to explore the combination of poetry and music in experiments with the dulcimer. Now he recognized the possibility of collaboration with Wise and Whetstone, combining their music with some of his new translations of the medieval poets Rumi, Kabir, and Mirabai. The Boston-area journalist Shepherd Bliss, who was writing essays about the conference, observed that Bly was “quite excited by the opportunity to read the Hindu poems accompanied by such Indian sounds. He commented that it allows his ego to withdraw, as the music filled the empty spaces between the lines” [Bliss, Draft #1, p. 12]. Thus began an interaction which has provided a central element both of conference life and of external concerts ever since.

The 1977 Maine conference also represented the first time our public presence turned controversial. Outside of Denver, with a relatively small cluster of participants, and in Minnesota near the Canadian border with mostly moose to observe our actions, we attracted little attention. But within the first three years we had also learned something about group dynamics: If we didn’t take a break during the ten days, then the pressure-cooker effect might lead to an explosion, such as had threatened to occur on the hill during the first gathering. Near the end of the first Maine conference we therefore took time off. Not surprisingly, for many participants the ocean provided the greatest attraction. And there we sat, just twenty minutes from the Atlantic.

We piled into seven cars, with Maine residents Arbor and Rosenwald holding the maps, and started searching for a beach with public access. In early June, however, the state parks and lighthouses had not yet opened for the season. We drove to Cape Elizabeth, to Portland Head. At each spot Ivana Spalatin, that lover of love, Serbo-Croatian art historian and discoverer of naïve artists, would jump from our car in her striped tights, flowing scarves, and thick mascara to ask an apparently appropriate policeman or park employee how we might gain access to a beach. Finally we found one open at Two Lights, parked our caravan of cars, and proceeded to dance, build sand castles, drape ourselves with seaweed, chant, and perhaps, a few of us, even dash into the icy water. By this time Ann and I were running the financial part of the conference, sleeping at night with all the registration money, maybe $6,000, tucked into the bottom of our purple sleeping bags. Since the group moved each year from place to place, we had no formal bank account anywhere. Fortunately Ann’s mother worked as a bank teller and had agreed to clear checks for us at the end of the week. When we dropped off our deposit we learned police had distributed a message to all financial institutions in the state, warning against taking bad checks, as a band of gypsies had been seen traveling outside of Portland.

Gypsies or not, by now the conference was no longer solely in the hands of Peter Martin. Fran Quinn did the set up work and some of the correspondence. Jamie Stunkard had control of the kitchen. Jeanne D’Amico, another of the Worcester set, had begun helping with various business matters. Ann Arbor and I, living in Maine, handled much of what might be called local arrangements. Martin’s recommendation for a centralized administrative structure had not proved acceptable. Collectively we handled such organizational matters as best we could without worrying too much about hierarchies or formal procedures. By current standards our fiscal responsibilities remained astonishingly small. Total budget for all expenses lay under $20,000. At the Luther Gulick site we paid $5 per person per day for housing, $2.50 per day for food. We rented camps during the first week in June, before schools let out, during the period owners performed annual maintenance

and trained their staffs. Facilities, however, remained primitive: outhouses, minimal showers, cabins without heat or electricity. Maine residents describe their climate as “nine months of winter and three months of poor sledding.” Early June qualifies, but barely, as poor sledding. During that first conference in Maine it rained non-stop; we huddled around the small fireplaces in a few cabins. Only on the last day did the skies clear; we immediately organized a sun worship ritual on the red clay dance area outside the meeting hall.

In the drafts of his articles Shepherd Bliss evaluated what he had experienced at his first Bly conference. He praised the event as a whole, commenting on some elements that had been transformative for him personally, such as Stunkard’s vegetarian and locally based menu. He responded strongly and positively to Bly, to Rita Shumaker, whose “quiet voice would enter the large lodge with a clarity of understanding and practice of Jung” [Bliss, Draft #1, p. 6], to Howard Norman for taking to heart and recreating traditional Cree stories. Bliss also presented Bly’s list of what next needed to be done: greater emphasis on women, more physical work, less passive acceptance of presented material, and less presence of technology. Perhaps Bliss’ two most trenchant observations had to do first with Etheridge Knight’s insistence on the political realm and his critique of the predominantly interior searching, and second with the masculinization of The Mother, for Bliss observed a positive response to what he considered “rapid and aggressive” male behavior. As illustrative of one dimension of the gender tensions, Bliss quoted a brief conversation between Jamie Stunkard and Asta Bowen:

> Asta: The Mother Conference is actually a father thing. The mother appears only when we return home. Such conferences are a father form.
> Jamie: But isn’t there a mother within the father, which comes out at the conference?
> Asta: Well, yes. This conference was not cold and sterile, as are so many others.
> Jamie: The conference was an implantation, which grows when fertilized upon returning home.
> Asta: But that is still a father thing. The nurturing comes later.
> [Bliss, Draft #2, p. 6]

Others shared Bliss’s concern about the role of women at the conference. Mary Fell, who had expressed her frustration at the lack of female-centered knowledge following the first gathering, attended the third, but expressed her dissatisfaction in a letter explicitly criticizing the language proposed for the fourth conference poster. She attacked not only the failure to address directly feminism and male growth but also the conference’s implicit apolitical focus on “private consciousness” [Fell, letter dated March 7, 1978].

In 1978 the group met again in Minnesota, with Rita Shumaker joining Robert Bly as the announced organizers, and Peter Martin now listed as “Conference Secretary,” for his vision of how to run our annual session clearly had become increasingly at odds with the reality of workload, finances, and personal responsibility. By the end of this second Widjiwagen gathering he had fundamentally removed himself from the organizational structure.

