

In Search of a “Feminine” Mode of Mysticism: The Experiences of Women Mystics of Medieval Christendom and the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

Wanting to know if certain characteristics of mystical experience manifest differently for women than for men, and wanting to discover how the mystical experience might vary from age to age, I researched both issues by looking at the biographies and writings of women mystics of medieval Europe and the twentieth century. I believed that I would find a “feminine” mode of mysticism and that the stories of these women’s lives would have relevance for present society. Religion is not unquestioned in people’s lives today, as it was in the middle ages. But this has not resulted in a decline of mystical experience, as one might have suspected. Study of the experience, though, has scholars removing it from its socio-historical parameters and separating it from its philosophical-theological environment, viewing the experience instead as an intense, private, subjective matter that does not connect with issues of social justice or dominant ways of knowing and dealing with the world. By doing so, society is cut-off from a wealth of resources. The feminine mode of mysticism offers to us a means to connect with the inter-relatedness of life and has the potential to invoke healing and balance in the human race.

INTRODUCTION

From atop Machu Picchu in Peru over twenty years ago, Sophy Burnham was overtaken by a *knowing*—her first “mystical” encounter.

I felt a pressure on my neck, as if a dark hand were pressing me down. Terrible and majestic it was. Nothing sweet and pretty in it, but frightening, full of force. From the midst of black roaring, came a voice: *You belong to me* or *You are mine*. Not in words, but rather as a form of knowledge, resounding in blackness I was filled with its intent, which I understood in two ways: first that work would be required, and second that it would be hard.

For a moment I fought it, terrified. Then: “If you are God, yes,” I surrendered with my last coherent thoughts. “I belong only to God.” As for the work: “With your help. I am not enough. Help me!”

With that I was immersed in a sweetness words cannot express. I could hear the singing of the planets, and wave after wave of light washed over me. But this is wrong, because I was the light as well, without distinction of self or of being washed...At one level I ceased to exist, was swallowed into light. How long that lasted I do not know. At another level, although I no longer existed as a separate “I,” nonetheless I saw things, thus indicating the duality of “I” and “other.”¹

I came upon this account following a mystical experience of my own. The encounter spawned a lot of questions for me, and I wanted answers. In particular, I began searching for a “feminine” mode of mysticism, wanting to know if certain characteristics of the experience manifest differently for women than for men. For answers, I looked to the lives and experiences of women mystics of medieval Europe and the twentieth century. This paper is the culmination of my search for a feminine mode of mysticism. The following questions guided my search: 1) can one identify a “feminine” mode of mysticism; 2) would the women from the two ages manifest common traits; 3) would less religion in the twentieth century mean less mysticism for women today; 4) would the differences in cultural, social, historical and economic factors influence their mystical experiences; and 5) how can the stories of these women’s lives serve society presently?

THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE “IN GENERAL”

Before I specifically looked for a feminine mode of mysticism, I had to achieve a certain rigor regarding the phenomenon in general. Sophy Burnham’s encounter, while it cannot be considered representative of all encounters, does contain a number of distinctive features found in most accounts of mystics, and it serves as a good model to explain the dimension of mystical experience.

Mystical form cannot be predicted. However, Jess Byron Hollenback has found that its specific character and intensity derive from “religious and philosophical assumptions that the mystics bring with them into the experience prior to its onset.”²² Sophy’s religious background factored heavily into her experience. She was raised Episcopalian and later lost her faith at college. At the age of twenty-five, under her husband’s influence, Sophy converted to atheism. As a child she had had no mystical experiences, and as a grown woman the lives and the work of the celebrated mystics of the world’s religious traditions had not interested her; she possessed virtually no understanding of mystical experience before that day of destiny on the mountain top.

The encounter at Machu Picchu “came out of the blue, as it were, without warning or training, and without the discipline of a spiritual guide.”²³ Although it is possible to court mystical encounters, most of the time individuals are overtaken by the experience itself, with its own timing and without the person’s volition. And as Andrew Greeley reports, “Some people seem to be ‘natural’ mystics, while others...are ‘naturally’ very unmystical. How much of this may be the result of the physical arrangement of our brains and nervous systems, how much the result of choices we have made in our life cycles are questions for which there are now simply no answers. Clearly, there are some people who are unmystical and others who can with some ease develop mystical capabilities with only a modest amount of effort. Finally, there are others—and these are probably the ones who have come down in history as the great ecstasies—who cannot help being mystical.”²⁴

Prior to her experience, Sophy lived what most of us would recognize as an ordinary life; this wife and mother of two was guided by concerns similar to those of average middle class Americans. Meditation entered Sophy’s life a few years before she turned forty, and in her words, she “developed some kind of faith,”²⁵ her prayers turning to a longing to serve the will of God. At forty-two years of age, with increasing urgency, she wanted an indication of God’s grace, and her longing was acknowledged that afternoon on Machu Picchu. Sophy did not know it at the time, but she had employed a practice that generated the mystical state of consciousness. Her use of meditation, coupled with her longing prayers, stilled and centered

her mind. "This process of focusing the mind is a phenomenon of the utmost importance in mysticism. Throughout the world, in the most diverse religious and cultural circumstances, focusing the mind (and the "heart") serves as the chief method that mystics use in order to bring about their mystical experiences and free themselves from a state of being that is exclusively conditioned by sense-experience."⁶

With her senses enraptured, Sophy filled with the grace of God admits, "I was humbled by the indulgent love of the Absolute, and by a joy beyond description."⁷ The return trip down the mountain and back to her hotel was remarkable:

When I looked down I saw light streaming off the palms of my hands. I could feel it pulsating off my palms in waves, like hot currents. I could see it flaring, flashing in everything; the fields were shining with light. And so were the people gathering at the hotel, some drinking pisco sours, talking to one another and shining with their inner light.

Later we took the train from Machu Picchu to Cuzco. I rode in a wild and joyous state, knowing that all creation is perfect and is most perfectly composed of love.

Knowing I knew nothing.

Knowing I would never be the same.⁸

The phenomena of light that Sophy describes is commonly associated with mystical states of consciousness and can take several different forms. "Sometimes it becomes manifest as a brilliant aura that seems to emanate from either the mystic or the particular beings that the mystic encounters in the spiritual world. At other times it seems as though it is the whole environment that is suffused with radiance rather than individual beings within it. On other occasions, preternatural illumination seems to be localized within a system of subtle physiology...."⁹

Another distinctive feature evident in Sophy's account is knowing. She was given access to, and knowledge of, the nature of creation: "creation is perfect and is most perfectly composed of love." This knowledge can be regarded as ultimately real as it pertains to those things that are of her particular culture and religious tradition.¹⁰

Important in Sophy's account, too, is the knowing that she "would never be the same." Upon return home, Sophy began searching for answers, the encounter consuming her thoughts and leading to turmoil. The life she had known prior to the encounter began to unravel, and eventually, her marriage ended. Sophy's career as a writer shifted direction as spiritual matters held her attention, and with the publishing of *A Book of Angels* in 1990, her obscurity as an author ended. Without a doubt, the mystical experience is a radical one, "heavily laden with affect."¹¹ For Sophy, it was truly a life transforming experience.

Using this narrative of the mystical experience, the various aspects of the phenomenon as identified by John C. Clark, can be identified. Clark's list of common elements is derived from the work of William James, W.T. Stace, M. Laski, and F.C. Happold:

1. knowledge, significance
2. unity, belongingness
3. eternity, the eternal now
4. light (a sensitivity to externals)
5. body sense (an internal focus)
6. joy
7. freedom.¹²

These traits manifest in both men's and women's accounts, although the elements of knowledge, eternity and freedom appear more commonly in men's accounts. Joy, light, unity and body sense appear regularly in women's accounts. These four "feminine" elements of the mystical experience will be examined in the following section.

IN SEARCH OF A "FEMININE" MODE OF MYSTICISM

"Mysticism" is a fairly modern word; it originated in France in the seventeenth century and spread to other European vernaculars.¹³ The term is derived from the ancient Greek "mystics" or "mystical ones." These terms were applied to individuals who devoted themselves to the secretive ritual filled mystery religions of the period. Scholars believe that the ceremonies in these early cults offered a "mystical" insight into the cycles of production and reproduction that guaranteed the continuation of human life.

During the time of early western Christendom in medieval Europe, mystics took God's existence for granted; and other religions were either ignored or seen as threats. God's word was accepted as the highest truth and mystical writers sought to extol God's rich diversity through the language of their religion. Having a direct pipeline to God in the middle ages, though, did not guarantee that one could speak freely. Grace M. Jantzen reminds us that, "in early and medieval Christendom, after all, there was an overt link between the knowledge of God gained through the mystical life and the authority which could be claimed on the basis of that special knowledge."¹⁴ Those who had power controlled access to that truth; men determined who they declared a mystic, and men directed the release of mystical writings.

Women were often at great risk when speaking and writing of their experiences; accounts were censured or denied all together. Some mystics were considered heretics and burned at the stake. The women who were allowed to speak and write were carefully governed by men; their work sometimes attributed to or claimed by the men overseeing them.

Themes that women mystics of the Beguine movement introduced have been found in Meister Eckhart's writing—one of the most influential male mystics of the middle ages. Hadewijch of Antwerp first described the "exclusive reciprocity between the Divine Depths and the depths of the soul—the soul, that fathomless abyss which God alone can fill. This theme is considered by some as the most famous point in Eckhart's mysticism."¹⁵

Eckhart not only borrowed from Hadewijch, but from several other Beguines. This fact came to light after the rediscovery of Beguine writings in which expressions that had been attributed to Eckhart and another male mystic, Ruysbroeck the Admirable, were found. The expression *without a why*, which "refers to the gratuitous nature of Divine Love, but also to the total detachment of the annihilated soul,"¹⁶ was made famous by Eckhart although Hadewijch, Marguerite Porete, and Catherine of Genoa used it originally.

"Unfortunately, the contribution of many women mystics have not been fully appreciated due to an inability on the part of the masculine-oriented to see their unique priorities as feminine mystics."¹⁷ Rather than refer to gender differences in mystical experience, Sandra A. Wawrytko likes to "refer only to feminine characteristics set in contrast to masculine ones."¹⁸ This permits feminine characteristics to arise in both male and female experience, although she notes that feminine characteristics are to be found more readily among women. She goes on to suggest that the basis of "feminine/masculine differences lies not so much in a different quality of mystical experience as it does in a difference of emphasis, in stylistic expression, which often reflects the individual mystic's social and educational background."¹⁹

To support her view, Sandra makes use of John Clark's seven main concepts common to

mystical states that I listed previously. She finds that three of the seven elements— knowledge, eternity, freedom—appear regularly in men's accounts.²⁰ The four "proposed feminine mystical elements" found more commonly in women's accounts are:

joy—the guiding principle of *EROS*, expressed as a nonrational, feeling response which encompasses the extremes of joy or ecstasy along with pain and fear and also may be manifested in terms of sexuality and erotic imagery;

light—*RECEPTIVITY* to externals leading to an openness to the mystical experience, a willingness to surrender to, to be possessed by, a higher power;

unity—*ALL-IS-ONE-NESS*, the recognition that *THE INNER IS THE OUTER*, that complete unity is possible because no real distinction exists between the mystic who is experiencing the divine and the source of the mystical experience;

body sense—*THE LINK WITH NATURE*, a sense of the body as a source of connectedness with the "external" world through our physical experiences, as a possible source of mystical stimulus (what Stace has termed "extrovertive mysticism").²¹

Mystics who fall within the feminine category and who clearly illustrate these points are the women of the religious movements of medieval Europe. These women's *EROS* is characterized as "hysterical," "pathological," and "repressed"; their *RECEPTIVITY* lead to "self renunciation, or a ceding of self-will to God's will"; the element of *ALL-IS-ONE-NESS* for these women is a belief in "the action of the Spirit in all believers"; and lastly, *THE LINK WITH NATURE* is, in a negative sense, the "recognition of the importance of the body in one's spirituality as seen through the need for mortification of the flesh, amounting in some cases to self-torture; the women...were known especially for 'austerities and penitential sufferings, as well as some instances of highly subjective and erotic accounts of the mystical life.'"²²

WOMEN MYSTICS OF MEDIEVAL CHRISTENDOM

Women mystics of medieval Christendom exemplify the feminine mode of mysticism defined above. These women followed their hearts and souls—some at great personal risk and in opposition to family and church—to pursue a life of contemplation. F.C. Happold defines contemplation as "a movement of consciousness towards a higher level, as the result of the emergence and cultivation of powers...an extreme form of the withdrawal of attention from the sensible world and a total dedication of action and mind towards a particular interior object."²³ This creative activity, similar to the highest activity that poets, painters, and musicians experience, illuminates and remakes the consciousness. "Contemplation is thus a developed form of that inward turning towards the deep centre of the soul...for it is only here that God is to be found."²⁴

Following are four brief profiles of women contemplatives from the middle ages whose lives bear a distinct individuality, determination and grace. As you read these accounts, I ask that you hold in your mind the unquestioned presence of God during the middle ages, and picture, if you can, an image of the bawdiness, corruption, uncleanness and crowdedness of this age. Try not to judge quickly or harshly these visionaries, remembering that visionary literature was more readily accepted by our counterparts in the middle ages. People embraced a "chaotic, holistic and multi-dimensional reality" then as opposed to our perception of the uni-

verse as “controlled, atomistic and one-dimensional.”²⁵ Turning to Julian of Norwich first, we discover a fourteenth century visionary whose teaching of Christ the Mother is a beautiful merging of feminine and masculine. Writing on the motherhood of God, she teaches us that:

The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the godhead and of the joys of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss....

This fair, lovely word “mother” is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and all things.²⁶

This text is taken from the second writing of the only book Julian composed. “She gave it no title; it has come down to us as *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*.”²⁷ The first writing in 1373 followed a series of mystical experiences, or “showings,” that lasted slightly more than twenty-four hours. Julian rewrote the book some twenty years later, more than doubling its size. She tells us in both texts that she was thirty-and-a-half years old at the time of her experiences. In the Short Text, Julian writes of her inadequacy to teach God’s word, although she maintains that her revelations are equivalent to the truth of the Scripture.²⁸ In the Long Text, Julian removes her disclaimer of inadequacy, maturing into her role as spiritual counselor.

Like many women of the period, Julian may have been illiterate, depending upon others to read to her. Her “writings” could have been dictated, possibly to a priest. Julian’s mind appears quite clear and disciplined, and it is possible that at some point she trained in thinking and writing. The “showings” written in English, not ecclesiastical Latin, may have put Julian at great risk by writing in her own tongue.²⁹

Born in 1342, nothing is known of her parentage and very little is known about her life. The exact date of her death is unknown, only that it is after 1416. As a recluse, an anchoress in Norwich, England, she withdrew from ordinary life, making a vow never to leave her anchorhold. Anchoresses were not uncommon in her day. The purpose of the enclosure was for a complete openness to God through prayer; it was not heroic asceticism.

The anchorhold might have consisted of a room, possibly two or three, and a small garden. A servant would obtain food and other necessary items from the outside world. Julian was obligated to provide counsel on spiritual matters, obscured behind a curtain or a door. No one knows whether she entered the anchorhold before or after her great vision.

You may well be questioning why anyone would retreat from society to pray for several years. If you recall the conditions of this age, this story is less difficult to understand. Having a room to oneself in medieval Europe was a luxury, and silence was nearly impossible to attain—the period is known for its crowds, noise, and unhealthy conditions. In some regards a recluse lived a more comfortable life than the general population, isolated from the noise of overcrowding, servants providing regular meals and housekeeping. The contemplative was freed to pursue her God, not burdened with distractions other than the ones she confronted internally on her journey.

Julian sought a union with God, and the theme of God as lover and the soul as the beloved permeates her writing, as it does a number of women of this period. She succeeded in uniting with her lover, receiving her revelations and a recollection of Christ’s passion during a three-day near-death experience in which she saw Christ dying on the cross. Caught up in the hor-

ror, Julian vividly describes in the "showings" the agony of despair, the injury, pain and blood of the event. A scene change at the end takes her "into a joyful vision of the living Christ, who talks with her and answers her questions about evil and suffering and salvation and the love of God.... This amazing experience preoccupied Julian for the rest of her life."³⁰

A contemporary of Julian's, Saint Catherine of Siena, was also a visionary—but the two lives could not be more different. Born in 1347, the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children, Catherine had her first vision at six and is said to have taken a vow of perpetual virginity when she was seven.

She refused to marry, and in defiance of her family's wishes to do so, cut off her hair. Her parents, enraged, dismissed the maidservant and put Catherine in her place. Undaunted by their actions, Catherine called upon her imagination, and "she learned to pray by withdrawing to an inner solitude; she practiced love by treating her angry relatives as if they were the apostles."³¹

Catherine eventually persuaded her parents to let her join the Dominicans—her father felt the request genuine after seeing a white dove above her head when he walked into her room while she was praying. She became a *mantellata* at sixteen, not a cloistered nun, but a daughter of a third-order body composed of widows who cared for the poor. Remaining at home as a recluse in a small room, her contemplative life brought her powerful visions and voices. During three years of solitude, demons and the devil taunted her regularly until she learned to mock them.

Catherine thought of Christ as her bridegroom, and her prayers were answered in the form of a betrothal on Shrove Tuesday 1367 when she received a ring invisible to all but her. Catherine prayed "for a clean heart" on another occasion, and the Lord appeared and removed her heart. A heart was brought back later—not hers, but his. From then on, Catherine felt herself loving others with Christ's own heart.³²

At nineteen Jesus asked Catherine to leave the solitude of her room and serve her neighbors—she did not hesitate, taking care of the sick and dying as well as her large family. Supernatural powers came to Catherine as she tended the needy. She tried to conceal the fact; being in great demand as a miracle healer was wearing her out. In 1370 she was believed dead, witnesses claiming that Catherine had stopped breathing. This "mystical death" was "four hours of inner ecstasy but outward immobility."³³

In 1374, at the age of twenty-seven, Catherine was joined by her confessor, Raymond of Capua, in caring for the sick and dying when another outbreak of Black Death struck Siena. She entered politics next, drawn into the conflict between the city-states and the papacy. Once local matters were taken care of she took on larger concerns, including the return of the papacy to Rome. On a trip to Pisa she received the stigmata of Christ—it was invisible as she had prayed for.

Catherine founded a convent and at thirty learned to write. Her book, the *Dialogue*, was written in the last years of her life. It is a debate between God and herself, a spiritual compendium; "everything she had learned about the life of the spirit is here."³⁴ She also wrote a large number of letters, many concerning the state of the church.

Catherine imposed severe penances on herself throughout her life. This practice is quite common among mystics, engulfing the men and women of God in terrible suffering in the last days of their lives.³⁵ Catherine ate very little and in 1380 was unable to eat anything at all. She grew quite weak and died at the age of thirty-three.

Catherine, as did Julian, adopted the theme of God as lover and the soul as the beloved,

reveling in passionately expressed love. In direct opposition, both withstood the experience of intense pain that they sought and inflicted upon themselves. Julian's desire to suffer the Passion of Christ, and Catherine's exquisite suffering by means of starvation, made it possible for these women to attain the full force of God's love: they achieved mystical unions that covered the complete spectrum of ecstatic bliss and extreme pain.

In the troubled twelfth century, a woman of strong personality—Hildegard of Bingen—achieved a very active spiritual and artistic life. Born in 1098 to noble parents, Hildegard at the age of seven or eight was given to a relative who was an anchoress. Hildegard took Benedictine vows at fifteen and at thirty-eight years of age was voted abbess. A few years later she dictated her first great visionary book, *Scivias or Know the Ways* (of the Lord), and more than 300 letters of hers have been authenticated.

"Hildegard's visions have been considered didactic rather than ecstatic; that is to say, through them, she transmitted her knowledge in allegorical form."³⁶ She insisted that she received her visions in a state of wakefulness; they were not hallucinations. At the end of one of her writings she relates the experience:

The creature who sees these things and transcribes them sees and yet does not see; he feels terrestrial things and at the same time does not feel them. It is not he who presents the wonders of God, but he is seized by them, as a chord by a musician's hand, to make heard a sound which does not come from him, but from the touch of another.³⁷

An ill woman much of her life, Hildegard during an extraordinary period of creativity composed a large volume of music for the convent and started an immense original scientific work in physics and medicine. In old age her visions sent her across the country on a preaching tour—a rather extraordinary feat for a woman in this period who had lived a sheltered life and previously traveled little. Later, Hildegard founded another community of nuns. Caught in a tangle of ecclesiastical controversy in her last years, she died peacefully in her own community in the year 1179.³⁸

In the thirteenth century, the German mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg composed a series of passionate and lyrical poems, interspersing them with rhymed narrative prose. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* is her only book. Written over several years, Mechthild expresses her mystical experiences as "dialogued scenes between God and the Soul, between Lady Soul and Lady Love and other allegorical figures...as well as the ineffable joy of union."³⁹

Born around 1210 into a wealthy family, Mechthild received a good education; her writing style and knowledge of courtly love is evidence. Mechthild left her family about 1230 to join the Beguines of Magdeburg, staying with the order for about 40 years. A longtime critic of the clergy's decadence, Mechthild in old age and ill health entered the convent of Helfta, driven there by her fear of Church authorities.

The theme of divine grace permeates Mechthild's writing. Her favorite images of God's grace are things that flow: water, tears, blood, milk, honey, wine—and the like. These items close the void between the human and the divine by cleansing, healing, nourishing and consoling. This imagery speaks of a connectedness, of a merging with the divine through God's grace that takes many forms. God's love is something that also flows, and the way to receive God's love is by opening oneself as a willing vessel to be filled.

Mechthild, too, like Julian and Catherine, thought of God as lover and the soul as the beloved; the theme was highly developed in her writing. Her language at times is almost shockingly erotic, and despite fierce censure she continued to write.

How the Soul Speaks to God

Lord you are my lover,
My longing,
My flowing stream,
My sun,
And I am your reflection.

How God Answers the Soul

It is my nature that makes me love you often,
For I am love itself.
It is my longing that makes me love you intensely,
For I yearn to be loved from the heart.
It is my eternity that makes me love you long,
For I have no end.⁴⁰

"When Mechthild writes of the soul's romance with God...she has found a lover who is fully, deliciously responsive. 'Thou art my resting-place,' God tells her, 'my love, my secret peace, my deepest longing, my highest honour. Thou art a delight of my Godhead, a comfort of my manhood, a cooling stream for my ardour'...the sweet goings-on between God and the soul are the reality—all consuming and exquisitely fulfilling—of which human sexuality is only a pale shadow."⁴¹

Love has a distinctive role in medieval Christian mysticism, and "the function of this deep emotion for feminine Christian mystics is even more distinctive. A long tradition exists in Western thought of the soul as a feminine entity (derived from the Greek psyche and the Latin anima, both of which are feminine nouns.) For the Christian, God's loving, personal relationship with the individual soul was epitomized by the imagery of Solomon's Song of Songs, which has as its subject the longing of a lover for her beloved. The use of passionate erotic language was transposed to the spiritual plane, and it is in this light that the language of the feminine mystics must be understood."⁴²

WOMEN MYSTICS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Religion no longer dominates the world views of women and men in the twentieth century as in the middle ages. The diminished centrality of religion in lives today has not resulted in a decline in mystical experience. As Andrew Greeley discovered, "there is every reason to believe that the experience of mystical union may well be a relatively constant phenomenon...Abraham Maslow has suggested that almost everyone he studied had some sort of 'peak-experience,' by which he meant an intense feeling of unity with the universe and of one's own place within that unity."⁴³ Feeling "that the experience comes to almost everyone and that these moments of grace are increasing now," Sophy Burnham tells us, "some people claim that mystical visions are occurring more frequently because we, as a species, are evolving, so that what was once the province of a few saints is now our common heritage."⁴⁴ As for the nature of women's mystical experiences presently, Anne Bancroft discovered when researching material for a book on twentieth century women mystics, that these women are "so related to life and the world that the boundaries have melted."⁴⁵ At the start of Anne's

research she hoped that she might find “authentic feminine insights and ways of being.” Fearing that her research would prove otherwise, she was delighted to discover that:

Women tend to see all things around them as revelatory, revealing totality and completeness and a numinous quality. To see things in this way a certain attention has to be given, which women are good at. It is not the kind of attention with which one acquires knowledge but rather that which happens when one lets go all concepts and becomes open to what is there. Then what occurs is not so much an understanding as a ‘being at one with’, even a ‘being taken up by’, a clarity of expansion and liberation which at the same time seems to be the very deepest sort of relationship.⁴⁶

Joanna Macy is a twentieth century mystic, whose strong sense of relatedness fuels her life and work. *World As Lover, World As Self* is a collection of Joanna’s essays and talks. Speaking on behalf of our planet, she provides examples and insights into ancient Buddhist philosophy, teaching that our world and the creatures in it are an extension of ourselves.

Joanna was born in 1929 and grew up in New York City under the rule of a violent, tyrannical father. During her summers she lived with her grandparents in the country. Her grandfather was a Congregationalist minister, and he made God real for Joanna. Her devotion to God inspired her to become a Christian missionary, but she was unable to accept the theological studies at university. Often at odds with her professors, Joanna became an atheist after a professor trying to get her in line shouted the suggestion at her. Following school, and a period of study abroad, Joanna returned to the States, married, and had three children.

In the 60s, her husband became an administrator in the Peace Corps, and she moved her family to India for two years. India is where Joanna found Buddhism—the religion that profoundly guides her life still. On returning to America, Joanna took a doctorate in early Buddhism, and in 1979 she traveled to Sri Lanka for a year to study the Buddhist Sarvodya movement. She wrote *Dharma and Development*, a book that she felt could be put into practice in the West to bring about social change; feeling that the application of Buddhist understanding when applied to Western civilization could save our planet from extinction. This belief still prevails in the course of her work.

Joanna relies on meditation at all times to guide her. Another of her practices is listening to trees, flowers, dogs and other plants and animals for they have something to tell:

Listen, humans, this is our world. For hundreds of millions of years we have been evolving our ways, rich in our own wisdom. Now our days are coming to a close because of what you are doing. It is time for you to hear us....

Listen, humans. I am raccoon, I speak for the raccoon people. See my hand? It is like yours. On soft ground you see its imprint, and know I’ve passed. What marks on this world are you leaving behind you?⁴⁷

Joanna’s most profound teaching is what she calls “social mysticism.” She asks workshop participants to assume the identity of an individual that is causing trouble for them and to work through the person’s malicious deeds. In doing so, she believes that individuals get a stronger sense of interconnectedness and *interexistence* with other beings—which is our real identity. Joanna feels that this awakening is necessary for our survival. The experience of moving out of oneself, shifting sense of self and sense of identity to another, brings people in

touch with something bigger. Through this earth-created spiritual practice, participants find grace, and "grace opens us to that which is beyond the self—and what is beyond self knows."⁴⁸

Another woman in intimate relationship with the earth is Annie Dillard. She spent four seasons living near Tinker Creek in Virginia, which was the inspiration for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Annie was hesitant to release her work in 1974 and nearly published the book using a man's name—it won a Pulitzer Prize.

The oldest of three daughters, Annie was born in 1945 to affluent parents. Her upbringing was filled with many good memories, as well as bad, and her interests were varied and plentiful in her youth. An avid reader to this day, Annie was particularly interested in Ralph Waldo Emerson in high school. She studied English, theology, and creative writing at college, and her Masters in English thesis focused on Thoreau's *Walden*; his influence on her writing is evident in *Tinker Creek*.

Raised in the Presbyterian church as a child, Annie did not remain with the faith. After college she began adding ideas from other religions into her religious world-view, converting to Catholicism recently. Annie continues to write; she is presently an adjunct professor of English and has been divorced and remarried several times. She is the mother of one daughter.

The stories of her experiences near Tinker Creek "speak about the human condition, and our relationship with the Divine...you can just feel the profound implications as she simply relates what she is seeing around her."⁴⁹ Annie, a naturalist, seeks a clarity of the workings of the universe and pursues its mysteries through observing the cycles of the seasons and life and death as it manifests through the plants, animals and insects of Tinker Creek. Her imagery is strikingly vivid, writing how she: "watched a chickadee swooping and dangling high in a tulip tree. It seemed astonishingly heated and congealed, as though a giant pair of hands had scooped a skyful of molecules and squeezed it like a snowball to produce this fireball."⁵⁰

Annie's true commitment to life is "to experience on the one hand the mystery which goes beyond everything we can know or understand, and on the other to cherish and serve all that she encounters with every human gift she possesses, by bringing it into her consciousness and paying full attention to it once it is there."⁵¹

Toni Packer, like Annie Dillard, asks us to live fully in the moment; directing our "attention to what is—*right* now, this moment, *right* here."⁵² There is no sense of separation or limitation in pure being according to Toni, and her work focuses on the discovery of undivided wholeness that can be achieved through the immediacy of being:

Life energy can be right here in all-embracing awakens, without the hindrances of all our thought-created divisions. It's possible for anyone to come into this state of being, which is true being.⁵³

As a spiritual guide and director of the Springwater Center for Meditative Inquiry near Rochester, New York, Toni simply listens as a peer, no longer calling herself a teacher and letting no one turn her into an authority. She is a self-discovery guide, using her Zen training to reveal what is mistaken for reality—our habitual conditioning.

Toni was born in 1927 and grew up in Nazi Germany. Her parents were scientists, and although her mother was Jewish, they were spared from the Holocaust because of her father's prestigious work. Growing up in this strange environment, Toni believed that life was full of horror and was meaningless.

Following the war her family emigrated to Switzerland, and here she met and married her American husband. They moved to the States in 1951, and Toni attended university in Buffalo, New York. They adopted a daughter, and in the late 60s she and her husband discovered the Zen Center in Rochester, New York. The writings and talks of J. Krishnamurti helped Toni to realize that although she had been put in charge of the center, she discovered she could no longer work in the traditional way.

Toni, and several others, left in 1981 to found the Genesee Valley Zen Center, renamed Springwater Center when the practice of Zen began falling away. Toni was thrilled to work “in the country where people could be in close contact with the natural world, a world not dominated or produced by human thought.”⁵⁴ Her fondness for the healing power of this space is revealed in Toni’s closing words at the end of a fall retreat:

Awakening this morning to utter brilliance and calm. Golden sun rising over the autumn hills close and clear, each blade of grass, each window pane shimmering brightly with pearls of water and light. Clouds of ever changing color and form floating across a vast open sky that does not move at all—that does not mind, or know, recall, or want anything.⁵⁵

Meinrad Craighead records her journey as a mystic in word and pictures. This writer and painter has a strong connection with the earth; guided by God the Mother from the beginning:

