

# Feminine Genius

The Provocative Path to

*Waking Up and Turning On*

the Wisdom of Being a Woman

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sounds true  
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# *You Are Not Crazy*

## The World Is Off Its Rocker

When you are at war with yourself and you win,  
who loses?

**CARL BUCHHEIT**

**T**he world has gone stark raving, totally loony tunes, round the bend, nutty as a fruitcake, not in its right mind, dangerously and absolutely mad. And you can't see all the ways the world is wacky because you marinate in them—you literally stew in them—day in and day out. And you not only swim in the stuff, you drink it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, so the insanity becomes part of your bones, your blood, and your DNA.

It is as though you—like most women—walk around in a straight jacket and a muzzle, and you've been wearing them so long, and they feel so normal, that you no longer even notice that you are bound, gagged, and hobbled. Instead, you gaze in the mirror, examine your reflection, and ask, "How do I look? Do these handcuffs make me look fat?"

This, my friend, is crazypants.

In my decade and a half as a coach, seeing this all day, every day, one hundred times over and in a thousand variations (not to mention within my own self), has confirmed for me that both the world out there and the world within far too many women need a big, bold

do-over. A new era, inspired from our sorely missed, pro-goddess past and informed by each woman's true wisdom, must become our new normal. And you, sister, like me and like every woman, bring your piece of the magic so that together we can make our worlds over.

And yet, as one of my mentors, Carl Buchheit, asks, "When you are at war with yourself and you win, who loses?"

Oh, right. That war inside you. There's that.

Let me share with you how I came to be writing these words, and why I believe that cultivating Feminine Genius is the key to bringing an end to the war we each wage against ourselves—and perhaps even to the war that the world at large wages against women.

My own path to an inner cease-fire began on the stage—well, actually on the side of the stage, cozied up in my pint-sized sleeping bag while my mother led her dance rehearsals. Aside from a brief time when I wanted to be a princess, and then a scientist, I had always wanted to become a professional dancer like my mom was. When my father, a staunch proponent of following your bliss, asked me why I loved to dance so much, I told him, "Daddy, I feel like I have this light inside of me, and when I dance people get to see it too. I just want to share it."

So when I turned sixteen, I got myself a scholarship and left my hippie home in northern New Mexico to go to a fancy boarding school for the arts in conservative New England. I quickly memorized the script I would need to follow if I were to go pro: be very, very thin and get the steps very, very right. These harsh rules apply for a girl aspiring to be a dancer as well as for a girl aspiring to be a woman. On both accounts, I got busy. I shifted my focus from sharing my light to getting it right, from following my bliss to following the script, and from shakin' my booty to working my ass off.

Along with biology, French, and ballet classes, I studied up on how to become an excellent anorexic, and embraced my new way of life with religious fervor. I ate nearly nothing. I scrutinized the girls who were technically advanced and tried not only to dance like them, but also to move like them, sit like them, and even talk like them. I stayed late in the dance studios, practicing long past the point of pain and

fatigue. As the weeks and months went on, people asked with concern if I was getting too thin, but I knew other students were secretly jealous of me and my teachers were proud of me.

During one visit home, I handed my parents my report card—a column of straight As—and waited for their reaction. Instead of admiring the piece of paper, they looked at me and beamed. “You know,” my father said, “we love you unconditionally. Always will. There is nothing you could do or not do to change that.”

While that was probably the best thing any girl could hope to hear from the god and goddess of her universe, inside I was distraught. *No*, I thought. *No! Don't you understand? I don't deserve that. Not yet. There are so many things wrong with me, so many ways I am not yet perfect. I can't accept your love until then.*

Back in boarding school, I was hungry, tired, and felt like I was holding my breath all the time. I dreamt at night about the indulgences I wouldn't let myself have by day, things like meat with gravy, ice cream sundaes, boys to kiss. I longed to skip class and sleep in. I started to feel that the urges of my body—my hungry, unruly, feminine body—were antithetical to my goals of becoming a great dancer. I began to believe that somehow my body was against me.

I doubled down with my preferred war tactics of control and deprivation, and didn't look up for the next ten years. One day, in my twenties, in rehearsal for a dance company I dearly loved, I watched a fellow dancer practice. As I stretched on the side of the room, an icy realization poured into my body. She was a great technician (she got the steps very, very right), yet as I watched her, I became aware that her greatness was about something far beyond her technical virtuosity. She seemed completely at home in herself. A luminescence shone from her that was almost holy. In that third-story dance studio in Lower Manhattan, it hit me in the gut: I would never feel truly successful, in dance or otherwise, because I was focused too much on following my script and too little on sharing my light.

But the light I saw in my fellow dancer woke up a dormant part of me. I realized that I gravely missed my light, even if I had no idea how to regain it. I realized that I had traveled far from my true self, and the path

back was anything but clear. Regardless, more than the salvation that I thought my script would offer me and that I was killing myself to reach, I began instead to want to feel completely at home in myself. I longed to feel luminous and to know myself as holy—or, if that was too much to ask, then to just feel okay.