The following year we moved for the first time to the west coast to a camp located by David Seal and Connie Martin on Tanglewood Island in Puget Sound. Then in 1980 we returned to Luther Gulick. During these first six years patterns emerged that have characterized the conference ever since. Finances remained delicate. In my recollection and according to my sketchy records, during those years the conference experienced regular shortfalls; Robert Bly made up the deficit at times either by working without pay or by actually contributing cash at the end of sessions.

In a desire to make the experience available to more participants we had insisted on moving the conference around the country, though the return to Minnesota and Maine laid the foundation for greater geographic stability ahead. Tensions emerging at nearly every early session led to what became the “fifth day ritual,” time out for expressing concerns about all elements of community life, facilitated after the third year by passing a kitchen pot, until all who wished to had voiced their complaints. From the beginning, scheduling remained chaotic, intense, and uncertain. To deal with individual needs in a large community we created small groups, sometimes assigned, more often random or self-selected. In these clusters newcomers could express their mystification at various rituals; old-timers could try to explain the history of the conference

and the impact of that history on its procedures. Sometimes these groups formed the basis for fairy tale completion or for the assignment of camp chores.

As exemplified by Jamie Stunkard's attempt to provide through a sense of responsibility and his vegetarian menu the most integrated approach to food the conference had yet known, a philosophical and pragmatic commitment to work and self-support underlay many of the early years. Many participants lived as stereotypical starving artists/poets and money was tight; we needed to do everything as frugally as possible. Many of us also rejected emphatically the notion of conference participants as somehow separate from conference staff. Bly himself, as Bliss had seen, wanted the group to do more physical labor. In those years all attending had work duty: garbage removal, meal set up, outhouse cleaning, dishwashing, scheduling. During the second session at Luther Gulick in 1980 we made a deeper commitment. In exchange for the pleasure of sharing their camp for ten days, we offered the van Winkle family a workday to complete a major project of their choosing. What we negotiated was building/repairing a stone wall, highly labor-intensive and therefore a low priority for the camp owners, but a relatively easy task for 100+ able-bodied participants.

Concern about the role of women both as subject and as leaders of the conference led to what I'd describe as a search by Robert Bly for a woman who would match or parallel his own intelligence, charisma, flexibility, imagination, and curiosity. Although powerful women played a major part of the group from the beginning, both as teachers and as participants, none quite matched Robert's areas of strength. Rita Shumaker and Anne Igoe, brilliant teachers and strong personalities, did not possess the outspoken verbal power to share his stage. Gioia Timpanelli, a superb storyteller, showed little interest in assuming responsibility for conference organizational or administrative matters. Alice Howell, crone and wise astrologer, in a sense interviewed for the position for two or three years. For the third conference Bly invited Daniela Gioseffi, the writer and bellydancer, to teach, but the level of her work struck many as inadequate for our purposes. Over the years perhaps the only woman who paralleled Bly was Marion Woodman, fully his equal as scholar, storyteller, intellectual, and Jungian, *and* his match as well in approach and demeanor. Their telling the Maiden King story at the twenty-fifth conference in 1999 on Orcas Island remains for me a high point of the conference.

Even before Marion Woodman, however, and perhaps the first time a woman poet both challenged and met Bly as an equal occurred on Tanglewood in 1979, when Connie Martin introduced to the group her long poem "Woodwork." Strong enough to work as a carpenter, imaginative enough to inspire her fellow participants, disciplined enough to assume organizational responsibilities, Martin became a central figure at the Great Mother Conference; by 1980 she shared credit with Bly on the conference poster. A reading of her sailing poem, "The Shelter of the Roar," displayed her particular magic, but for me the most evocative evidence of her contribution came in 1979 on Tanglewood, not far from where she lived on San Juan Island in the Juan de Fuca Strait at the northern boundary of Puget Sound. The conference site that year included a lodge overlooking a large open field that sloped down to the ocean. Not surprisingly for a group interested in Jung, some of our explorations during early conferences dealt with dreamwork. On Tanglewood, Connie Martin enlisted a large group of women to enact one of her dreams, sending some to gallop across the large field while others formed a visual boundary, a "house of women" she named it, for the ocean cliff behind them. It presented an unforgettable moment akin for me to rituals created by Peter Schumann and his Bread and Puppet Theater. The drama itself suggested power, but also the sense that at this instant the conference belonged to and had clearly focused on the world of women.

A general concern with religion and spirituality represents another characteristic of the group during these early years. Following the first Maine gathering in 1977 Shepherd Bliss interviewed many participants for the articles he was writing. I remember being surprised when he asked if religion formed the conference core. For me religion did not hold the center; instead the arts and psychology did, with cross-disciplinary experience essential to all the explorations we undertook. With his question, however, Bliss compelled me, as an atheist, to see the conference through eyes radically different than my own.

So did Joseph Campbell.

Campbell had served as a focal point for the conference since its inception. Had Robert Bly had his way I suspect the teaching staff would from the beginning have included Campbell and Marie-Louise von Franz. Age, at least in the case of von Franz, made their participation implausible, as did financial considerations. In 1980, however, Campbell agreed to teach a single day at the Luther Gulick site in Maine. By luck I had the task of driving Bly to the airport to pick up the noted mythologist. As we drove back to camp, Campbell outlined his schedule: First talk from 4:00 till 5:15, second 5:15 till 6. Did we eat supper? Third, on the Grail, immediately after supper. Fourth, at 8. By the time he had reached the middle of the night, for his discussion of Tarot symbolism, even Bly, famous for his long readings and seemingly indefatigable energy, seemed tired. "I'll need a morning nap from 3 till 4:30," Campbell added, "but then we should be ready for some work on meditation practices." When either Bly or I suggested this program might demand too much of his audience, Campbell offered a simple response: "You asked me to come for a day. Last I looked, a day contains twenty-four hours. I believe in giving value for my fee."

