

VOICES IN THE MIST: THE SPIRITUALITY OF WOMEN

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Call to Worship: #646 *The Larger Circle* Read Responsively

Reading:

Anna, The Prophetess

Anna, prophetess of God! The little we know of you
reveals a woman of awesome wisdom
whose intuition and inner sight knew what was to come.

Your prophetic gift lives with us still, Anna—
gestating deep in our feminine consciousness.
your words still waiting to be uttered in our time.
You were, Anna, a daughter of Ancient Tradition
that embraced a Mother God
and never questioned the sacred role of women
in prophecy, discernment and moral leadership.

For, in ancient times, women were honored

As the embodiment of wisdom,
Reflecting in the cycles of their lives
The wonder of creation and
intrinsically connected to the divine
through the mysterious powers of birthing.

But when you had passed through the first two cycles of womanhood—

Maiden and Mother—

You then entered into the dark age of the Crone,
wrinkled, wise, known from time immemorial as

The Saga—"She Who Speaks,"

The one who now, in her old age,
Had reached the fullness of her time
and was empowered by her years
to utter sacred words and poetry.

invoking the divine in the Temple's holy spaces.

Oracle of the Sacred!

The Book of Proverbs knew you, Anna:

"She opens her mouth with wisdom"

And the people of your time knew you too—

More connected than we to the wisdom of the feminine
and the power of the Crone—

They honored your wrinkles as a sign of
Knowledge and experience

To be shared as a gift with those who had not walked
So far and deeply, and were unfamiliar

With the mysteries of life and death.
They called you “Hag”—
Meaning in those early days not one to be despised
And cast aside, but a wise and holy woman.
Priestess and Prophetess,
Counselor and Guide,
You were a comfort and a solace
To God’s people, Anna!
Ah, wise woman!
We have lost you!
We are disconnected from the feminine power and energy
that breathed through your wrinkled, craggy skin.
We are all too often bereft
Of compassion, born of long journeying,
That shone through your all-seeing eyes.

May we, Anna, women of today
Inheritors of a world unbalanced, bereft of feminine wisdom,
and grieving while not even knowing what we grieve,
May we retrieve the Crone, the Wise Woman, the Prophetess
from the layers of our history,
May we once again delight in access to sacred mysteries—
Waiting and given to those who honor their years,
listen to their lives, reflect on the experience,
Embrace who they are, discern their sacred path
and dare follow it—
Distilling all they have encountered and experienced on their way
into a chalice of Wisdom for others to taste,
May we, Anna, prophetess, stand up with courage,
breaking open our own truth,
like you,
In the Temple’s sacred spaces
Soul Sister.

Edwina Gateley, *Soul Sisters*

Sermon Text

It was as if my chair was spring loaded. The moment the speaker finished his morning presentation I bolted from my seat, gathered my notebook and handouts, and fled from the room. Without saying a word to Chrystal I dumped my stuff in my room and raced out of the building. I started walking toward town. Not a stroll, not a power walk, but a foot stomping tattoo powered by rage. I don’t know Marathon City very well, as the only place I usually go is straight to St. Anthony Retreat Center on 4th street. This day I walked without seeing where I was going. I just need to get way from the painful revelation the morning had brought.

Eventually, I found myself huffing and puffing up the side street leading to St. Mary’s Church at the top of a modest hill in the center of town. I tromped up the steps to a balcony that looks out over the peaceful farms surrounding the little town. Certainly there was no peace within me. I paced back and forth along the balcony shouting my

white hot anger at God. Well, if truth be told, it was silent shouting lest the neighbors call local law enforcement to deal with the wild woman at the church.

I spent all the free time for that morning trying to comprehend what I had just come to know. I am not talking about understanding in an intellectual sense. I am talking about knowing in the deepest, most personal, gut level way. Three years later I still rankle when I think about it. Let me help you understand what so upset me.

Chrystal and I had gone to our favorite place of peace and serenity to attend a five-day summer seminar on Protestant Spirituality sponsored by The Upper Room. The presenter was Professor Joseph Driskill from the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA. During this morning session he had been chronicling the history of Christian Spirituality beginning with the Christian scriptures, the early Desert Fathers and Mothers, on through the Middle Ages to the days of the Reformation. As I listened intently and took notes diligently I realized that something was wrong, very wrong.

What I came to understand that morning was, with the dawning of the Protestant Reformation, the spiritual voices of women were all but totally silenced. For the first time in 5 – 10,000 years, women had virtually nothing to say about their own spiritual lives and practices, the shape and structure of the faith communities in which they lived, and how their children would grow in awareness of the holy. Women lost all power to name the Holy as they understood it and create rituals and ceremonies to honor their own life passages. No longer could women lead prayer or contribute to the understanding of the sacred human journey from birth to death and whatever is beyond death. The Reformation signaled the throwing of the bolt on the doors of the church as it was also being thrown at the temple, synagogue, and mosque.

