

# The Goddess Ungirdled:

## How I learned to love my belly and found the Sacred Feminine within

*By Lisa Sarasohn*

**Yes, it's true: my path to the Goddess has been learning to love my belly.**

When I was fourteen, my mother handed me a girdle, something that she hoped would help me present a smooth line under the straight skirts she wanted me to wear. That's how the war on my belly began.

An artifact of the early 60's, this girdle was not one of your soft, stretchy latex numbers that supports and gently shapes. No, this was the Gestapo of girdles. It was so stiff that when I held it between my hands and tried to pull, it wouldn't give an inch. When I packed myself into it, a diamond-shaped reinforcement panel clamped itself over my tummy and rectangular reinforcement strips patrolled the outside of each thigh.

The three or four times I wore this contraption, stuffing my naturally curvaceous belly into this prison for my flesh, I could barely breathe. I felt like I was suffocating--the thing was killing me. So I hid it in the back of my bottom drawer under some sweaters and managed to "forget" to wear it.

*But my well-meaning mother, the one to whom I looked for guidance on becoming a woman, had already delivered the message:*

Your comfort doesn't matter, whether you can breathe doesn't matter, whether you can live fully and freely doesn't matter. What's important is that you look good. If your belly is too big, if it doesn't fit in, you have to hide it, crush it. Your belly shouldn't be seen, it's embarrassing, shameful, wrong. You're a misfit by nature, there's just too much of you. You have to hold yourself in, you don't deserve room to breathe. Don't take up too much space. What's important is that you fit into the very narrow definition of what's acceptable. Left to be yourself, unconstricted, unrestrained, you'll stick out, bulge out, be totally inappropriate.

When I was seventeen, both my mother and father encouraged me to go on the Stillman Diet to slenderize my shape. Remember the Stillman Diet? The food plan was eating nothing but protein and water for a week or more. So I just ate protein--mostly cottage cheese--and water for weeks at a time, trying to shrink my belly from sight, trying to emulate Twiggy, my Goddess of Thin.

When I first started dieting, I enjoyed a sense of control in my life that I had never had before. Dieting was a way I could outwardly comply with my parents' directive and at the same time defy their prescriptions for what I should do, how I should feel, who I should be. At least when I was dieting I could say: No, this will not go in my mouth. In dieting I found a way to assert my own will.

That sense of control came with a pricetag, though. In order to diet so strictly I had to deliberately deny, suppress, and override the sensations arising in my belly--sensations of hunger along with feelings of desire, pleasure, joy, grief, anger, and fear.

*The message I swallowed in my attempt to diet was this:*

You don't deserve nourishment. Food is bad, wrong, dangerous. Your appetites are by definition dangerous. The more you feel hollow--better yet numb--in your belly, the better. Don't feel what's happening in your belly--those feelings are dangerous and should be ignored. Empty yourself out. If you feel empty and hollow in your belly, you're doing something right.

But the fact is my body did need nourishment, and being human I did need to feel a whole range of hungers, and being human I did need to feel full. So my weeks of compulsive dieting alternated with weeks of compulsive eating, times when hunger, fear, anger, pleasure, and desire would not be denied. Such feelings emerged in my belly as an irritation, a grumbling, a restless stirring. These sensations were so terrifying and intolerable that I tried to extinguish them immediately--soothing, smoothing, stifling, or snuffing them out with food.

In twenty years of alternate dieting and bingeing, gaining and losing twenty pounds five or six times each year, I gained and lost at least 2,000 pounds. I obsessed about food, my weight, and my shape. I was lonely, directionless, and unhappy because I was too preoccupied with "trimming my tummy" to cultivate a sense of identity or purpose or to develop any intimate relationships. I was fighting the war of "fitting in" and "feeling full," and the battlefield in this war was my belly.

When I was twenty-four, I knew I was losing the war. It was becoming obvious to me that I would never find lasting happiness either in consuming another bag of cookies or in squeezing myself into size seven jeans.