Some of us made it to most of his lectures. All of us, perhaps even including Joseph Campbell, felt exhausted. Of the many extraordinary talks I've heard over these thirty-five years, the ones I wish most I had recorded remain those by this brilliant scholar/writer. His subject, though always particular, became, though never explicitly, religious as well. I learned this the hard way. As I drove Bly and Campbell back to the airport after his twenty-four-hour marathon, I ventured to question him from my stance as atheist. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I commented over my shoulder, "It seems you believe in God." From the backseat came the thunderous reply, "What do you think I've been talking about the past twenty-four hours!"

Then silence.

The religious dimension of the conference remained usually subtle, always eclectic, rarely arcane. Bly had been studying with a Tibetan teacher, and by the third conference sat meditation at 6:30 each morning, inviting those interested to join him. Although he chanted in Sanskrit he also soon attempted to make the language appropriate to our own world. Seeking to capture the sounds of the original, he transformed the traditional "Om Mani Padme Hum" into "Black Dog Take Me Home." During these meditation sessions Bly shared what he had learned from his studies of Buddhism; especially instructive for me remains the Hindu notion of Vajra energy, the knife that cuts through bureaucracies, unnecessary indecision, and other nonsense.

The presence of Joseph Campbell illustrates another element that at times has dominated conference discussions and planning. Campbell was obviously an outsider, brought in for one day, neither then nor ever to become a member of the community. Bly understandably wished to include as leaders people he admired, who stimulated him, who could enlighten him as well as us. At the same time, the emerging tradition of participant performances, the skill level of teachers who had been part of the group from the beginning, and the general democratic impulse of most teachers and participants meant that many wished to reserve time for presentations either prepared in advance or emerging, like the fairy-tale conclusions or like Connie Martin's dream, during the conference itself. As the number in attendance grew, and the number of former participants and teachers invited to give brief performances increased, opportunities for participant-centered activities diminished. Sometimes invited guests integrated effectively into the community, as the Traveling Jewish Theater did in 1980. Sometimes teachers stressed the need for participant public presentations, as the poet Naomi Shihab Nye later did during her years at the conference. Joseph Campbell, in his second (and last) visit to the conference, spoke at length with participants and worked closely with his small group. But sometimes the guests saw themselves as gurus, chose not to mix with ordinary participants, ate by themselves. In addition, as Robert Bly grew older, his need for rest and privacy increased, so that understandably he, but consequently and unfortunately some teachers, grew more isolated from other members of the community.

Meanwhile the conference survived, despite casual and occasionally chaotic organizational principles. For 1981 Fran Quinn located a camp in Tennessee, still our only southern site. Quinn, however, could not attend. The by now traditional skinnydips in the adjacent lake became more challenging when shared with water moccasins. Other inconveniences led Rita Shumaker to call this session, in response to Quinn's absence, Frannie's revenge.

As the conference approached its tenth birthday, we needed to change if we were to survive. Finances remained questionable. Although the conference could theoretically remain the same each year, we needed to focus more explicitly on different topics if we wished to draw new participants and attract old-timers to return. The danger of death by paralysis seemed real. Partially in response to this danger, and to Bly's shifting interests, posters for the eighth and ninth gatherings advertised not the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father, but instead, "A Conference on Form." The first of these, in 1982, took the group to California for the first time.

Responding to the interests and needs of teachers and participants has always demanded an immense workload for those involved in creating, running, and then closing a ten-day conference. For starters, negotiating with Robert Bly is always challenging, always interesting, and always exhausting. He has strong opinions (often, as he used to say proudly during his three-hour readings, 84% wrong), and respects co-workers most if they stand up and face directly his hurricane of words and ideas. At the same time he remains unfailingly gracious and generous to those who work with and for him. The influence he exerts on many of us complicates this relationship further. If we learn from him and from the conference more generally then to put these ideas into practice demands its own time, so much time that we can no longer easily return to the conference itself. For Ann Arbor and me, for example, after serving as official organizers for the seventh conference, we had to bail out. With the eighth conference fees already paid and airplane tickets in hand for California, we stood in the Boston airport, looked at each other, and went home. Enough was enough. For the next ten years our involvement was minimal, attending a session occasionally, but having no official role. Instead, following what would become in *Iron John* Bly's insistence on "ashes work" [*Iron John*, p. 79 ff.], we began to rebuild an old farm in Maine near where Ann grew up. Other organizers, not surprisingly, have experienced similar burnout. High-maintenance artist/performers sometimes fail to notice who plays the role of Cinderella on their stage.

At times Robert Bly, who often does notice, has also wanted a break. He maintains a deep commitment to writing, translating, editing, public readings; his wife, two daughters, two sons, houses and small cabins; his community; his circle of private friends. These, plus his deep distrust of academic institutions and insistence on innovation/discovery, might have made him at times willing to let go of the Great Mother Conference or GMC as we often label it. Taking a stance that relates to his refusal to accept public money for his magazine during the Vietnam War, he has insisted since the beginning that we not accept government or foundation funds. As he said once in an interview, accepting such support would introduce "too much of a father influence" [Bly, *Talking All Morning*, p. 216]; this desire for independence has further compounded his relationship to conference finances, for in the early years, at least, his own resources constituted the emergency fund. At the same time the conference has served as extended family for him as well as for others. And to a certain extent Bly integrated his own family into the GMC. His two sons Noah and Micah attended regularly during the 1970s and 80s, with Noah's entrepreneurial instincts—selling candy bars brought from town to sugar-starved young adults at elevated prices—at least superficially in conflict with the quasi-official minimalist eco-friendly conference vision. And, starting in 1980, Ruth Bly, Robert's second wife, also has played a role, often a significant one, serving at times as teacher, ritual leader, and sage.

