

The Spiritual Goddess Warrior

by Nicole Vecchiotti

When you log on to the Bootcamp for Goddesses website, the first thing you'll notice is the women in camouflage striking elegant yoga poses—telling images for workshops that aim to celebrate the female warrior and goddess inside all of us. As one woman writes, Bootcamp for Goddesses is a “Be all you can be experience.”

Meet the goddess in charge: Sierra Bender. Bender has incorporated yoga, a professional background in fitness training, and the study of indigenous cultures to create a series of workshops that help women align what she calls the *four bodies*: the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of human experience.

If ever there were a guide equipped to pioneer the body, mind, and soul, it is Bender. She's an accomplished athlete who played semi-pro fast pitch softball for a number of years, and has worked as a trainer for professional athletes, including a handful of Olympians. She became a certified yoga instructor at the famed Kripalu Center in the Berkshires, has lived on a Navajo reservation outside Santa Fe, and spent time in both India and Peru, where she even studied with medicine men.

Most poignantly, however, Bender has made use of her personal experiences to shape her philosophy of total wellbeing. At the age of 33, Bender was rushed to a hospital, suffering complications from an ectopic pregnancy. Severe hemorrhaging resulted in the loss of her heartbeat and Bender required resuscitation. Essentially, Bender died on the operating table and was brought back to life.

Prior to her near-death experience, which Bender describes as “going to the other side,” she had struggled with addiction, abuse, and eating disorders—behaviors that she now realizes “only numbed out the emotional pain” she was feeling. She realized after her recovery that she went through these experiences, what she now calls “necessary evils,” to help her to find her true purpose: to show others how to overcome the obstacles they face in their own lives.

Her emotional healing was a

long process that began with an investigation into serious philosophical questions. Perhaps the most profound question she posed to herself was about the nature of love. Our culture teaches us that “...love is something we need to fulfill us—and that it comes from someone else or something else. And that's what profoundly changed for me. I saw that the love I was looking for was in me. It was right there in front of me. There's responsibility behind love,” continues Bender. “And there's action behind love, too.”

Taking action is Bender's overarching message. But unlearning the cultural lessons women have been taught over a lifetime is no easy feat. Like many women, Bender originally thought love was about sacrifice. “Giving to everyone else first, that's what women do. We're not supposed to take up space. We're supposed to be of service to others.”

For Bender, the daunting task of learning how to be of service to herself and God began with yoga. “Yoga is one of the tools that's really helped me release a lot of these issues on a cellular level,” says Bender. “It's about getting in tune with the god within you; it's not just about being fit, though that will happen. The journey really begins with the spiritual self and works its way down to the physical.”

If you've ever practiced yoga, you probably understand what Bender means by that. When treated as the spiritual discipline it is, yoga is a powerful tool to learn patience, resilience, strength, and flexibility—qualities that prove useful off the mat, too. “When I'm in my yoga classes I start with what I feel and what is going on in my mind. We're conditioned to think certain things because of society and culture. So I look inside of that thought or feeling and dissect it until I can see how the seed was planted that made me believe it. And then I'll say, ‘No, that's not real.’”

Simple preconceived notions might include ideas about marriage, career, and money; more profound ideas might concern the purpose of life. “Everyone has a different issue,” says Bender. “But these mindsets take us further away from the god within us.”

Through a delicate blend of compassion and tough love, Bender encourages her students to do the hard work of examining expectations of themselves and others, urging them to ask deep-probing questions that will exhume long-buried hurts. “What part of us is disconnected from our higher self? Why did we stop loving ourselves? What's taken us





[AMBITIONS] epitome The Business of Being a Woman...

away from our true nature?"

Whatever your challenge is, Bender advises you to accept it. Surrendering to what ails you will help you transcend it, though she's quick to point out that there is a difference between letting go of pain and giving up in general. And rest assured, she will not leave you in a state of emotional wreckage. Bender's goal during her workshops is to make sure you are on your way to healing yourself. "Here are some tools you'll need to take action. This is how you're going to love yourself. This is how you're going to take care of yourself. This is how you're going to change the karma," she says.