Voices strong and prominent, voices of passion and commitment, voices that brought church prelates and secular rulers to attention finally faded into the mist during this period. Oh, the silencing had begun centuries before as the egalitarian societies that honored the goddess and gave place to women's spirituality were replaced by the communities honoring the Great Sky God and male-only hierarchy. With the burgeoning of the Reformation and the fracturing of the Christian church into a multitude of sects and denominations the pace really sped up.

It is very difficult to speak with accuracy and certainty about the role of women in pre-history. The works of Maria Gimbutus and Riane Eisler have their supporters and their detractors. Research in these areas of archaeology and thealogy (that's spelled "the A olgy", emphasizing the feminine face of the Holy) continues and I leave it to finer minds than mine to sort out facts from wishful thinking. What this work does suggest, and what solid evidenced seems to support, is a time before recorded time when for reasons of survival if no other, men and women worked out equitable distributions of labor and power that respected the contributions of both. It would appear, during this time, women had their own sacred spaces, times, and rituals that nourished their lives, their children's lives, and the life of their society.

Prehistory gives us tantalizing bits and pieces but no firm agreement among scholars about women's spirituality before the early classical period. Female statues presumed to be figures of the Great Mother Goddess are as old as 50,000 years. Exactly what these statues meant to our ancestors, what they meant to women specifically, and how they evolved out of the human quest for meaning making is unclear. What is clear is that these early humans understood the significance of women in the on-going process of human life and community.

What we have is some data that supports the idea that across the globe and in almost all cultures there was a time when women and men used their unique gifts in support of life and wholeness for all. Women, as well as men, healed using herbs,

rituals, and prayers. Women and men spoke with prophet voice on behalf of the Holy One and the welfare of the community. Women had places and times when they could come together to create ceremonies and rituals to honor the seasons of their lives and share with their daughters and granddaughters the mysteries of being female. Together and separately women and men made life holy, meaningful, and rich.

Gradually, as extended family groups grew to become tribes of ever expanding size land became a precious commodity. Humans began to settle in communities and take up herding and farming to support themselves. As women had the responsibility for the care of the young, which was not compatible with engaging in large scale agriculture and herding women's position in society and the religion of the society began to recede. Over several thousands of years the female goddess image disappeared and women's wisdom, intuition, and rituals were replaced by a male god, sacrificial rituals, and a male hierarchical leadership. Women's prayers, songs, and dances, and, most importantly, women's spiritual voices began to fade. Women's equality of position was replaced with male dominance over women, children, and men of lesser rank.

This silencing happened in Greece and Rome as priestesses were superseded by priests. It happened in Egypt and the Levant as the Goddess gave way to the Sky God. It happened when Christianity became the dominant religion sweeping across the Near East and into Europe. Traces of the voices of aboriginal women exist today in some remote places such as Australia, New Zealand, and in the memory of Native American peoples. Even for these remote peoples contact with Europeans spelled almost immediate desecration of women's sacred sites and rites. Women's roles in religion and society disappeared as Europeans supplanted the indigenous religion with Western religion and refused to deal with any but male leaders.

Women are made of sturdy stuff and did not give up their sacred knowledge and their sacred voice easily. We still hear women's wisdom in Greek and Roman mythology. We hear the voice of Miriam, sister of Moses; and Deborah, judge over Israel. We have pre-Christian Celtic stories of women warriors and chieftains who led their people with strength and courage. There are the voices of early Christian women like Priscilla, Mary Magdalene, and Lydia. The first few centuries of Christianity had the voices of the Desert Mothers such as Amma Mary, Amma Sarah, and Amma Theodora. However, the times were changing.

By the Middle Ages few women had the opportunity for education or voice in religion or society with one exception. Monastic women retained some level of autonomy and self-determination. Wealthy and well educated women as well as peasant women were able to enter great monastic houses that provided access to classical literature, sacred texts, and women's wisdom. Women developed their minds and hearts and told their own stories about meaning making in life. What women they were. Hildegard of Bingen, musician, artist, mystic, and healer; Theresa of Avila, mystic and social critic; and Mechtilde of Magdeburg were deep thinkers, social activists, and prolific writers.

The 16th century brought great change in both the social and religious order. With the spread of the Protestant Reformation women's roles and options changed greatly. Monastic centers of learning were replaced by the rise of great universities, to which women had no access. Convents were closed across Protestant Europe. Some women left by their own choice. Others were forced to leave against their will, relegated to the nursery and the kitchen, as Luther put it. No longer could women think, read, and write about their own spiritual lives and intuitive mystical knowing. Within the Roman Catholic Church, embattled on all sides by an ever diversifying Protestant Reformation, women's voices were also silenced as all of the energy was focused on defending the faith against the Reformation Movement.