Following the second session on form, held at Widjiwagen in 1983, the conference returned to Maine in 1984, and returned as well to a theme that paralleled the tensions some felt concerning the organizational principles and practices that had emerged. This tenth gathering identified itself as a conference on form *and* spontaneity. Continuing the ritual of moving around the country, we went back to California in 1985. Following this 11th conference, Bly decided he would not participate the next year as primary teacher and so the 12th conference took place over seven days, not the traditional ten, and centered

"itself around creativity. That is, actually writing poems, painting pictures, composing dance pieces and making and performing music" [Conference poster, 1986].

Whether or not in response to this new vision, one less dependent than in previous sessions on the presence of Bly as leader, the two years following the 12th gathering presented a transition time that threatened to end the conference. In 1987 Bly decided he did not wish to participate at all, so a cluster of conference regulars took two steps that in the long run not only permitted a truncated gathering that summer but also insured the future of the conference. With Bly's blessing or at least acquiescence, Jeanne D'Amico and Andrew Dick organized the 13th conference as one carrying on the tradition of participant leadership and teaching. A group of about twenty met at a site D'Amico found in Illinois, continuing some of the usual rituals but in addition beginning the process of systematizing procedures so that burnout of individuals would not mean collapse of the conference itself. During what they called this "Ersatz Great Mother Conference" they discussed guidelines on how to run the conference, and developed an organizational structure with relatively clear-cut duties and responsibilities for crafting, staffing, advertising, housing, administering, and concluding each year's session. They agreed, however, that more people needed to become involved. Following some delicate negotiations, Carol Keller joined D'Amico and Dick as official administrators, now called convenors, for the highly successful 14th conference, held the next year. During the conference, after considerable discussion and debate, the group as a whole ratified the procedures developed during the previous year. At the end of this session, D'Amico, Dick, and Keller abruptly resigned, exhausted on one hand, but on the other believing that rotating responsibility for the conference remained essential for retaining its energy. The gathering created the name "greyhairs" for retiring convenors, and soon thereafter announced the selection of three new convenors for the 1989 conference. The three greyhairs continued organizational discussions during the summer of 1988; Victoria Fraser interviewed each and summarized their deliberations; Andrew Dick finally combined these summaries into a written text, *The GreenBook*. In order to permit open and continuing discussion of the delicate dance of running a complex organization, the book remains private. Though various modifications have occurred and despite debate concerning its use and influence, this document remains the primary written source for all conference procedures.

From the perspective of an academician, the structure created by the conference for itself bears considerable similarity to that of a small college. Greyhairs resemble the board of trustees, with overall responsibility/liability but few day-to-day tasks. Convenors function as the administration, the three of them doing everything from hiring cooks to negotiating the daily event schedule. This structure on the surface freed Bly from most administrative responsibility, though his charisma and contacts meant that the greyhairs and convenors had to work closely with him on the annual theme, teachers, and tone. In addition, in order to stabilize the conference in its financial dealings, D'Amico, Dick, Keller, and the others registered the organization as a non-profit corporation, Tor Gul, Inc., thereby insulating the conference as an idea from the fiscal vagaries of any individual annual meeting. In the collective desire to maintain a structure that had offered so much to so many of us, those who worked on this systematizing may seem to have transformed or even compromised the initial free-flowing spirit of the conference, imposed "form" on "spontaneity." One might at first see the transformation of Andy Dick, the piston-ring seeking Sufi-dancer, into Andrew Dick, the corporation attorney and organization man, as emblematic of this shift, but Andy Dick already possessed substantial organizational impulses (his work helping to create the Travelling Troupe demonstrated those skills) and Andrew Dick retains some of the funky confrontationalism of the Sufi-dancer who at one conference literally popped all the buttons off his shirt to express his joy.

The GreenBook, much of which Andrew Dick wrote, took a clear stance on such issues: "The Conference has been run differently over the years: from reeling like a sailor on leave, to a very tightly run ship…. Organization and spontaneity should be present at every Conference—it's a delicate balance. Certain things should be well organized…. But, we shouldn't organize the **Juice** out of the Conference" [1991 version, p. 50].

Following these structural changes the conference has continued in a fairly regular fashion. At this point perhaps it

would help to summarize some trends rather than focus on particular conferences. First, true to our initial instinct we retained some movement around the country: conferences in California again, Wisconsin, Washington State again, Montana. Yet the difficulty of locating appropriate sites—campgrounds with physical facilities for one-hundred-fifty people, tolerant of alcohol, occasional nudity, strong language, alternative political expression—remains substantial, "one of the biggest hassles in organizing the Conference," as *The GreenBook* points out [1991 version, p. 16]. At the same time certain camps seem to welcome and even thrive on the alternative vision that the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father provides. These include Camp Kieve and its owners Dick and Nancy Kennedy; the combination of their hospitality and superb facilities has contributed to the decision to hold six of the most recent eight conferences at their site.

Second, a cluster of continuing participants, many of whom have regularly held positions as greyhairs and/or convenors, has aged. A few couples, faithful participants since the early years, have had a strong positive and yet (in the best sense of the word) conservative impact on the continuation of the group. Frank and Peggy Steele, Michael and Millie Quam, Harold and Myra Shapiro, Robert Smyth and Anna Warrock, Karen Edwards and Martin Lowenthal, Janice and Steve Applegate stand out among these partly because both members of the couple have played so important a role. Robert and Ruth Bly obviously also fall into this category. But others, in some cases with more frequent participation by one half of the couple, have also served much the same function: Lola Wilcox and Chuck, Gioia Timpanelli and Ken, Tom Verner and Janet Fredericks. And the continuing involvement of some teachers, especially Rita Shumaker and Anne Igoe, even after they have ceased to teach regularly, has also proved beneficial.