If taking action is Bender's message, reminding women of their true nature is at the core of Bender's work. Bender augments her yoga instruction with Native American rituals and ceremonies—and she incorporates it all, from sweat lodges and praying, to music and drumming. The results are workshops where women can break through their isolation to celebrate the goddess and warrior within. "A true warrior is not only strong but has to be graceful and wise, knowing when to take action. When to retreat and observe," explains Bender.

And what about the goddess? "The goddess isn't just the beautiful thing on the shampoo bottle," laughs Bender. "There are goddesses who are very wise because they are older and they have wisdom and that's what they are known for. Each one of us has one of these gifts to bring forward into the community. And you need to own that, you need to recognize that. A lot of us deny that power inside of us."

Bender has led countless women through spiritual rebirth. After working with Bender, one student left her position as an attorney in New York to pursue a lifetime dream of becoming a midwife. "She went through the cultural things of what other people wanted her to do, but she was miserable," says Bender. "I work with so many women. It's almost like the light bulb goes on and they say, 'Enough, I'm not taking this anymore,' and that warrior part of them comes out to say 'I'm hurting myself too much'...It's like they wake up and say, 'Stop being a victim of life, start participating in it. Start loving yourself.'"

Sierra Bender will be in Northeast Ohio at the Karma Yoga Studio in Cleveland for a workshop on Invigorating the Soul of the Goddess, March 4-5, 2006. For more information, visit karmayogacleveland.com and www.sierra4bodyfityoga.com.

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The Women's Community Foundation of Cuyahoga County Speaker's Series Presents Lynn Donohue, Author of Brick by Brick

In her memoir, *Brick By Brick*, Lynn Donohue states simply, "We all want to leave our mark....I did not set out to become a bricklayer."

A native of New Bedford, Massachusetts, she became the first female member of Bricklayer's Local 39, working on construction projects from Cape Cod to Boston. After a decade as a bricklayer, Donohue founded Argus Construction Corp., a firm which grew into a multi-million dollar business with more than 50 full-time employees.

January 25, 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
Windows on the River
2000 Sycamore, Cleveland 44113
Cost: \$35
Visit www.wcfcleveland.org for more information or to register.

Weatherhead Announces Women in Leadership 2006 Seminars

The Weatherhead School of Management at CWRU offers the following seminars for its 2006 Women in Leadership series:
Negotiation And The Gender Divide
February 15, 2006

Success Strategies For Women Professionals
April 6, 2006

Women And Organizational Politics: Developing Power And Influence
May 15, 2006

Contact the Weatherhead School for more information or to register:
Phone: 216-368-6413
Email: seminars@case.edu
Web: www.weatherhead.case.edu/seminars/certificate_women.cfm

Women's History Project of Akron Area

2006 Women of the Year Awards Dinner

March 1, 2006

The University of Akron Student Union
5:30 p.m. Registration, 6:00 p.m. Dinner

<i>Pioneer</i> Cynthia Capers	<i>Inspiration</i> Shana Lee
<i>Faith</i> Flora Novella Randall Dees	<i>Creativity</i> Deb Lemire
<i>Woman to Watch</i> Kari Fry	<i>Innovation</i> Patricia Munka
<i>Imagination</i> Danna Hall	<i>Faye Dambrot Award</i> Carrie Herman
<i>Posthumous</i> Carolyn Reed	<i>Courage</i> Becky Spellman (formerly Slabaugh)
<i>Perseverance</i> Marion Joy Hoffman	

Join us as we honor these women who have worked to improve the quality of life for others and reflect the area's rich religious, racial, political and economic diversity.

Tickets are \$45. For reservations & information, contact Stacia Smilek at smc6uakron.edu or 330-972-7600.