

Salvation and the Divine Feminine
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Salvation and the Divine Feminine by Jennifer Springsteen

I love how the feminine qualities of the Divine sweep across the centuries and continents and religions, capturing so many of us in Her strong embrace. The Divine Feminine, as I recently discovered, is also the name of an album by rapper Mac Miller which I'll admit to listening as curiosity got the better of me. I'm not sure what his album has to do the Divine Feminine other than an obsessed and repeated appreciation of the female body. (ROLL EYES, ah, to be 24!)

It is a reminder to me that what is to be revered about the Divine Feminine isn't the human physical, it is a feminine essence—the push and pull of balanced elements in our universe. It is the broad stroke of winter chill, the splitting scream of birth, and also the quiet landing of bird's feet, the shy opening of flowers.

The Pagan tradition offers us a window into the omnipresent feminine, as the Earth Mother, as Goddess. Many of us embrace the earth-and-feminine centered religions after what too often has felt like a dismissal of the feminine role in religious traditions. How

many sister prophets were left out of the sacred scrolls? How many Sarah's, Ester's, and Fatima's, smudged in favor of the hard outlines of God as Father, God as Son? There were too many killed for their biblical interpretations, that is for certain.

Our own Unitarian Universalist Shirley Ann Ranck explains her call to Paganism: she says for too long our faiths have viewed the world as a ladder with God and the angels on top, then man, then women and children, and then earth and its many creatures. She goes on to say, newer theologies lopped off God and the angels, but kept the rest of the patriarchal ladder, as if women, children and earth remain a bundle of resources to be exploited. It is the idea of domination the Divine Feminine corrects. We are of the earth; the divine lives within our own bodies. This earth, these bodies are the homes that need our tending.

My grandmother was a witch. She was of the Heaths and Coates of Ireland: hearth women, soil woman, women of the loom. She had what we called "the sight" so we grew used to her predictions as well as neighbors' or relatives visits for her assistance with matters of the other world. All of us trusted her sight and intuitions immensely; she was the guiding force in our family.

I remember one summer night staying over with my grandparents when she rose from her chair and exclaimed, "It's the full moon in June! We have to harvest the butter beans!" I sat stunned, but my Papa, knowing about these things, scrambled to put on his boots and find flashlights. Out to the gardens we went in the pitch of night. We spent the next day with colanders of beans on our laps and paper bags at our feet, shelling. There is knowledge in the bones of women that shouldn't be questioned.

When I read the Sufi view of the ninety-nine names of Allah, there is no “he or she” assigned to God, yet the names hold in their roots, meanings that contain elements of both. For example, the names Rahman (infinitely compassionate) and Rahim (infinitely merciful) open each chapter of revelation in the Qur’an. Both words have the same root: “womb.” The first two names of God speak to the feminine.

In Sufism, God is ecstasy and love, the marriage of the two. Not male and female; essences. In the introduction of her book, Women of Sufism, Camille Adams Helminski writes, “Each moment, we reaffirm the inner marriage until there is no longer lover or Beloved but only Unity of Being. Little by little, we die to that which we thought we were. We are dissolved into love, and we become love, God willing.”

Remaining back in the 12th and 13th centuries, the mystic Margarite Porete wrote similarly in France—her concept of a God of divine love eventually had her burned at the stake as a heretic in 1310. Porete was a Christian, yet she spoke of shedding the ego in a way that reminds me both of the Sufi Muslims and of Buddhists. In fact her book, *The Mirror of the Simple Soul* reminds me of the image Sufism offers: that our heart is like an corroded mirror that we rub and rub and until finally is reflects God back to ourselves so that our heart and God are one.

Porete writes that the Soul, once touched by the divine, is guided through seven stages (the Buddhists, too, love their counted lists: the four noble truths and the eightfold path...), so to repeat, once touched by the divine, the soul is guided through the seven stages

learning as it goes to love so deeply and with such humility, that it sheds its attachment to worldly needs as it draws closer and closer to God.

She explains that God isn't a man or woman, it is nothing, only the beginning of something—the source of all creation and everything that could ever be imagined or not imagined. God is beyond creation, perhaps even beyond being a creator because love is neither creator or creation.

These seemingly contradictory qualities are typical of the mystical explanations of God, but Love being the center of divine source is a clear thread that runs through all the early women mystics I've read: Hildegard, Hadewijch, Mechtild, and now Marguerite. It is believed that Meister Eckhart knew of Marguerite Porete's, *Mirror of the Simple Souls*, as he posed similar theologies and philosophies. Some scholars argue that it was the women who literally burned the way for Eckhart's philosophies to have formed. (It is Eckhart I was trying to remember in our Path to Membership UU Histories class a few weeks ago.)

What fascinates me about the Christian mystics and the Sufis is the idea we are constantly returning to the source of all creation; our deaths are a final purification like we observe in nature's seasons.

Last month we celebrated spring equinox, the time of the Goddess Ostara. The Hare, the egg, the flowers; springtime brings us to the Wheel of the Year in right balance between dark and light, winter and summer, masculine and feminine. In this middle place, we

are reminded the Devine feminine is spiracle, many armed, multi-faceted. She calls upon us to recognize balance in our minds, emotions and bodies. The word we tend to use these days is “nonbinary.” We are blended, with one another, without outlines, with the qualities of masculine and feminine, with Love.

In her poem s/he, Pooja Mittal Biswas writes about the Hindi god both male and female. I’ll read an excerpt:

around shiva’s neck is a ring of moonflowers.
ardhanarishwara, part-man, part-woman,
shiva & parvati are fused in the same body.
a divine union. their third eye of liquid fire
opens like a crimson mouth, from which
 songs of wrath & serenity emerge.
but shiva-parvati sit undisturbed, lost in the ecstasy
of meditation, of *dhyān*, the mirror-clear contemplation
of the universe. a constellation of thoughts as
distant & irrelevant to us as the galaxies
spinning outwards from their joint mind. their loins
are half-phallus & half-vulva, half-*shisna* &
half-*yoni*, simultaneously conceiving & birthing
the world as we know it:
 matter & energy
 particle & wave.

when I was a child, I felt
 small in comparison, dwarfed by the enormity
of this unified being, the masculine & the feminine
rendered pointless by a beauty so immense
that under its weight, cracks of *want*

appeared in my psyche — I wanted this.
I wanted to be neither, to be both. I wanted
to be garlanded by snakes, tied to this mortal realm
only by a bond as insubstantial as that necklace of flowers,
held here only by love

I'll tell you another story. When in college in the late 80's, my little cat escaped and was hit on the busy street in front of my apartment. I had returned from baby sitting and it was late—there were two trans women I'd seen often working on the corner and when they heard me cry out in horror, they ran to us in the street and one directed traffic while the other wrapped her arms around my shoulders and rocked me. They walked with me down the alley and into the little stamp of yard where I would bury the cat. This was precious time, loss of money, and I will never forget the kindness these women offered. They had embodied the beautiful quality of the divine feminine.

I know you have stories of strong women in your lives—hold them dear; they are expressions of the Divine Feminine.

This is where salvation enters our conversation today. The earth, our bodies, and our souls will peel away from suffering, will move into a more balanced—or to use Porete's language—a pure realm of existence which holds the tension of being able to express both the feminine and masculine qualities and also what is beyond those binaries.

We are saved from the depravity of oppressive social norms when we give into kindness, we are saved from ourselves when we break away from binary thinking and allow our introductions “...and I use she/her pronouns” to make space for what is true for someone else. We are brought in the arms of love when we open ourselves to grace.

This mystical divine doesn't reside in one religion or culture. It can't be hidden or smudged out. It is in the women of Ukraine who fight to protect the future generations; it is the poise and power of Judge Ketanji Jackson; it is trans people risking their bodies to speak what is truth; it is the father who learns to braid his daughter's hair; it is the blade that cuts the soil, it is the soil. It is in us and of us.

Let us all reside in this place of knowledge and let us rejoice in it. May it be so. Blessed Be and Amen.