The aging of this core group has probably influenced the conference in both obvious and subtle ways. Some of the frenetic sexual energy that Tomas O'Leary identified as characteristic of early gatherings seems to have diminished (though my aging perspective may mislead me on this point, and one of my correspondents assures me that the conference *eros* remains healthy!). The desire for creature comforts such as flush toilets, hot showers, beds not cots, professional food service has played a larger role in recent years. Even a sense of the history of the conference has at times enabled these grey- (and now white-) hairs to identify potential trouble spots and avert disasters. Our sleeping bags, cameras, and cars are no longer so cheap as at the first conference. Robert Bly's comment about ponytails and motorcycles quoted earlier went on to claim: "How swiftly television broke up the real family. How dangerous it is to live without a family larger than that in your own house…. faithfulness has come to be the sort of virtue I once imagined free thought to be" [Bly, letter to Arbor and Rosenwald, July 6, 1996].

The stabilizing of the conference structure has surely had an impact on what we do and how we do it. In recent years the pattern of a conference or of a conference day has become predictable: breakfast; one, two, or three morning sessions led by Bly and by invited guest teachers; lunch; small group meetings; workshops in drawing, pottery, poetry writing, drumming, dance; some quiet time; gathering for dinner, often with a shared blessing led by a member of the community; dinner itself; evening performances by guest artists or by the satirical Players; more music and dance. Although unlike Joseph Campbell we don't officially go straight through the night, we have always held once a year a very early morning session of small poems spoken by heart and accompanied by David Whetstone and Marcus Wise, with all invited to contribute but special pleasure perhaps created by Robert Bly and Coleman Barks. In recent years we've celebrated the end of the conference with a banquet involving elaborate decoration and numerous toasts and roasts.

Despite an increasing sense of continuity, history, and structure, powerful individual forces have often either interrupted the pattern or at least modified it. In the mid-1990s the native Canadians Shirley Cull and Mel Chartrand changed the tone of our gatherings with their meticulous attention to meditation, stress-relief, and natural history. Rachael Resch, Toni Zuper, and others tried to mitigate what they perceived as an exaggerated focus on the brain by holding yoga sessions early each morning. Ruth Bly initiated a workshop that enabled participants to trace their dreams through a single night. Her interest in ritual and even more acutely the presence of Martín Prechtel centered attention on ritual process, and in

Prechtel's case the power of initiation rites of the Guatemalan and Mayan cultures that adopted him. In recent years perhaps the two strongest new influences have come from Caroline Casey and Doug von Koss. Casey, with her irreverent wit, trenchant political commentary, and serious study of astrology has become a mainstay at morning sessions. Even earlier arrives the joy of working with von Koss. At 6:30 each morning he creates what he calls a "failure-free zone" for the celebration of Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, African-American, and secular poems and songs, sometimes in eight-part harmony. By the conclusion of the conference more than half of the participants often choose to join him.

Over the past thirty-five years, though new faces and ideas continue to stimulate and inspire the group, the Great Mother Conference has managed to create a sense of continuity that appeals to both old-timers and newcomers, those we call nubies. Continuity of staff, participants, location, schedule, structure, size, and even finances enables the organization to survive without abandoning the wildness that helped create it. Yes, money remains tight, but the conference has found ways to support itself and to succeed. We operate a book store; record and sell discs containing most sessions; run near the end of each conference a silent auction with craftwork, first editions, memorabilia—treasures to take home but with a cut to reduce conference expenses. After years of paying rather minimal attention to the numerous visual artists in residence, the conference accepted Rita Shumaker's suggestion that we open a gallery during the latter part of the week, with work for sale and again a portion for the conference itself. Though full cost for the seven days currently stands at $850, we have tried to keep fees reasonably low, and have managed through the generosity of many participants to provide a limited number of scholarships and work-study positions so that those with fewer financial reserves, whether young or old, can afford to attend.

Even with continuation and perhaps what some would see as success, numerous issues remain, including several that have played a role at the GMC since the beginning. The question of gender remains significant. It is important to note that Robert Bly's initial impulse towards both the conference and the materials we have studied over the years came from his concern about gender issues. The success of *Iron John* and the popular recognition/fame/notoriety that book brought him have led some to assume that Bly's primary interest has been in masculinity. As one of the founders and eventually the senior member of the Beloit College Women's Studies program, I enjoy passing an unattributed copy of Bly's essay "I Came Out of the Mother Naked" (from *Sleepers Joining Hands*, 1973) to my young feminist colleagues and asking what they think of it. Since they are usually impressed with the argument, imagery, and examples, I relish their surprise when I reveal the authorship. With his omnivorous hunger Bly remains simply and profoundly committed to exploring how gender works and how men and women act and interact. During the height of the *Iron John* years, yes, we met at times as separate groups, men together and women together. Most of the time, however, we have held only integrated sessions. That said, the concerns voiced early by Mary Fell, Shepherd Bliss, and Bly himself remain an issue. At the 2008 conference one newcomer expressed outrage at the absence of Great Mother material on the program. Independently she attempted to introduce what she considered a goddess-centered blessing into the dinner circle, created a goddess-reading at the opening of the art gallery, and generally tried to further what she saw as appropriate mother goddess elements wherever she could. In doing so, however, she confronted in what many considered an inappropriate way the force of tradition and continuity, rituals that have developed over thirty years and will not change easily.

A second issue that remains delicate involves a continuing struggle between emphasis on a participatory conference and what seems essentially a star system. Many conference participants bring tremendous talent and teaching skills to each year's meeting. In the early years they often expressed those talents through involvement in, for example, the fairy tale skits, whether as writers, dancers, singers, drummers, or artists. As the conference has moved towards a larger number of invited guests who stay only a day or two and have as their primary involvement an evening performance, and as these guests are increasingly isolated from ordinary participants by separate housing and private meals, the gap between the stars and the plebes has grown. As early as the sixth conference a participant named David Robinson articulated at great length in a letter to Connie Martin this sense of the danger of abandoning the collaborative elements of early conferences.