Although I didn't know it at the time, it was my *want* that was actually my first step on the path that led back to me. It was my *longing* that let me pick up that humble white flag that signifies the end of a war. Friend, I believe you picked up this book because you also feel a similar *longing* stirring in you.

Maybe you too, at some time in your girlhood, were naturally in touch with your light. Maybe you too, like the women I get to know and get to work with, used to feel naturally confident in your body, sassy (in my case also bossy), and clear about what you wanted. Even if you have to reach way, way, way back into your past, you might find a time when pleasure was everywhere for you, as natural as drawing breath. When you were luminescent. When you felt what you felt, knew what you knew, and you felt completely at home in yourself.

And then maybe at some point either very early on or in young womanhood, your light began to dim, or the world dimmed it for you. It became no longer safe to feel what you felt and to know what you knew. Your body might have even stopped feeling like your own and became a commodity to trade for love, acceptance, and belonging—if only you could become “perfect.” You learned to hold your tongue, be a good girl, close your legs, and do as you were told. Your girlhood was cut short. You stopped trusting yourself. You stopped hearing your soul.

## GOING MAD

To give you a bigger, clearer picture of how insane things truly are, and how the insanity at large skews a woman's everyday reality, allow me to present to you a few facts and figures. Fasten your seatbelts, because it's a bit of a nauseating ride. Although women make up 51 percent of the population, we hold only about 11 percent of decision-making and policy-setting positions in media, government, and education.<sup>1</sup>

Eighty-one percent of ten-year-olds worry about becoming too fat.<sup>2</sup> A woman is 70 percent more likely than a man to experience depression during her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> One in four women takes antidepressants, and women use antianxiety medications at almost twice the rate of men.<sup>4</sup> Sixty-five percent of American women have an eating disorder.<sup>5</sup> *Ninety-seven* percent of women admit to having at least one “I hate my body” moment each day, although for most it’s thirty-five, fifty, or even one hundred; which means that for every waking hour, the average woman will hurl between one and eight cruel insults at herself.<sup>6</sup>

Oh, there’s more. During her lifetime, one in three women will experience sexual or physical abuse<sup>7</sup>; one in five women will be raped<sup>8</sup>; and one in four girls will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen.<sup>9</sup> There are 220 words for a sexually promiscuous woman but only twenty for a sexually promiscuous man.<sup>10</sup> Globally, there are an estimated 4.5 million people trapped in forced sexual exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Twenty-six percent of women between ages eighteen and twenty-four have been stalked online, and another 25 percent have been the target of online sexual harassment.<sup>12</sup> It is enough to douse a girl’s inner fire and leave her choking on her own ashes. But you don’t need two depressing paragraphs of statistics to tell you that something is very wrong here.

Add to this barrage something I call the “script”: a set of harsh rules and conditions, both spoken and unspoken, which demand that you give up *who you truly are* in order to play the part of *who you are supposed to be*. You learn: *Be good. Be nice. Be pretty. Be thin. Be perfect. And whatever you do, don’t be too much, too big, or too loud.* The script is a noose around the neck of your soul. While the script may differ from family to family, culture to culture, and nation to nation, it always requires you to second-guess what you innately know, and to trade what you innately want for what your family, culture, or nation wants (read: demands) of you. As your inner compass becomes no longer consultable or trustable, you do what every woman does when swimming in crazy soup for far too long: you go to war, usually against yourself. While the requirements listed in the script vary, the damage you inflict upon yourself while trying to live by the script’s rules is all too familiar.

It's a man's world after all. You exist in a world that values and rewards what I call your Masculine Genius: your rational, linear, go-go-go, get-it-done, goal-oriented, competitive, will-powered abilities. It is that same world that shames and hobbles your intuitive, meaningful, collaborative, emotional, passionate, spiraling, soulful abilities—your Feminine Genius.

The script requires you to conform to a narrow and confining definition of womanhood, or to try not to appear feminine at all. If you are like the women I get to know and work with, you think that if you want to be successful, free, powerful, and strong, you should think, act, speak, decide, work, and work out more like a man. And if you want to belong, and feel valuable, lovable, and attractive, you had best nip and tuck yourself into the ideal of a woman that the dominant culture has laid out for you. So as you read this you might find yourself—as most women and many men do too—more than a touch sad, sick, and off-course.

But.

You are not crazy; it's the collective system that is out of whack. Your wildness isn't the problem; it's the cage that you put around yourself. It turns out that the serious out of whackness is “only” about five thousand years old and is neither divinely nor biologically ordained, as explains researcher and writer Riane Eisler. Eisler's research of Western archeology, social science, history, religion, and anthropology has allowed her to shed new light on the art, wall paintings, cave sanctuaries, and burial sites from roughly 2.6 million years ago through about 30 BCE, from the civilizations of the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages through those of ancient Crete and Greece. One of her works, *The Chalice and the Blade*—which explains how our current culture has evolved to hold women in such low regard—has been called by anthropologist Ashley Montagu “the most important book since Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.”