As a teenager, I had witnessed a demonstration of yoga at the Unitarian Church my family attended. Not knowing how else to help myself, I started taking yoga classes. I found yoga to be a gentle way to start reinhabiting my body. Four years later I was a professionally-trained yoga teacher.

As part of my continuing yoga training, I began to learn about hara and to practice movement and breathing exercises which develop and strengthen hara. Hara is the Japanese word for "belly," the belly as both our physical and our spiritual center. In a word, hara identifies the belly to be the source of our spiritual power.

*(Even in English, "gut" is a word for the belly and "gutsy" means daring, spirited, brave.)*

The belly as source and site of spiritual power? Here was a new angle on what I had only known as a source of embarrassment and shame.

The benefits of developing hara, as I read about them in Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim's *Hara: The vital centre of man*, one of the few books on the topic, were totally appealing. I was nearly salivating as I read that one who develops hara unites with the nourishing,

creative, regenerative flow of the universal life force. One who develops hara experiences security, confidence, courage, creativity, serenity, identity, authenticity, autonomy, sense of purpose, sense of kinship and connection, boundless energy, and stronger immunity from disease. In Dürckheim's words, one who develops hara experiences a power "which is not a power one has but a power in which one stands." More than anything else, I knew, I wanted this experience of hara in my life, for myself.

But although I lusted after the benefits of developing hara, a certain nameless dread would arise when I did the hara-strengthening exercises for more than a couple of weeks. So I'd stop for a few weeks. Then I'd take up the practice again for a couple of weeks. My practice was like running up to the edge of the ocean, sticking a toe in, and running back to dry land.

Bringing energy and awareness to my belly did stir up these feelings of "nameless dread," and something more. One morning, in a room full of long-time yoga practitioners and spiritual seekers who, like me, were engaging in this hara-strengthening practice, I began to giggle. And I giggled and laughed for a half-hour or more, for no reason at all. I began to suspect that whatever feelings were lurking in my belly, they might not all be dreadful. Those feelings hidden deep down in my belly might also include joy.

I was intrigued. I made it my mission to immerse myself in the study and practice of hara: to plunge--full-body, full-being--right into that ocean which I had been avoiding. And I wanted to make practical information on developing hara available to women in more popular terms than Dürckheim's book could provide. His book is dense and theoretical, and seems to address itself only to men.

I also resolved to define my "approach/avoidance" pattern with respect to practicing the hara-strengthening exercises as something important to investigate, rather than as a personal failing, a character flaw, or a lack of commitment. And it's this investigation which has brought me home to the Goddess.

*Here's what I discovered:*

I discovered that ancient peaceful and egalitarian woman-centered societies flourished in Old Europe and the Near East for thousands of years, that these cultures worshipped the Goddess, and that they understood their universe as woman's body. These people's icons, their Goddess figurines, show that they honored woman's big belly as the source and site of the power creating, sustaining, and regenerating the world.

I began to understand the connections among woman's belly, women's power, and the power of the Sacred Feminine--in the ancient past, through history, in our times, and in my life. As Elinor Gadon writes in *The Once & Future Goddess*, our bellies are our power centers, "not just symbolically but in physical fact. When we say we act from our guts, from our deepest instincts, this is what we are speaking of. The power of our womb has been stolen from us."

And so it has been: women's power has declined as woman's belly has been violated and shamed. As I researched this connection, I saw that 5,000 years of patriarchal culture has degraded belly, body, woman, the Sacred Feminine, the soul, the feminine sensibility in both women and men, native peoples, and nature--all in a single process of devaluation. Because the belly is the bodily site of feminine sensibility, our patriarchal culture marks the

belly as a target of assault--through rape, unnecessary hysterectomies and Cesarians, reproductive technology, legal restrictions on women's authority in pregnancy and childbirth, and belly-belittling fashions, exercise regimens, and diet schemes. The same logic which drove patriarchal culture to raze the sacred groves in which women and men worshipped the Goddess has driven it to desecrate women's bellies.