> One of the things that I really like about the conference is…the value that it places on people being open with each other…. But, it seems as though we are not to apply a similar kind of openness to the organization of the conference itself. [There is a choice between] two extremes. If the choice is minimal feedback, I think these are the implications. The structure is fairly tight. There are "teachers" and there are "students"…. Students come to take courses...BUT they are NOT encouraged or even permitted to assume responsibility for what is going on around them…. If the choice is significant feedback, then things become in some ways more difficult. The people who come to the conference can see themselves as being part of a community…. [and] will arrive at its purpose collaboratively.
>
> [Letter to Connie Martin, Rosenwald, Arbor, dated October 5, 1980]

Some notable exceptions complicate the situation. In the 1980s Michael Meade taught drumming but also initiated participant-based drumming circles that remain an integral component of most conference sessions. In the early-1990s when William Stafford regularly attended the conference he, like others, slept in an ordinary cabin and joined, with great delight, in the collective fun by being part of a performance group, including, just weeks before he died, playing the role, in a dark hooded raincoat, of Hades snatching Persephone down into the underworld. Coleman Barks, though a long time participant, has in recent years joined us only for a day or so near the end of the conference to do a reading or to perform with Robert Bly, but by virtue of his limited presence, he appears to contribute to the star culture. Greyhairs and convenors have attempted to find ways around this divide, encouraging a poetry salon at which anyone who wishes to read a poem may do so and scheduling "blank time" for those who desire to attempt more elaborate projects, but these are essentially band-aids on a larger conceptual disagreement on what the conference represents. The question remains significant, partly for theoretical reasons, partly because as Robert Bly gets older and less willing/able to determine the larger program, any hope of continuation for the conference will depend upon its becoming again participant-based, as it was that one year, the 13th, that Bly chose not to attend.

In recent years decisions about major teachers have exacerbated the issue of participants/invited guests. From 2005 to 2007 the major teachers included older white men whose explorations interested and influenced Robert Bly. What Bly sees and uses as metaphor, however, they have at times presented as science. The most notable example of this problem occurred in 2005 with Joseph Chilton Pearce, whose *Biology of Transcendence: A Blueprint of the Human Spirit* served that year as a primary conference text. Pearce asserted in his lectures that the heart has a function fundamentally similar to that of areas of the brain. For those of us who have substantial background in science, however, his research failed to meet any reasonable standard. A number of participants had to take Bly to task for focusing significant time and attention on such material. This situation has numerous facets: the question of Bly's leadership within the conference, his aging, our need for his prestige and brilliance to attract truly significant guest teachers, the limitations of other participants including greyhairs, whitehairs, and convenors, financial constraints, and general conference bias.

Conference bias works two ways. The inception of the Great Mother Conference as Jung-centered, Bly's notoriety as supposed leader of the supposed "men's movement," individual preferences, all contribute to the willingness of potential teachers and participants to join us for a session. At the same time, a general reluctance to deal with science and Bly's general opposition to academia have also limited the range of the conference. Although, for example, we have had numerous medical doctors as participants, I cannot recall a single time that actual medical material has become a focal point. During the third conference Charlie Smith ran a workshop on scientific developments, especially the implications for "masculine" thought of anti-Aristotelian aspects of twentieth-century physics. The Berkeley geologist Fred Berry has perhaps made the most significant scientific contribution to the GMC. Berry regularly participated in early years; when he returned briefly in the late 90s he gave one of the most stunning talks ever given at the conference, a high-speed, highly humorous, challenging description of the Irish origin of the Maine soil on which we stood. Such attention to science, however, remains rare.

A third concern includes religion. Bly's antagonism towards academia at times has a parallel in his relationship towards organized religion. At the same time, much of his vision connects directly to elements of the Lutheran culture of his

childhood environment: "I was brought up in the patriarchy of the Middle West. I was a Lutheran besides; and then I went to college" [*Talking All Morning*, p. 214]. I remember a small group of participants who, following the first conference in 1975, joined Bly at an autumn event at Augustana College. The evening reading was classic Bly: masks, music, poetry, political commentary. In those years no one else *performed* poetry in that way. The next morning, however, Bly led a class at the Lutheran hour of eight o'clock. As he entered the room in his long black woolen coat and talked to the students about the discipline of writing poems, the need for commitment, the power of language, the importance of political stances, one could see him posting on a door in Wittenberg his manifesto, like those delivered early in his career to the editor of the *New York Times Book Review* or the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. In the "evaluative report," written in 1976, Tomas O'Leary had already pointed out "the enigmatic priesthood of our main man in the Mother, Robert Bly" [O'Leary, p. 30]. And yet O'Leary goes on to praise Bly as leader, to cite an appreciative comment concerning the "impersonal energy of Robert Bly" [p. 31]. Bly's commitment to diversity, to exploration of religious and spiritual principles from traditional Christianity to Daoism to Buddhism reflects the intensity and intelligence of his search.

Changes within the conference in recent years illuminate this issue. I've mentioned the positive influence Doug von Koss has had on our gatherings. When he needed to miss a conference following his wife's death, the Frantzich brothers replaced him as musicians in residence. Their high energy and sweet harmonies contributed greatly, but their reliance on Christian hymns counteracted much of the spiritual diversity fostered by von Koss's repertoire. To give them credit the Frantzichs have tried to learn from von Koss, but while the scope of their vision speaks deeply to some participants it just as deeply offends others.

A fourth area of concern involves the relation between attendance and work within the conference structure. This connects to the shift from a participant-centered organization. In the early years we collectively did most of the clean-up, organized the food supply, attempted to offer a workday. Perhaps for some paying participants, this system seemed like an interruption of a holiday. For the convenors it certainly meant additional supervisory responsibility and occasionally real grief. Bly, however, initially wanted the conference to include physical labor, some "ashes work." Abandonment of this principle offends those who regret the division between physical and mental labor, who insist that ecological responsibility depends upon personal involvement in the heating, eating, cleaning aspects of daily life. The move to create and then increase work-study positions and the offering of scholarships, though laudable attempts to increase participation by those with less disposable income than others, has in a sense also contributed to this class divide.

