

Shakti Rose

It was Uma's idea. She sent me an email: 'Do you want to do a women's yoga retreat somewhere next year?'

What a good idea. I replied: 'Yes!'

We did all the usual things: found a lovely venue (EarthSpirit, near Glastonbury, and were shown around the newly-extended premises and lush gardens by the charming, smiling David), set dates (Late May - Spidertime, the time of Ariachne, the hidden thirteenth zodiac sign when the elder trees begin to bloom), and advertised (I doodled elderflowers and Uma converted them into glossy flyers with which she pasted London).

Nobody applied. The usual people who come on my retreats looked at the wording on the glossy flyers: 'Feel free to bring your baby with you,' and felt free to abstain. Nothing wrong with babies in their right place, but surely not on a retreat?!

Two months before the start-date, and still nobody had applied. We did the sensible thing, and cancelled. David said we were still liable for our deposit, but we philosophically decided to put it down as a tax loss. After all, we couldn't force people to come. Maybe we'd just go ourselves, and have a holiday.

The day after we cancelled, our first application arrived. It was from Lesley Bourne and her baby Eric. I called Uma: 'One person believes in us!' We decided to go ahead, and devised a timetable, which included a sweat-lodge.

The applications steadily trickled in, until we had seven babies with their mothers, plus a couple of grandmothers and Dee, a

pregnancy yoga teacher from Nottingham who used to be a midwife. When I told her how many babies we had, she said `Good!' Other people couldn't quite make out what we were planning to do.

`Will you have a creche, so the mothers can do Yoga?'

`No.' The mothers were coming to be with their babies, right?

Nirlipta (Uma's husband) stayed up many late nights in a row, carefully painting the yantras for three of the main Wisdom Goddesses in oils. With every brush-stroke he chanted the name of the appropriate Wisdom Goddess. We cancelled the sweat-lodge, and substituted a bonfire. The logistics just didn't seem feasible. Nobody seemed to mind. I filled out forms for bed allocations, made people lists for the local authorities, while Uma patiently explained to the EarthSpirit administrator that we wanted all single supplement rooms so the mothers could all sleep with their babies. On the appointed day Uma turned up in her Yoga van, having driven from London in a sea of rain, with a yurt attached.

The sun came out. Alex the cook arrived, with a vehicle full of catering packs of Fair Trade organic ingredients. It looked auspicious. I threw up my mountain tent by the tree circle, helped Uma with the initial stages of the yurt, raced off to show Jane and baby Isabelle, Nicola and baby Archer, Bronagh and baby Niamh, Reka (without her three children) which cowshed or dairy room they were to sleep in. Dee (pregnancy yoga teacher from Nottingham, ex-midwife) flew in on bright wings. I took her down to the field where she picked up the canvas and carried on helping Uma with the rest of the yurt. The fresh air was scented with the bloom of the first

opening elderflowers, and the birds were singing for joy.

Rachel, her mother Jill and her baby Martha arrived; Alex's mother manifested, with tales of Australia, setting out red roses in vases for everyone. Across the generations, from planes and motorways, out of the rain and the sea-spray, the women convened. Suddenly Shakti was rising, flickering slowly at first as we recognised one another from letters, forms, books, e-mails, photos or previous lives.

On their application forms, we had asked people what they were expecting from the retreat, and many of them said: 'Time for myself, time to spend with my baby, time to re-ignite my yoga practice.' And this is what happened. On the first evening, after a tasty twist on bangers and chips, we gathered in the big yoga room of a converted barn, where in the upper reaches of inner space the green dragon walks out of the wall and the cheese-plants spread their leaves. The log-burning stove was alight and glowing, the rain fell heavily outside, the babies suckled and the warm scent of progesterone started to permeate the atmosphere. Everybody was too tired that night to do the formal introduction thing; but in between the picking at the piles of books Uma and I had brought and the low murmur of conversation, there was a sense of instant community and peace.

In a separate building outside, beyond the spiral herb garden, was the hot-tub house. I went for a dip before sleeping out in the mountain tent, wondering how closely we would stick to the timetable we had drawn up.

Every morning began with silent meditation between six thirty and seven, followed by Yoga practice between seven and eight. The babies weren't big on the early morning scene, but there would always be one or two, who were very gracious about letting their mothers do their own thing. These sessions happened in another practice room off the barn, where we had set up a shrine with Parvati, Kali et al. and where the Wisdom Goddess Yantras positively burned themselves into the wall of blue lyass stone.

The after-breakfast Yoga sessions definitely included the babies. Lesley Bourne - the one person who had believed in us! - arrived with Eric on that first morning, and he quickly became a star as he demonstrated how to do a perfect Bhujangasana. When Eric wasn't doing Bhujangasana he'd generally be flapping his arms in delight.

On the first afternoon we had Juggernath, our friendly Indian head massager, bicycle in from Glastonbury in his raw silk Indian bespoke clothes to give a free taster session to all the women. He massages with a serious dexterity which just melts the head, neck and shoulders and completely disintegrates shoulder tension - perfect for mothers with babies.

Juggernath was massaging when I left to go home and collect the props for the evening game. What was rather alarming was that he was still massaging when later, after supper, I came to set the game up. He was quite happy, and everyone else was wandering around with oily hair, dazed expressions and contented babies. We set up the game.

It followed the theme of the stages of a woman's life - from first memory through to death. We set out a series of hoops, each one to represent one of these stages, and into each hoop we put props to represent that stage - red roses for first love/sex, Ralph the skeleton for death. A name was selected randomly at each stage and that person then talked about something - food, sex, clothes etc. - which was significant to them at that stage. This was how we introduced ourselves to one another - and Dee, dressed in an oatmeal cardigan designed to demonstrate the attraction to natural colours that comes with menopause, was the star turn: buttoning up all the coconut-shell buttons she dropped her chest onto her abdomen, visibly aged twenty years, and outlined the delights of the Change. `Food - no point going on a diet - Sex - forget it - clothes - well, I just wear the most outrageous clothes possible and then people look at me and say: `What is she wearing!' - which of course means they're not looking at my face ...'

Dee of course has a lovely face, and hers was a wonderful presence as she reached out for babies throughout the week, administered Reiki and talked to the mothers - young and mature - in the way which we all wish our sisters would but somehow rarely do. The temporary community of women bonded rapidly against the constant back-drop of suckling and gurgling; without the intrusions of every day life - telephones, jobs, other family members, meals to cook - everyone was able to concentrate on themselves, their babies, their Yoga - in no particular order and often all at the same time.

Outside it was pouring with rain for a large proportion of the

time, but though it was enough to short-circuit the heating for the hot-tub, it was but a distant patter. The EarthSpirit retreat, now it has been extended, is spacious enough for one not to feel claustrophobic when it rains. In the kitchen, Alex kept the men at bay, flirting brazenly with them, feeding Ken, the man trying to fix the hot tub, the most delicious dainties. The regular tasty and nutritious meals were a goddess-send, fed the mothers' milk and nourished our practice. And in the afternoons Rachel went running around the hills while the rest of us went for walks: to the ancient yew tree in the church yard (which Uma and Andrea climbed), to the church, all around the hill, up the hill to the iron age fort in the pouring rain (only I, Jane and Isabelle made that one) and back again.

We did creative Yoga, fecund Yoga and post-natal recovery Yoga. While Uma did Baby Yoga on big sky-blue mattresses in the big room, I split off with an elect few for Peri-menopausal Yoga. Juggernath cycled in each day to do his magic on breastfeeding shoulders. We did Tratak on the Yantras, sang the mantras of the Wisdom Goddesses, walked barefoot down to the yurt with beanbags on our heads and sang the Kali mantra there, accompanied by Uma on the harmonium. We did deep Yoga Nidra for both Wise Woman Yoga and Death Yoga. And yes, the babies were there all along. OK, when Uma led the Yoga Nidra she had a baby over her shoulder and I had Isabelle in my arms while rocking Sean in his push-chair with my foot; and when I led the Relaxation I had a baby over my shoulder and Uma sat on a ball with a baby on each knee - but the thing is, it worked. Everyone relaxed. Deeply. No babies cried.

This was the remarkable thing about the retreat. How often people pop the adjective `screaming' in front of the word `babies' as a matter of course. And while I would defend the right of any baby to express his or her inner adult in the form of a scream, it just didn't seem to feature. Oh, there was a fair bit of teething and chewing, Dee ended up with a love bite on her chin and Archer lost a sock - but those full-bodied cries of incomprehensible and inconsolable distress which seem to be such a feature of babyhood were simply absent. The babies had their mothers' full attention because their mothers were being looked after and had no distractions. The mothers discovered that it was possible to do Yoga and be with their babies. The grandmothers and other mothers delighted in taking care of the babies while their mothers had the occasional break - and round the fire on the Tuesday evening, as we watched the flames fly upwards and thought of the witches who had flown with them, Andrea got out her guitar and accompanied Uma in the song about the white bird which flies from life to life ...

And on the last night, we danced. With the babies, with one another, with Ralph the skeleton, together looping, twisting and interweaving the stages of a woman's life in one spell-binding dream of birth and death under the green dragon while the rain pounded unheeded on the roof high overhead.

We have now disbanded and melted back into our lives, but I am so happy Uma and I had the chance to meet all those beautiful women and their babies. Juggernath told me with astonishment how he found all the babies `adorable'. What was really astonishing was

how natural and easy it all was in the end. Why isn't it always like that?