

Mother/Sister/Daughter/God

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

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Readings

I know I am not alone in being overwhelmed at times by hopelessness and despair ... Everybody's personal pain is touched by this greater uncertainty: we are no longer confident of leaving a better world —of leaving a *living* world, to our children ...

And still the children grow up around us, no less beautiful than any other generations of children, and still when we poke a seed into the earth it continues to push forth roots and unfurl stem, leaf, flower, fruit. There are still moments when we see the processes of life continue to unfold, when we cannot help believing that life is moved by a power deeper than the power of the gun and the bomb; a power that might still prevail if we knew how to call it forth.

There are many names for [this] power-from-within, none of them entirely satisfying ... I have called it *Goddess*, because the ancient images, symbols, and myths of the Goddess as birth-giver, weaver, earth and growing plant, wind and ocean, flame, web, moon and milk, all speak to me of the powers of connectedness, sustenance, healing, creating ...

If we are to survive the question becomes ... How do we shape a society based on the principle of power-from-within?

--Starhawk from *Dreaming the Dark*

There was a fascinating poll conducted recently by the Phoenix-based Behavior Research Center and some of its findings were published in the Arizona Daily Star back at the beginning of December (12/07/93). The headline read, "Tucsonans trust in God, but less often in religion," and the article went on to say, "Tucsonans increasingly see a difference between being 'religious' – adhering to organized religion – and being 'spiritual' – mixing and matching pieces of traditional theology with personal belief or less-orthodox religions or philosophies."

In other words, most people refuse to believe that a single orthodoxy holds the capital-T truth. They want to explore, to investigate, to experience various traditions, and so the interviews the Daily Star

conducted in consonance with the poll include a woman from Three Points who, while a self-identified Catholic, also strongly identifies with pantheism; a Tucson businesswoman raised in an Evangelical Christian home who now finds herself drawn to Buddhism; a mother who lost her son to a brain tumor finding some solace after his death in attending services at Sunrise Chapel, a Swedenborgian church, while she continues to ask tough questions; a research specialist at the U of A who was once a Catholic and now calls himself a "humanitarian," believing in the collective goodness of humankind; and a retired United Methodist minister and former director of chaplain services at the Mayo Clinic who says, like so many others, that he is deeply spiritual but not very religious.

"That is strange coming from an ordained minister," he says, "But I believe one's understanding and experience of God is dynamic, not static."

And each of us may use the term God, or life-force, or supreme good, or ultimate concern, or web of existence, or any of a million other terms for what it is we experience (and believe me, the definitions of God in this article stretch the traditional boundaries of the word), but it seems clear that people, many people, in their personal, spiritual journeys are not necessarily content to stay on the marked trails.

That, I think, is quite exciting. Exciting for us, here, as we keep the flame of a Universalism alive that calls us to honor the widest variety of traditions, to probe and explore the insights contained therein, to keep our minds open to new and old and rediscovered perspectives that will enrich our own, and to keep our doors open always to the seekers. Apparently, there's a lot more of them out there than you might think.

You see, all too often, our Universalism is explained by the perceived similarity of religions. "Really, when you strip away all the particular ritual and dogma, religions are teaching the same thing," we say, and we may describe that "thing" as the Golden Rule or being in harmony with the sacred or simply: Love. And that is true, to a great extent, but if that were the whole story, why bother exploring various traditions, why create a community that forthrightly invites people of varying backgrounds and encourages individual expression of religious truths...if they're all the same, why not just, communally, pick one and run with it, then we could avoid a lot of confusion about how to structure services, how to proceed with our work in the world, and what rituals and readings and concepts we can all agree on.

The fact is that we honor differing faiths because of their *differences*. Yes, they may all hold love as of supreme value, but each faith may have different insights into how we nurture and practice and spread that love. No experience of life is unmediated. We have to perceive it and then make sense out of it, *make meaning*. The different lenses that religions hold up to the world allow us wider possibilities for discovering meaning...and (as we are part of the interdependent web of all life), create a revitalization of the world around us. "We look for insight and wisdom to all of humanity," writes Kenneth Patton, minister of the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston in the 1950's, described in one text as "the most energetic advocate of a world Universalism," "for truth and goodness have never been the monopoly of one people or one religion." When we sang along with today's version of "give me that old time religion," I hope it was with the recognition that we can learn from all of those traditions and more, that

we need those varying perspectives and more...

People understand that, I think. There is a natural hunger to fill in, to balance, to challenge the perspectives of our own faith with the perspectives of others, for, as the retired United Methodist minister said in the article, "the church and organized religion are vehicles for expressing one's spirituality." They are simply *vehicles* for expressing one's spirituality, not the thing itself, so when they are found to be lacking in describing our experience we look to somewhere else.

One of my favorite quotes in the article was from David Collingham, a retiree who grew up Protestant but no longer identifies as part of a particular faith. Collingham stressed that he believed in God, but his God is female: "We men have screwed too many things up," he explains.

My first thought was, who can deny that we men have screwed things up? My second thought was, what would it mean for God to be female?

Here we get into dicey territory, of course. I know that there are arguments back and forth about which traits are masculine and which are feminine, and there is a fear of stereotyping and oversimplification... Still, we can hardly argue with a history of religion in the Western World that holds many examples of systematic, and often brutal suppression of female understandings of the sacred. Listen to this, an accurate historical summary from the pages of a recent novel:

The Catholic Inquisition published the book that arguably could be called the most blood-soaked publication in human history. Malleus Maleficarum—or The Witches' Hammer—indoctrinated the world to "the dangers of freethinking women" and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them. Those deemed "witches" by the Church included all female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, herb gatherers, and any women "suspiciously attuned to the natural world." Midwives also were killed for their heretical practice of using medical knowledge to ease the pain of childbirth—a suffering, the Church claimed, that was God's rightful punishment for Eve's partaking of the Apple of Knowledge, thus giving birth to the idea of Original Sin. During three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five million women.

The propaganda and bloodshed had worked.

Today's world was living proof.

The novel is *The Da Vinci Code*, a thriller based on a theory of what the Holy Grail might really be and the Church's ongoing attempts over the years to suppress the truth. Clues to the mystery are found in the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci, thus explaining the title of the book (and also the tie I chose to wear today). The book has been a phenomenal bestseller, more than 4.5 million copies sold so far, nearing a year on the New York Times bestseller list, racks of hardcovers have been set up even in grocery stores

just to sell this book, cover stories about it have appeared in all the major news magazines over the last few months, there was an ABC prime-time special and will soon be a movie directed by Ron Howard... why all the hoopla?

Well, this *is* America, so you can bet that publishers are at work trying to find out what the hoopla is about so they can duplicate it with a *Son of Da Vinci Code*, (a blockbuster that maybe could center around a previously undiscovered painting entitled *The Next-To-Last Supper*)...reporters are trying to figure it out the book's success, and they're interviewing ministers by the dozens...(Susan Manker-Seale at the Northwest Tucson congregation said she has been interviewed three time already as regards this book. How often are ministers so popular with the media?) And the articles I've read all have their theories about the book's popularity...but a good share of them have been rather haughtily dismissive, criticizing author Dan Brown for his historical and theological inaccuracies and pooh-poohing the imaginative leaps he has taken from thin evidence. In Brown's defense, this is a novel, and, even with some clunky writing and preachy passages, if he takes imaginative leaps and manages to bring the readers along, we can hardly fault him for that.

Personally, when I came across the passage in the book that suggested the person on the right of Jesus in The Last Supper was actually Mary Magdalene, it totally changed my feeling about the painting, a painting that I had always admired; it humanized it beyond what I thought such a simple suggestion could; it breathed new and realistic life into what had been a rather remote, religious tableau. It doesn't even matter to me whether that is the case or not, there is that within me that says it *should* be. (You can all take a look at my tie at coffee hour and see what you think.)

But the articles are full of interviews with scholars and writers who attempt to sum up the book's appeal as best (and simply) as they can. Again, to Brown's credit, the theories are numerous. Richard Wightman Fox, author of *Jesus in America*, suggests, among many possibilities he puts forth in the same article, that the book is "riding the wave of revulsion against corruption in the Catholic Church." The article goes on to submit the theory that the true appeal of the book is that it "taps into...a persistent American desire to recapture the true, original Jesus." But the most compelling theory put forth here, one that few of the articles I read really wanted to engage, and one that coincides with David Collingham's conclusion that God must be female, is that "[the book] validates a contemporary yearning 'for a female sacred presence' that animates everything from growing numbers of women in Christian and Jewish clergy to the sprouting of spiritual movements accentuating female divinities." (U.S. News and World Report, Dec. 22, 2003) I think that readers resonate with a passage like this from the book:

The days of the goddess were over. The pendulum had swung. Mother Earth had become a man's world, and the gods of destruction and war were taking their toll. The male ego had spent two millennia running unchecked by its female counterpart. The Priory of Sion believed that it was this obliteration of the sacred feminine in modern life that had caused what the Hopi Native Americans called koyanisquatsi —"life out of balance"—an unstable situation marked by testosterone-fueled wars, a plethora of misogynistic societies, and a growing disrespect for Mother Earth.

And I think that Starhawk's words in the reading further illuminate this, that it is not really about "female divinities," ("The word 'Goddess'" is often "mistaken for the worship of an external being," she writes) it is not just a matter of switching pronouns when we pray, but about an orientation toward existence, the understanding that a certain way of engaging the world, carried out in patriarchal societies and religions, has played out as far as it can go and that our only hope is to reclaim a "Goddess" orientation, to nurture the power-from-within rather than the power-over. And if Christian readers of *The Da Vinci Code* want to believe that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus, it may not be just because that sounds kinda cool, but because they want to restore some kind of intuitive balance in their faith, they want to feel the reality of a meal together, with men *and* women, in The Last Supper, they want to understand their own families and friendships and relationships in light of the sacred. Jesus, alone, celibate, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, surrounded by a faithful band of men, is just not working anymore.

And just because, as the article in U.S. News and World Report points out rather weakly, that the Roman Catholic Church acknowledged ("as far back as 1969," mind you), that Mary Magdalene was not a fallen woman, that alone will not suffice to strike the balance that people are expressing the need to search out between masculine and feminine notions of what is sacred. (And think about that, the Church only corrected the completely unsubstantiated notion that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute after some 18-19 centuries, and we're supposed to denounce Dan Brown, writing a contemporary *thriller*, for historical inaccuracies?)

What is being called for is a rediscovery and maybe a re-imagining of our orientation toward the world itself, through our religions, all of which are still fighting to expose and understand embedded patriarchal notions...(yes, even, though UU's don't like to admit it, our own tradition). Our history has been saturated with a certain attitude toward power and divinity and the sacred that no longer speaks sufficiently to our present situation and concerns. It is not, finally, that men are evil, but having followed a certain type of relationship with the world to the exclusion of all others has undoubtedly led to evil.

Listen to Ursula LeGuin's characters discuss this in a novel from her Earthsea trilogy, *The Farthest Shore*:

"There is only one creature who can do [evil]."

"A man?" Arren said, tentative.

"We men."

"How?"

"By an unmeasured desire for life."

"For life? But it isn't wrong to want to live?"

"No. But when we crave power over life -endless wealth, unassailable safety, immortality- then desire becomes greed. And if knowledge allies itself to that greed, then comes evil. Then the balance of the world is swayed, and ruin weighs heavy in the scale."

When we crave power over life- immortality, *endless wealth, unassailable safety* ...does that sound at all familiar?

Theologian Sharon Welch (*A Feminist Ethic of Risk*) describes a paradigm shift similar to the one Starhawk describes, from an ethic of control (or power-over) to an ethic of risk (drawing on the power-from-within). She points out that even our most noble struggles for peace and justice are often tainted by the ethic of control; when outcomes don't match our expectations we give way to cynicism and apathy. She suggests that even the serenity prayer may not be the most helpful, when we say:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

The courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference.

We can't ever know, she says, what we can change and what we cannot...and if we truly embraced the concept of interdependence that we hear so much about in UU churches, who knows but that our actions, even if not producing the intended results, have not opened up huge possibilities for others along the web of life, that our actions have not wrought changes that we could not imagine? The results are *always* partial, she says; our methods are *always* flawed, which is why we stay open to the insights of each other, why we join in community across different theologies and philosophies and experiences. We need to embrace the temporal life, not strive for immortality; we need to embrace our vulnerability, not delude ourselves that we can create unassailable safety; we need to cherish what we have, and share it generously, not hope to pile up endless wealth.

But what does all this have to do with the "Goddess"? With "Mother/Daughter/Sister/God"?

The "Goddess" that these women speak of is not "out there," not a separate being who exercises control. The power of the Goddess is "the power of relatedness," and "the divinity of [this] force does not lie in [its] absolute power but in the quality of life it enables...The power which is holy is also fragile."

Though imperfectly realized (and how could it not be?), I think that we here are familiar with that power. I think we are poised to welcome the readers of *The Da Vinci Code* and the respondents to the Phoenix poll and the people who were interviewed in the paper. Those people live next door to us, we work with them, we see them at shopping malls and parks and in the midst of daily traffic. It is easy to assume that *other* people have their religious beliefs all tied up in a neat bundle; the media assures us that many are following traditional, conservative paths; we are besieged with information about the

Religious Right...I've given you a few indications today of a very different reality. I think it is time to send out the word to the community that there is a place for those uneasy with orthodoxy; I think we can not only provide a community for those seekers who are now traveling individually on their journeys, but we can immeasurably strengthen the community we have with their presence, and we are ready.

It is understandable, as Sharon told us in the reading, that we are often overwhelmed by hopelessness and despair. The word "fragile" may make us uneasy. How do we face the challenges of the world with a "fragile" power? "We have reason to hope," writes Starhawk.

The forces of destruction seem great, but against them we have our power to choose, our human will and imagination, our courage, our passion, our willingness to act and to love. And we are not, in truth, strangers to this world... We are of the world and of each other, and the power within us is a great, if not an invincible power. Though we can be hurt, we can heal; though each of us can be destroyed, within us is the power of renewal.

And there is still time to choose that power.