In speaking with Dr. Driskill about my new awareness of the devastating effect of the Reformation on the spiritual lives of women, he agreed. I had interpreted the information correctly. As good fortune would have it, there was hope for learning more about this period in church history. Just down the hall from Dr. Driskill's office in Berkeley was the office of his colleague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, world renowned feminist theologian. He spoke with Dr. Ruether who recommended several books to me. I discovered the stories of some of these Reformation era women, in their own voices, as they wrote passionately about their reasons for leaving the convent or their reasons for fighting to stay enclosed. Each group made their choice so that they could best continue on their own spiritual path. While armies waged wars against those who thought and believed differently, in many communities Catholic women and Protestant women lived together, worshiped together, and served together. There is even a scant history of a convent of Benedictines who managed to survive as enclosed Lutherans until 1610. However, by and large, women lost their spiritual autonomy not only within Christianity, but around the globe in almost all religious traditions.

What was lost when these voices were silenced? After thousands of years women could no longer name the Holy for themselves. They lost their places in society and religious institutions. There was no platform from which they could use the special gifts of women in service of humanity. Lost was respect for intuition, that deep inner knowing that has no verifiable source, but has guided women to understand the mysteries of the transcendent. Lost was respect for mysticism, found in all world religions, that cares little for logic and creeds but knows the Great Mystery intimately. Lost was the sense of wholeness and completeness that honored the anima and the animus within each human being. Lost was the awareness that we are most fully human when we use our mind and our heart, our voice and our silence, our gentle empathy and our passion for justice and equity.

For many women like me, feminists of the second wave of the women's movement, we thought the job was done in the 1980's. In the main, women have the same opportunities as men. While not perfect in execution, women can enter the trades and professions. They can attend college, move into the corporate world, and be assured of receiving equal pay for equal work. Steadily, women are entering politics and sit on the benches of our highest courts. They have access to safe birth control and can make choices about their own bodies and their own lives. While Islam still has few women scholars and no clerics, some branches of Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism have opened places for women in religious scholarship and to ordination. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg toward regaining the full measure of what women bring to the human spiritual enterprise.

If you listen carefully and attend to the faint rustle in the mist you will hear women regaining their voice in religious discourse and the new spiritual awakening. Women and men are rediscovering that to grow in personal spirituality and to serve the common good requires all the gifts we can bring to that creative endeavor. We are entering a new age, an age in which those characteristics labeled as male and those labeled female need to come together in harmony and mutual support. In truth, there are no conflicts between thinking and feeling; reason and intuition; mystical knowing and logical deduction. We can accomplish more by sitting in wisdom circles than by facing off across rectangular tables. We can utilize the very best in Western allopathic medicine combined with energy work and shamanistic healing to restore our bodies and minds. Women are leading the way to this new age of wholeness and fuller humanity.

Is this movement toward integrating the feminine relevant to Unitarian Universalists who began ordaining women in the 1860's, now boast more than 50% of its clergy are

women, have used inclusive language for decades, and have women serving in the highest levels of its governance structure? I would argue, as heirs of the Radical Reformation, yes, UUs have as far to go as anyone else to achieve holistic faith communities. In fact, given the strong preference for the rational, the scientific, and the provable, we have much work to do.

Could this new emergence of feminine energy be calling UUs to open more intentionally the doors and windows to let in the fresh breeze of the intuitive, the supra-rational, and the mystical? Might it be time for UU congregations, long recognized as centers of thoughtful discussion and debate, to become centers for the development of deeply right-brained activity? Might UUs open their religious services and their religious education programming to greater emphasis on the feminine ways of being spiritual? Might we make place for alternative healing practitioners to use the intuitive energy centers of the body? Is there a place for women's rituals that honor the life passages of girls and women, not peripherally, but in the very heart of the community? Can the linear thinking rationalists and the intuitive mystics sit in a circle to dialogue and share their perspectives before major decision making within the community?

Without this opening to the feminine way of knowing and being, I fear that Unitarian Universalism, once on the cutting edge of religious progressivism, will become rigid and unwelcoming to those who are seeking to engage both heart and mind in the spiritual quest.

In my own life I first heard the Great Story of the Universe from Roman Catholic religious women. I have glimpsed the Shekinah light of Holy Wisdom through the eyes of Jewish feminists. The most challenging ecofeminist I read is a Roman Catholic religious woman. Those most able to help me integrate the sacred feminine in making meaningful rituals are neo-pagan women. And, wonder of wonders, the faith community I most long to visit is Ebenezer Lutheran Church in San Francisco. A congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it is a worshipping community that focuses on the goddess, engages in both critical conversation and playful exploration of the sacred feminine, and sponsors pilgrimages to sacred goddess sites. Certainly not your typical mainline church.

I think UUs are ready to embrace the next great spiritual leap in human history; the leap from the dichotomy of left-brain or right-brain, thinking or feeling, rational or mystical to a faith that celebrates the totality of the human quest for sacred wholeness. It is time to modify the "sermon sandwich" service and include sacred dance and movement, drumming and chant, incense and sage, life-transition rituals, and colorful sacred art within the worship space. We might do away with the sermon entirely on occasion and sit in a wisdom circle to listen to our prophets and mystics share their inner wisdom. Sitting in silence as our Quaker friends, we might listen to the divine voice in each of us. As Unitarian Universalists embrace these diversities our congregations will become places of incredible spiritual vitality and welcome for all people.