Mentioning such work-study opportunities returns the discussion to finances, always a concern for the Great Mother Conference. A conflict, for example, sometimes emerges between opening the conference to more participants (especially those who pay full fare) and keeping it small enough to insure a feeling of community. So do struggles between Bly's spontaneous invitations to artists he meets and the attempts by greyhairs and convenors to balance the budget, even though *The GreenBook* makes it clear that unauthorized extemporaneous offers come out of Bly's own pocket.

The issue of finances raises the even more substantial question of ownership. As the group working on *The GreenBook* debated this topic in the mid-1980s they asserted emphatically that the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father does not belong to those who organize and run it. Nor, they claimed, does it belong to Robert Bly, though they recognized that without Bly the conference would never have existed and would be challenged to survive. Nor, they finally understood, does it belong to the participants. Instead, it is "its own beast" cooked of various ingredients "till done to taste" [1991 version, p. 49]. What must be said, and it remains high praise, is that thirty-five years later, the conference survives.

Not only survives. Thrives. After this many years, can we identify particular contributions by the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father to our culture as a whole and to us as individual participants? Like all opinions in this essay, the following evaluation remains mine alone, although I have consulted with others and have

appreciated their input. Let me suggest some accomplishments:

First, we exist as a community. To be sure it's a physical community only for a few days each year, but through phone calls, email messages, our newsletter the *Crow*, its on-line version the ecrow, letters, songs, poems sent, visits made, it has become a community. And, at least in its physical form, it is more than a community; it's a village. For a week or more we mostly abandon our reliance on automobiles, television, and (until the arrival of ubiquitous cellphones and wifi) on electronic communication as well. Special pleasures inhere in walking the path between my cabin and yours, between the meeting hall and the dining room, between the lake and the library. I live in a small Maine town where I walk to the post office almost every day, but for some the reliance on our feet, the physical proximity of other people, harkens back to a time of more intense personal contact, what the Nobel-Laureate economist Douglas North might disparagingly call our "natural state." That touch of communal life becomes metaphor for a larger sense of community towards which many of us strive on a local, national, and international level.

For its days together this community is based not upon money but upon the flow of ideas and, even more, of art. Painting, dance, and poetry form the currency of this gathering: Henry Braun reciting a Goethe lyric from the Kieve loft during an early morning session; Anna Warrock or Myra Shapiro reading poems to a eager cluster of listeners; David Whetstone and Marcus Wise (and recently, his daughter Marina) moving us with their music; Ivana Spalatin, Rita Shumaker, Susan Aaron-Taylor sharing their visual artifacts; Coleman Barks, Li-young Lee, Naomi Shihab Nye, Galway Kinnell, Jane Hirshfield, and Robert Bly himself touching us with their poems. The community thrives on young blood as well as old. In recent years a cluster of gifted poets and visual artists has brought much to our gatherings: Norm Minnick, Katie Rauk, Marie Ursuy, Erin and Anna Molitor, Tim Fitzmaurice. And hundreds of other participants, young and old, too many to mention here.

From the beginning our experiment has been multidisciplinary. This art-centered community thrives on diversity, on a combining of the arts in ways that have encouraged growth of ourselves as individuals as well as artists. When the conference began, Robert Bly was already doing more in most readings than any other poet I had had the privilege to see. In movement sessions with Anne Igoe, however, Bly may have achieved a greater level of comfort in his stage presence, working like all the rest of us at squeezing our ani. Collaborating with Wise and Whetstone has taken him further as well, as have his explorations with other musicians who have graced the conference, from the Ethiopian brothers Seleshe and Kiflu Damessae, to the Iranian Reza DeRakshani, to John Densmore of the Doors, to the extraordinary outsider musical visionary Danny Deardorff.

We have long struggled about whether and how to share our collective personal conference experiences with an outside world. The celebration, in public and in print, of Robert Bly In This World, organized by the University of Minnesota Libraries in April 2009, and in particular the invitation to me to write and speak at length about the conference represents a rare opportunity to take the GMC on the road, as we did in a very different format with the Great Mother Travelling Troupe so many years ago.

We have kept our arts "unplugged." Within the conference almost all work has been live: an oral literature, whether recited poems, or traditional stories told to the community by Gioia Timpanelli, Marion Woodman, Bly, and many others. The radical conservatism of our commitment to living and breathing art forms remains a central component of the conference. Even the topics announced year by year share this deep reliance and indebtedness to tradition, but traditions often neglected by main-stream media or university academics: the first public treatment of the Inanna story by Diane Wolkstein; the Mayan Popol Vu as narrated in part by Martín Prechtel; all the many stories—Coyote, Celtic, Jewish—shared by Gioia Timpanelli; the Grimm tales, including Iron John, brought to us by Bly; Indian cave paintings researched by Walter Spink; the flamenco tradition including Lorca's duende as danced and described by La Conja; Joseph Campbell's Tarot deck. The breadth of our exploration parallels and relates directly to the breadth of Bly's poetic curiosity, his continual search for

what lives and lasts among poets around the world, usually sensed by his antennae long before others have gained familiarity with these authors, whether contemporaries such as Harry Martinson, Vicente Aleixandre, or the old ones, Kabir, Mirabai, Hafez, and of course Rumi. Who has done more than Bly to expand the poetries available to our mostly monolingual citizens? As a conference we participants have drunk from the well of Robert Bly's curiosity and courage.