Eisler found that up until about five thousand years ago, goddesses were revered alongside gods, peace was considered to be greater than war, and the life-death cycle was not seen as something to outwit or outrun, but as a powerful force to respect and revere. The fertile feminine body, the womb, and the vulva were all seen as points of worship.

Even when deities were fashioned as female, it was not that women dominated men; men and women lived as equals, neither gender being inferior nor superior. The sexual was not yet bound to the violent and dominant; the erotic was not yet separated from the sacred; and the sacred was not yet stripped from the Feminine. Fossils, bones, carvings, tools, and writings whisper to us that, once, that was simply a way of life.

*how much brighter will life become  
when the Sacred Feminine again  
flourishes in us all?*

#### THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

It was not until I was in my early thirties, when I was staring down retirement from my performing career in dance, that a path back to myself slowly started to appear. In need of a new way to support myself financially, I stumbled across the career path of holistic health coaching. I saw that it would allow me to be my own boss while helping other people to live, eat, and relate better. It would also allow me to heal from the physical and psychic injuries I had sustained from my lifetime of warring with myself.

What I learned to do with clients, I practiced first on myself. Along with coaching skills like high-quality questions and high-quality listening, I mastered how to decode cravings. As I examined the impulses, longings, yearnings, needs, wants, and desires I had felt my whole life—like for ice cream sundaes, skipping class, or kissing boys—I realized that each impulse was an encoded message, designed to make me aware of some physical or metaphysical nutrient I needed more of in my life, be it healthy fats, more rest, a truer connection with others, or (almost always) a truer connection with myself.

*Oh, I realized, my body doesn't lie. My wanting, longing, desirous, feeling body isn't a problem. In fact, what I want is actually key to helping me get where I want to go.*

One afternoon, I sat in a lecture on Vedic Tantric philosophy (the guiding principle behind many forms of yoga), for which I was getting certified so I could offer it to my coaching clients. Originating in India around the fifth century, the word *tantra* loosely translates as “web” or “weaving.” As I learned that day, Tantrists—an unruly band of mystical upstarts—believe that since all life is interconnected (like a web), humans are not separate from God (or whatever term you choose for the divine power that animates all of life), but are in fact interwoven with God.

Many world religions see humans as inherently and irreparably flawed, salvageable only if we live precisely by one ordained script or another, getting high enough marks in this lifetime to earn our reunion with All That Is in some kind of afterlife. Tantrism, however, like the Buddhism and Hinduism it influenced, sees humans as suffering only from a simple, easily reparable misunderstanding. We aren't separate from the Holy One; we have simply *forgotten* that the Holy One and we are one. We aren't hopelessly messed up; we have simply *forgotten* that the Divine is having a messy human experience through us. We needn't follow a stringent set of conditions in order to be worthy of love; we have simply *forgotten* that the Universe adores us unconditionally. Tantra kindly reminds us that whatever it is we have simply forgotten, we can remember.

*Oh, I realized. So, I am a strand in the web of All That Is. That means that no matter how many pounds I gain, classes I flunk, or relationships I mess up, I will still get an A+ from the Universe.*

It slowly dawned on me that if being human is not a fallen condition, neither is being a woman. No longer my prosecutor and executioner, my hunger became holy. Instead of hurling my requisite one hundred “I hate my body” bombs at myself each day, I realized that—as a woman and a human—I could sing a new refrain to myself. I repeated a line from Mary Oliver's poem “Wild Geese”: “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” I began

to see that no script could ever teach me how to be the woman I was aching to become, nor could it ever teach me how to truly feel, speak, work, love, or know myself as holy. No script could—but my body, my soul, and I could.

As I built my coaching practice—learning and growing and falling and failing—something surprising happened. My new career slowly became a calling. Really. Feminine Genius herself (although at the time I didn't call her that or really know what she was) kept calling me and whispering, *Steady on. Women are the key.* The wild grace of Feminine Genius blossomed in my body like spring-drunk forsythia and refused to ever let me go. Feminine Genius directed my wary gaze onto a path that curved off into a future that didn't at all resemble my scripted, contorted past. Then without any instruction, Feminine Genius cackled a bit, smacked me on the ass, and sent me walking.

So, for the past fourteen years, I have supported women from all over the globe, from more than fifty countries and six continents. I have worked with hundreds in individual coaching sessions and live retreats, and with thousands through digital courses and my online community. My job description, as I see it, is to help women flourish in this world, a world in which the opposite of flourishing is too often the norm. As you and I go along through these pages, I will share about my clients, readers, friends, participants, colleagues, and mentors so that you can see how this Feminine Genius stuff has been of use not just to me but also to real-life, flesh-and-blood women worldwide.

One of the most enduringly inspiring things in my life is to watch a woman slip the Gordian knot of self-loathing, people pleasing, and overachieving and become simply and fully herself. The light that comes on in her, comes on in the world; it confirms that I am doing my part to leave this wacky world that much better than I found it, one Feminine Genius at a time.

One is not born a genius, one becomes a genius;  
and the feminine situation has up to the present  
rendered this becoming practically impossible.

**SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex***