

The Goddess Within

Growing up a Catholic, I had always been concerned with the spirituality of life. I questioned most of what I learned within the box of Catholicism, but the importance of these questions was beyond my own grasp at the time. I had always taken an interest in Mary's role. I internalized the concept that Mary was the exception to the female. Her immaculateness forged the privilege of bearing the fruit of God. Women, I was taught, were the essence of temptation and associated with the 'earthly things'. The negativity that the church connected to this was so ingrained within me that it had never occurred to me to make a positive equation between the 'earth' and 'mother'. I didn't have a reference to the feminine that wasn't connected to the ideas of a patriarchal dogma. Why did we worship Mary as mother but never recognize her as the giver of life? My experiences with the church had always left me with a feeling that I was missing something. The questions never stopped and were never really answered, so it wasn't long before I questioned the role of the omnipotent God I was taught to obey.

I didn't fully understand at the time (maybe it was intuition), but it struck me to leave the church. In her memoir Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, Terry Tempest Williams describes a similar revelation about the concept of the holy ghost, "today I choose to recognize this presence as holy intuition, the gift of the mother" (241). Williams also offers inspiration when she recounts memories of the women in her family gathering to bless each other despite the traditions that prohibit such action. Williams' mother and grandmother both explore ideas and ask questions that go beyond the realm of orthodox. "Suddenly, the shackles which have bound her [mother] are beginning to snap, as personal revelation replaces orthodoxy" (Williams 136). I find it interesting to learn of women who find the courage to dissent from the

orthodoxy of their religion (whatever that may be) and find a piece of truth for themselves while others either ‘blindly obey’ or search their lives to reconnect with a sense of identity that is of the self and beyond. The neglect of the feminine principle has created a loss within the self and the need for healing. I believe if we can reclaim a personal, feminine identity then our ability to create and sustain peaceful communities will blossom.

Williams writes, “I look at my mother and I see myself” (97). When *I* look at my daughter I see my mother and myself. I see now the need to recover the loss of female wisdom. I see new possibilities. Notable poet Lucille Clifton also discusses the wisdom and power of the feminine in her collection of poems titled Blessing The Boats. From her poem “female”:

there is an amazon in us.
she is the secret we do not
have to learn.
the strength that opens us
beyond ourselves.
birth is our birthright.
we smile our mysterious smile. (40)

At times I feel as if Clifton is trying to open up the conversation we should be having about ourselves, our bodies and our possibilities. My experience as daughter failed to give me knowledge of my physical self and consequently any spiritual wisdom or power I possessed was lost. My experience as a mother inspires me to call upon the wisdom that is my birthright and to release the secret we’ve all held for so long. I hope to reclaim this strength in order to impart the universal wisdom of the goddess to my own children.

The goddess has been forsaken. The neglect of the important nurturing element of the feminine spirit has created a disconnection from our very source of life. The earth as our ‘provider’ has been replaced with a more fearful creation of gender hierarchy. World renowned physicist and environmental activist, Vandana Shiva argues that “nature is an embodiment of the

feminine principle, but that the categories of femininity and masculinity are social constructions.” (qtd. in Quinby 3). The result of these social constructions is a decline in societal ethics. Have we created the subjugation of women because we have denied the goddess and instead pursued life in the image of a warring god? In her written lecture “Split Culture”, feminist poet and philosopher Susan Griffin writes about the masculine worldview: “According to this worldview...there is a hierarchy to existence...Everything earthly is corrupt...Those of the human species who belong to what is thought of as the white race, and those who are part of the masculine gender, are at the top of this hierarchy.”(pg cite) The prevalent social inequalities inform the destruction we force upon the earth. We treat each other and the land much the same.

We have created a language of fear that only offers the view of ‘others’ and the earth as forces outside of ourselves and as something to battle with. Theological images provide us with a look at the male dominance over political and spiritual thought. In her essay, Griffin discusses how the impact of the pursuit of religious and scientific knowledge has created the paradigm that views humans as above nature. “In order to control Nature, we must know Nature. But just as we are seeking to know, there is a knowledge we fear. We are afraid to remember what we, in our bodies, in our feelings, still know, but what, in our fragmented, civilized consciousness we have been persuaded to forget. That, like the forests we destroy, or the rivers we try to tame, *we are Nature*” (182). It makes sense that within this framework, it is easy to deny the value of the land. Since the natural world has often been associated with the feminine, mother earth, goddess, I can see how the desecration of this idea and its physical manifestations are directly related to the conflicts caused globally and ecologically. I do however fail to see a solution within the existing theological framework. My curiosity lies with the discovery of our feminine,

spirit selves. My journey to find the goddess within may have a natural consequence of establishing relationships with a collective of others and the land. Has the loss of the feminine/goddess been a direct cause of the decline in societal ethics/morality? Can we create an ethic of care by reclaiming the goddess within our individual selves? If so, is this a solution to living in a sustainable and peaceful world?

Always seeking answers to individual and collective questions, I've discovered that my past has been ignored. I have never had a sense of identity that was connected to the land or to any genealogical tradition/heritage. I don't know where my ancestors come from; I don't even have a history of my most recent family lineage. In a sense, I think I've tried to 'overcome' my past by escaping it. Much like America's past, mine has become fragmented and lost in perspective. The notable poet, Lucille Clifton spoke at an informal discussion recently at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon. In regards to American history she said, "We are not taught the whole story" ("Informal"). When the element of history is missing *and it is for some of us*, then the question looms, 'what do we need to know about our past?' How is it important to know where we come from? Thus far, the knowledge of our history has done little to stop the repetition of violence and inequality. Is this because the part of history we're denying is the suppression of the goddess...the feminine?

As I uncover consistent truths about American history, I believe that theology informs political and social hierarchy and it is representative of the white male. We have not abided by the old adage of "remembering our past so that we don't repeat it." Instead we have justified the past and used the patriarchal perspective as a means to continue the ideas of violence and male and white supremacy. Alan Johnson, Professor of Sociology at Hartford College for Women,

provides us with a description of society's patriarchal system, in his book The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy:

“A society is patriarchal to the degree that it is *male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered*. It also involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women.

Patriarchy is male-dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men... Patriarchal societies are *male-identified* in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity...it takes men and men's lives as the standard for defining what is normal”(5).

We measure success according to these standards. Even as civilization progresses, the identification of equality is made through the standards set by the male hierarchy. A woman is equal to a man when she prevails under the scrutiny of male centeredness. The female is not acknowledged for her intuitive and nurturing elements. Instead, the female is often seen as inferior, illogical and weak. In such a society we have exalted an economy based on this same framework of dominance. Our standards of progress continually deny the value of the individual's contribution to family and place. Lewis Hyde, in his book The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, describes this denial of the value of family as a disparity that is “partly a consequence of a stratified gender system”. Hyde goes on to emphasize a distinction between ‘labor’ and ‘work’ saying, “that there are gift labors that cannot, by their nature, be undertaken in the willed, time-conscious, quantitative style of the market” (Hyde 106). These gift labors are designated as “female” tasks. The system created by and centered on the white male

has remained a constant force regardless of the political/economical schema and has only perpetuated our divisions between each other and the earth.

I have considered the racial impact of this sort of system, but never the gendered division. The standards by which we claim success are already determined by the privileged, which is to say: white and male. I had until recently failed to see the connection between myself and the male centered political system that dominated every aspect of my American life. I had also never considered my own personal past to be interconnected with the web of life that I was continually co-creating. The racial implications of a society centered on the white male became obvious to me. As a mother and student I become increasingly more concerned with the fundamental problem of the lack of a female identity within society. We need to talk about our history in terms of how our conflicts could be directly related to the conflicts within ourselves. How much has the social impact of feminine subjugation informed the destruction we force on the land? In “Split Culture”, Griffin offers this:

a meeting place between social oppression of and the destruction of the environment by human society. For racism, anti-Semitism and the oppression of women all serve to hide from civilization what it knows yet does not wish to know. The Jew or the Black or the woman become at one and the same time a symbol of Nature and a symbol of the denied natural self: this self which, in the body, experiences Nature, through sensation, emotion, the memory of birth, the anticipation of danger, or loss, through grief, love and anger. (185)

Often the embodiment of the ‘feminine principle’ is the earth. The natural cycle of birth and rebirth is a constant, physical manifestation that is associated with the feminine because of the sources of life and nurturing that it provides. During a class last term, I first felt an

association with this 'feminine' idea of the earth as body. We discussed the perspective of looking at the earth as a body; the trees are lungs, the wetlands are kidneys purifying and replenishing the land. Replenishing ourselves is much like the land replenishing or cleansing itself. A pioneer in the study of Women and Religion, Carol P. Christ, recounts a quote from The Civilization of the goddess by Marija Alseikaite Gimbutas:

the goddess in all her manifestations was a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature. Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees, and flowers. Hence, the holistic and mythopoeic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on Earth (qtd. in Christ, Rebirth 8).

Exploring thoughts written about the ancient times of the goddess, I am given images of the body residing in the natural world and her nurturing power made known by the feminine spirit. How do we reconcile and heal what we've done to our earth when we don't know how to nurse our selves back to health? "I am realizing that the natural world is my connection to myself. I find my peace, my solitude, in the time I am alone with nature" (Williams 86). Perhaps women such as Williams and her female family members are able reconcile themselves within their orthodox framework because they also acknowledge the nurturing and powerful forces of the land. They feel as though they *are* the land. Williams continually speaks of the land in terms of spiritual manifestations and connects a personal identity to the physicality of earth. In Refuge, she describes watching the rise of the Great Salt Lake, "the pulse of the Great Salt Lake, surging along Antelope Island's shores, becomes the force wearing against my mother's body" (64). Perhaps for some of us, practicing a male centered spirituality neglected the important role of 'mother' and so we feel a sense of yearning to feel connected to something beyond ourselves. The feminine element is missing in society and economics, so how can we

possibly find a solution to stop the destruction of our earth? If we are part of a ‘greater whole’ then our missing links must be reconciled in order to heal physically and spiritually. How do we feel as if we’re whole human beings if we only recognize parts of ourselves? What does this have to do with our relationships to others? Can we go as far as to say that our human conflicts arise from the suppression of the feminine identity?

In her book Rebirth of the Goddess, Carol P. Christ discusses the images of the Goddess, “Visual images of the goddess stand in stark contrast to the image of God as an old white man, jarring us to question our culture’s view that all legitimate power is male and that female power is dangerous and evil” (22). The spiritual images of creator that are consistent throughout recent history are directly linked to social inequalities worldwide. Respecting and nurturing the land is vital to the holistic idea of care and compassion. If we are missing the fundamental concept of belonging to the land and the land belonging to us, then we are essentially missing a part of our individual identities. Operating in the civilization of *man*, we can start to understand how easy it is to deny the power and importance of respecting the earth’s resources. Where does this leave us in the connection to one another as human beings?

Renowned futurist and evolutionary economist, Hazel Henderson notes the effect of the patriarchal system on women, in her book Planetary Citizenship “women have suffered most when war, violence, oppression, human rights violations and epidemics have thrown society into turmoil and insecurity” (Henderson and Ikeda 141). So, it’s almost unsurprising to find that some of the most notable actions in response to environmental degradation and social injustices have been inspired and enacted by women. Henderson goes on to say, “Throughout human history, women have always walked resolutely toward goodness, hope and peace” (Henderson and Ikeda 141). And she lists off names of common women who have sought justice out of love

for the family and community. I am reminded of Williams' conversation with a Kenyan friend in her memoir Refuge. During the dialogue, Williams' friend Wangari says:

“My people believe if you are close to the Earth, you are close to people.” [Williams then asks], “How so?” [And Wangari's reply,] “What an African woman nurtures in the soil will eventually feed her family. Likewise, what she nurtures in her relations will ultimately nurture her community. It is a matter of living the circle.” [She continues,] “Because we have forgotten our kinship with the land, our kinship with each other has become pale” (137).

How do we reclaim a global connection when we only recognize parts of ourselves? Like the land, we see ‘others’ as detached from ourselves. We constantly strive for a sense of identity, but only know how to rape it from others. The conflict we create as a result, only serves the purpose of a vengeful and fearful system, a system that divides and perpetuates our detachment from the land. Those who benefit most from this division are those who gain a concentration of power. This is justified by the idea that only that which is static—perfect/unchanging—can claim the top of the social order. It's apparent to me that our conflicts are some sort of primal attempt to reach out to one another. The division within our selves has created isolation from others causing our exchanges to be fear-based and combative.

We see others as a threat to our individual existence instead of an asset and a vital role to developing sustaining communities. I've learned that an ethic of care and responsibility develops from an individual's feeling of interconnectedness with others (Dudley 1). What needs to happen in order for us to feel as though our individual lives are part of the global family? Some, such as Clifton, have developed a language of the self that permeates the universal and

very human need to physically and spiritually respect ourselves and the earth in order to reconcile relationships with each other. From her poem “adam thinking”,

she
stolen from my bone
is it any wonder
i hunger to tunnel back
inside desperate
to reconnect the rib and clay
and to be whole again

some need is in me
struggling to roar through my
mouth into a name
this creation is so fierce
i would rather have been born (78)

The power of the individual is necessary for sustaining the whole. Williams confirms the concept of the individual’s nourishment of self directly affecting her community’s welfare.

During a conversation in Refuge, Williams’ mother says “...we haven’t figured out that time for ourselves is ultimately time for our families. You can’t be constantly giving without depleting the source. Somehow, somewhere, we must replenish ourselves” (117). Ultimately we have nowhere else to turn for replenishment but ourselves, if we continue the path of destruction we’re currently on. There is a definite urgency for us to heal ourselves through the healing of our earth. Perhaps this is a way to sustain a life of peace with others. With the loss of the feminine principle in our spiritual and social lives, an undeniable wound has developed and it requires healing. Inspired by the writings of Clifton and Williams, I find a great healing quality in the power of grief. Maybe this where the importance of history comes into play. It seems that it’s necessary to have knowledge of our past in order to reclaim the wisdom we need for the present and future. Perhaps this is why people like Williams can proclaim, “I am a woman rewriting my genealogy” (239).

In response to a question about the importance of knowing our history, Clifton responds by saying, “it’s important to know where we come from, so we know where we’re going” (“Informal”). Since we come from different individual places with a variety of personal ‘wounds’, it is often difficult to see ourselves in others. I believe our connection to each other lies within the healing of our spiritual selves. When we speak in terms of the past and relate it to the past that we *all* share, we can see how our denial of the feminine principal has created the need for a “space of healing” (Williams 168). Part of the importance of remembering our past is to allow any necessary healing to take place. The idea of closing the ‘circle’ surfaces again. What do we need in order to heal? An important aspect to this idea is expressed in both Clifton and Williams’ stories. For Clifton healing has come from openness to grief. From her poem “grief”:

pause for the human
animal in its coat
of many colors. pause
for the myth of america.
pause for the myth of america.

and pause for the girl
with twelve fingers
who never learned to cry enough
for anything that mattered,

not enough for the fear,
not enough for the loss,
not enough for the history,
not enough
for the disregarded planet.
not enough for the grass. (30)

Can our acknowledgement of the oppression of the feminine allow for necessary grieving? Is this the healing we need in order to complete the circle of human connectedness? I think the individual need for spiritual and physical wholeness is a strong, human need.

The social and spiritual impacts of reclaiming the goddess are global. Williams writes, “my creation is internal” (168). The power that comes as a result of this creation is external. I see the possibility of our reclamation of the goddess bringing about a resolution that will provide us with a foundation for living a sustainable life of reciprocity and peace. Daisaku Ikeda, president of Soka Gakkai International, a lay Buddhist association promoting peace, culture and education, states, “the release of feminine forces long subjugated by the patriarchal system is a boon to humankind thirsting for peace, a better environment and greater human development.” (Henderson and Ikeda 137).

We abandoned the nurturing and creative spirit of the self. We have created a world that separates us from our strongest lineage and therefore have neglected our responsibility to it. Ingrained deeply in all of us is the masculine identity that supports the standards of society both politically, economically and spiritually. The constant search for answers to our perpetual questions continually leads us through the same vicious cycle of death and destruction because we have not allowed healing to take place. “I am witnessing the balancing of the world” (Clifton, “Informal”). Does this statement suggest that the inequality between god and goddess will be rectified? I believe to be whole means to be balanced. “The goddess is woman whole in herself. She speaks to us of a power that is our birthright” (Christ, Rebirth 8). To know ourselves means to know one another. To unify socially is to sustain and create a lasting peace that serves and protects the earth instead of ravaging her. “UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan has said that the best strategy for preventing conflict is to expand the role of women as peacemakers” (Henderson and Ikeda 148). In Williams’ memoir, her mother states, “I am realizing the natural world is my connection to myself. I find my peace, my solitude, in the time I am alone with nature” (86). Nurturing our selves can lead us back to a connection with the land which can in

turn, nurture our communities back to a healthy balance. Author Carol P. Christ shares her vision of “restoring the body and the world”:

She changes everything She touches and everything She touches changes. The world is Her body. The world is in Her and She is in the world. She surrounds us like the air we breathe. She is as close to us as our own breath. She is energy, movement, life, and change. She is the ground of freedom, creativity, sympathy, understanding, and love” (Christ, She Who Changes 197).

The lives on earth are all related to one another; our dances and struggles are that of every woman, every man, every child; we don’t merely inherit the earth, we are the earth. The need to reclaim the goddess within the self is a human dilemma. It is feminine in principle because it is natural, nurturing, and is the creative source and embodiment of life.

Works Cited

- Christ, Carol P. Rebirth of the Goddess. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997.
- . She Who Changes. New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2003.
- Clifton, Lucille. Blessing The Boats. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2000.
- . "Informal Discussion and Q&A". Lane Community College, Eugene, OR. 04 May 2006.
- Dudley, Virginia. "Feminist Perspectives on the Ethic of Care". Wisconsin Bibliographies in Women's Studies. No.69. University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Librarian's Office: 1994. Accessed online. 02 May 2006 <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/bibliogs/ethicbib.html>>
- Griffin, Susan, ed. "Split Culture". The Schumacher Lectures. Vol. 2. London: Blond & Briggs 1984. 2 vols.
- Henderson, Hazel and Daisaku Ikeda. Planetary Citizenship. Santa Monica, CA: Middleway Press, 2004.
- Hyde, Lewis. The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property. New York: Random House, 1983.
- Ikeda, Daisaku and Johan Galtun. Choose Peace. London: Pluto Press, 1995.
- Johnson, Alan G. The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997.
- Quinby, Lee. "Ecofeminism: Saving The Earth From Patriarchy". New York: Institute for Independent Social Journalism, Inc., 1992.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place. New York: Vintage Random House, 2001.