These artistic endeavors have often involved risk. Daring to dance when we feel we have no body. Daring to sing at 6:30 a.m. when we feel we have no voice. Daring, as Bly did, to bring the manuscript of his book *The Sibling Society* to the group as a whole and ask for comments. And getting them, not least from some of the younger participants, who told him directly that his comments about them and their predilections (their music, their clothes) remained ill-informed and insulting. At which point Bly made a date for the next day to sit down with the younger set at lunch and to listen.

Despite continuing conflict and concern about gender issues, the conference has boldly kept that topic on the table during most of its thirty-five years. Bly's interest in Jung and Neumann provoked an expansion, not a restriction, of discussion about male and female existence. If we have only rarely explored collectively Anne Fausto-Sterling's more complex concepts of sexuality itself, at least we have kept a conversation alive.

And that exploration has had its impact on us as individuals and as members of this community. Surely the creation of friendships forms one of the most powerful accomplishments of the conference, friendships within *and* across gender, age, race, class, national, and religious lines. To observe the mentoring role that Fran Quinn has played for generations of young poets, the links between many of the older couples mentioned above, the beauty of parent/child relationships, Jon Parsons and Melissa, Marcus Wise and Marina, Lou Camp and Lizzie, of all those who have brought children to the conference and seen them grow up among us, friends to us, but to their parents as well. I treasure the sisterhood Ann Arbor tells me exists among many conference women. I also cherish the brotherhood I feel with many of the men: with Frank Steele; with Robert Smyth for the hours working together to set up the bookstore or the sound system; with Tom Verner and Rick Johnson, for building a boat together as part of one of Martín Prechtel's rituals. As a group we have collectively provided support by and for each other, whether in success or in distress. When necessary we've created healing rituals for those who have lost lovers, children, friends, parents, themselves.

It is this healing that I turn to last. For it is this healing that provides the title for these comments and recollections: Small Engine Repair. Those of us who work at institutions of higher education sometimes need to offer rationale for our attendance at an organization with such a strange name, devoted to such strange topics, and with such strange procedures. Such institutions have difficulty recognizing the advantage of the life Robert Bly urges at the end of "I Came Out of the Mother Naked," one dedicated to "the parts that grow far from the centers of ambition" [*Sleepers Joining Hands*, p. 50]. "Did you give a paper?" an administrator asks. "Were you a section leader? A panel discussant? Will they publish the proceedings?" In the early years of the conference, Ivana Spalatin, dear Ivana, that lover of love, now nearly blind and house bound, but then teaching at some of the most callously bureaucratic institutions of higher learning, could endure only so many such questions before she discovered an Ivana answer. When asked what kind of conference she had attended, what the topic had been, she learned to say, "Small engine repair. A conference on small engine repair." That, she said, always shut them up. And each time she would tell the story she would reach up with her right hand, tapping that small engine, the heart

copyright ©2011 John Rosenwald, all rights reserved

Note:

Coleman Barks, Ann Arbor, Jeanne D'Amico, and John Rosenwald offered one version of this essay, adapted for oral presentation, at the celebration of "Robert Bly In This World" in Minneapolis in April, 2009. John Rosenwald contributed another version, considerably shortened for purposes of publication, to the volume *Robert Bly In This World,* edited by Thomas R. Smith with James P. Lenfestey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Libraries, 2011). This current version represents the original essay commissioned from John Rosenwald by the University of Minnesota Libraries, corrected when possible to remove factual errors. The opinions and assertions remain solely the responsibility of the primary author except where other sources are cited.

List of Sources Cited

Bliss, Shepherd, "Balancing Feminine & Masculine: The Mother Conference in Maine," *East/West*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (February 1978)

Bliss, Shepherd, "Carnival of creativity spring from Great Mother Conference," *Equinox: Independent Feminist Newspaper For Women Everywhere* (August/September 1977)

Bliss, Shepherd, "The Great Mother Conference," (unpublished duplicated typescript, "First Draft: Criticisms Requested," 18 pp., identified as in this essay as "Bliss, Draft #1," dated in accompanying letter June 22, 1977)

Bliss, Shepherd, "The Great Mother Conference," (unpublished duplicated typescript, "Draft: Criticisms Solicited," 23 pp., identified as in this essay as "Bliss, Draft #2," dated in accompanying letter August 16, 1977)

Bly, Robert, "About the Conference on the Mother: An Interview with Bill Siemering, in *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980)

Bly, Robert, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York, NY: Addison-Wesley, 1990)

Bly, Robert, Letter to Barbara McLaughlin and Robert Sheets, Colorado Council on the Arts (unpublished typed/signed correspondence, two pages, dated 17 Feb, 75, Bly Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries)

Bly, Robert, Letter to John Rosenwald and Ann Arbor (unpublished typed/signed correspondence, one page, dated July 6, 1996)

Bly, Robert, "Tongues Whirling," *Jumping Out of Bed: Poems by Robert Bly / Woodcuts by Wang Hui-ming* (Barre, MA: Barre Publishers, 1973)

Bly, Robert, *Sleepers Joining Hands* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973)

Fell, Mary, Letter "To Mother Conference Participants" (unpublished duplicated typescript, 3 pp., dated March 7, 1978)

Martin, Peter, Letter (unpublished duplicated typescript, one page, dated July 1, 1975)

O'Leary, Tomas, "PRACTICAL EXERCISES TOWARDS A MODERN MYTH (an evaluative report on The Second Annual Conference on the Great Mother)" (unpublished duplicated typescript, 37 pp., 1976.)

Poster for Robert Bly's Twelfth Annual Conference of the Great Mother and the New Father, 1986

Robinson, David, Letter addressed to Connie [Martin] (unpublished duplicated letter, 3pp., dated October 1, 1980), attached to letter for John [Rosenwald] and Ann [Arbor] (unpublished typed letter, 1 p., dated October 5, 1980)

The GreenBook (unpublished digital and printed document of The Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father, 1991 edition, 51 pp.)

copyright ©2011 John Rosenwald, all rights reserved