

Learning to apply the pleasure principle

By Ruth Ostrow

THE stage is set. A group of women is lying around on white, fluffy rugs on the floor.

Look around the room and think about what is beautiful about each woman, our facilitator Roxanne Foye tells us. Savour the woman next to you, note the shape of her body, the colour of her skin, what it is that's sexy about her, how she's wearing her hair. Let yourself fall into the role of voyeur, she says.

I am at an erotic dance workshop called Dancing the DeVine and these are the warm-up exercises. I came because it sounded like huge fun. Unlock your inner temple goddess, learn erotic dancing, get in touch with the feminine, said the flyer. I grabbed a couple of girlfriends, a tight red dress, and here we are.

But we are already finding it a challenge. Being asked to relate to women this way is not in our cultural conditioning.

Women in the West are taught to have a deep fear of other women. Magazines, movies, a patriarchal system, have trained us to be jealous or competitive. In ancient times women lived together in tribes, protective and nurturing; we initiated each other. Nowadays we act as rivals.

The beauty and power of women are often reduced to superficial attributes so we can feel better about ourselves. Here we sit among women who have given birth, lost and grieved, nursed and mothered, lived through abuse, been great healers and lovers. And yet we observe each other through the jaundiced eyes of: She isn't that good looking.

It's sadly normal when women come into a room together to sum each other up, compare, contrast: She looks older than me. She's better dressed than me. My partner would want to make love to her. I feel jealous.

But the instruction we're being given tonight is the opposite: Become aware of the deeper beauty around you. It is only in celebrating beauty in other women that we can really appreciate it in ourselves, explains Foye.

I lift my eyes and look at the different shapes, textures, colours and emotions of the females around me, without judgment, without comparison, through the eyes of the artist, through the eyes of love.

"Now pretend you're a cat. Shut your eyes and move around the room on all fours, enjoying other women. Feel the texture of their skin with your face, smell their scent and perfume, run your paws over each other playfully, cuddle, huddle, roll on top of each other and just experience the warm embrace of the feminine," she instructs us as we gingerly prowl around the room, graceful, sensuous, our eyes covered, our senses open.

The confronting nature of the workshop begins to subside as the mood gets more open, more loving, sexier. By the time we're ready to dance, the heat in the room is palpable. We admire each other limbering up. Take note of what you like in another woman's movements.

We're here to mirror each woman's best tools of seduction. To give confidence to our sisters and share pleasure, to unblock stagnant energy so that sensuality can just flow through us, she says.

Although only in her 20s, Foye speaks from experience. Trained as a yoga teacher, she found herself working in strip clubs to earn a living: "Despite the lack of sacredness in these clubs, I was one of the few girls who really enjoyed it," she says.

"I felt like an ancient temple dancer who had been expressing sensuality from the beginning of time.

"I was able to fully explore my sexuality, play out my own dark side. And even though I'm not the traditional bottle-blonde with big breasts, men would continually be telling me: 'You are so sensuous, you are a goddess.' In this validation I found that my figure became more womanly, my acne went away, I reclaimed my own sexual power. And I want to pass this gift on to other women.

"Watching women over time, I can see the stunning beauty most women possess in their vulnerability and pain, in their potency as mothers and lovers, in the way they move. It's there in all of us, at all the ages and stages of our lives, in all our shapes and sizes, especially if we learn to love and accept our bodies through dance and pleasure," she says.

The first stage of her workshop is the one we're doing tonight, where women open up erotic parts of themselves -- temptress, seductress -- in safety. It's a stage of liberation where the inner lover gets revealed and accepted. Those who wish to continue with the other stages then develop this lover into the art form of erotic dancer.

In ancient times women were the sacred initiators of men. By reclaiming our beauty and power over our own pleasure, we can unlock our partners and ourselves in erotic ways. My girlfriends and I certainly leave the evening feeling richer and juicier for the experience.

Roxanne Foye tours Melbourne in March, followed by Sydney, then Europe. More: dancingthedevine@hotmail.com

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