No wonder bringing awareness to and energizing my hara stirred up feelings of "nameless dread." For thousands of years the dominant culture has made war on women's bellies; overt and covert brutality has made the belly an uncomfortable place in which to be. And no wonder I and so many other women have cycled through compulsive dieting and compulsive eating in desperate and failing attempts to shrink our bellies from sight. In a culture which literally hates women's guts, those of us who have internalized that hatred have often expressed it by heaping abuse upon our bellies in our efforts to "fit in."

My research eventually took me (where else?) to the lingerie department of a local department store. I studied the tags hanging on the girdles and read what they said about the benefits these items were supposed to deliver. I noticed that the promotions for these undergarments read like an FBI directive for suppressing foreign insurgents: "Achieve firm control...obtain total control...eliminate undesirable elements." Here it is, the evidence: the girdle is an instrument of social control, a device to contain and restrict the expression of women's natural power.

The gruesome information that I've collected on the culture's violence against woman's belly has actually had a liberating effect. Now I can make a distinction: that whatever dread I may feel as I bring awareness and energy to my belly, those difficult feelings are like a hideous rug which has been hiding the entrance to the room below, where my treasure awaits me. Those feelings have been surrounding my belly; they are not my belly itself. I need the vitality and power of hara more than I need to avoid whatever difficult feelings may arise.

And so I've designed a sequence of eighteen belly-energizing, power-centering movement and breathing exercises which I've drawn from yoga and other healing traditions, and which I've practiced almost daily for the last five years. And I've written a myth--a story of creation, a story of the heroine's journey--which narrates the movement sequence. ("In the beginning, Woman created the world, and the world was Woman. She fashioned clay into a bowl, fired it in flame, cooled it in wind and water, and set the bowl within her belly..")

As the exercises enact the creation story, they become gestures in a transformational ritual of self-affirmation, spiritual empowerment, and connection with the energy of the Sacred Feminine. I call this ritual "Honoring Your Belly."

As practicing this ritual brings me to experience new levels of creativity, confidence, trust, stamina, compassion, identity, purpose, and connection, it also brings me to an ever-deepening sense of the Goddess as an undeniable, tangible presence within my body, within my belly.

How do I experience the presence of the Sacred Feminine within my belly? When my belly is active and alive, I feel a radiating warmth, an expansive vitality there. Sometimes I feel a pulsing; sometimes I feel a stirring or spinning sensation, as if a small world were spinning

there. Often I feel a spaciousness and a satisfaction in my belly, a sensation of being full and whole.

Intuition, guidance, and wisdom--usually delivered in feisty, no-nonsense, down-to-earth, practical terms--seem to emanate from my belly. Sometimes my belly feels as if there's a big beautiful black woman there, like a volcano, rumbling way down deep in my soul.

When my belly is awake and energized, I feel a resonance there with the center of the earth, as if there's an invisible cord extending from the center of my body to the planet's center. And I feel that from my belly center I'm umbilically linked to the loving, protecting, guiding energy that surrounds us. I feel that I belong, that I'm included, that I'm welcome in this world.

I'm not alone in finding connection to the Goddess through honoring and energizing the belly. For the last several years I've been teaching the "Honoring Your Belly" ritual in workshops and retreats, and I've produced an instructional audiotape album so women can learn and practice the ritual on their own. Many women are telling me that bringing awareness and energy to their bellies is ushering them into a deeper experience of their own power and their relationship with the Sacred Feminine. They tell me that moving and breathing deeply from their bellies engenders an experience of embodying the Goddess.

The delight of that experience eliminates any temptation I might feel to ever wear a girdle again!

*For more information about "Honoring Your Belly"--scheduling a workshop, obtaining instructional audiotapes, and more--contact Lisa at [bellyqueen@email.com](mailto:bellyqueen@email.com).*

[Article Index](#)