I am born connected. I am born remembering rivers flowing from my mother’s body into my body. I pray at her Fountain of Life, saturated in her milk and blood, water and honey. She passes on to me the meaning of religion because she links me to our origin in God the Mother.⁵⁶

The image of God for Meinrad has always been Mother in spite of being raised a Roman Catholic. Her secret worship of God the Mother for half of her lifetime has been the ground of her spirituality. Like a lot of women, rather than abandon her Christian heritage, Meinrad tells us, “my spirituality is sustained by a commitment to a personal vision that affirms woman as an authentic image of the Divine and enlightens, informs and enriches the orthodox image of the transcendent Father God.”⁵⁷

Meinrad has a rich heritage: named after a great-uncle who was a famous German monk, her great-grandmother on the other side was a Plains Red Indian. She was brought up in Chicago and spent her summers in Little Rock, Arkansas with Memaw, her grandmother. There is a great kinship between these women; their influence upon Meinrad substantial.

An artist from childhood, Meinrad went on to teach art in Albuquerque, New Mexico; teaching positions in Europe followed for several years. While in Florence, Meinrad made the decision to become a nun. A friendly priest referred her to a Benedictine abbey in England where she spent fourteen years as a recluse; the first five years were the worst of her life. She was gradually rejected by the community: the more she painted and wrote, attracting attention from the outside, the less her behavior was liked. Meinrad left the order once she realized the members were only interested in the kind of person that fit their framework. She returned to New Mexico where she presently lives with her dogs. Anne Bancroft feels that “Meinrad is that exceptional thing, solitary painter–poet–mystic, in the tradition perhaps of William Blake....”⁵⁸ Of her creative life, Meinrad tells us:

I draw and paint from my own myth of personal origin. The thread of personal myth winds through the matriarchal labyrinth, from womb to womb, to the faceless source, which is the place of origination. Each painting I make begins from some deep source where my mother and grandmother, and all my foremothers, still live. What gestates in this personal underworld waits for passage from one stage of life to another, memories waiting for transformation into imagery. Sometimes I feel like a cauldron of ripening images where memories turn into faces and emerge from my vessel. So my creative life, making out of myself, is itself an image of God the Mother and her unbroken story of emergence in our lives.⁵⁹

Meinrad believes that the only true purpose in life is the journey of the spirit—a journey which she expects to continue in lives yet to come. Affirming another of Meinrad's beliefs, Anne Bancroft tells us that "she believes that all nature points to that which is beyond itself"⁶⁰ and that a great feminine spirit moves through all creation. Meinrad is not alone in this belief.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What can be gained by studying the stories of women mystics? By acknowledging a "feminine" mode of mystical experience? The study of mystical experience in the philosophical community currently is a focus on the experience as an intense psychological state of consciousness. It has become "an essentially private, subjective matter which, as such, does not connect with issues of social justice...."⁶¹ Steven T. Katz, professor of religion at Harvard University, questions whether scholars should pluck the mystical experience "out of its socio-historical parameters and separate it from its philosophical-theological environment, thus treating it as a pure, non-relational, unmediated sort of human experience?"⁶² Grace Jantzen attributes the misguided study and control of mystical accounts to the ongoing complexities of power and gender and has traced major changes in history that have influenced our "understanding of what counts as mystical; and in every one of the changes there was a gendered struggle for power and authority."⁶³

Rather than speak of mystical experience in terms of gender differences, Sandra Wawrytko, as I noted earlier, prefers to speak of feminine characteristics in mystical experience in contrast to masculine ones. She has identified four feminine elements common to the accounts of women mystics: 1) joy represents an emotional orientation which is expressed through eros or love; 2) the second trait of feminine mystical elements is an attitude of receptivity or an openness to the experience of the divine (or nature for modern women) that is defined as a sensitivity to externals; 3) unity or a belongingness following the assumption that all-is-one, and that the inner is the outer is common to women's accounts; and lastly 4) body sense, or a recognition of the link with nature on both an individual and a cosmic plane connects women mystics with the external world through physical experience.⁶⁴

The women mystics of medieval Europe readily demonstrate these four traits. As we have already discovered, men in medieval Europe controlled the writings of the mystics, and either censured, claimed, or discounted women's experiences. The joy expressed by these women has been characterized as hysterical, pathological, and repressed, and the extremes of their ecstasy, along with pain and fear, manifested in terms of sexuality and erotic imagery. This expression, and their visions, trances, and experiences with prophetic writing and the paranormal, has not been fully appreciated by the masculine-oriented, sometimes labeling these individuals and their mystical experiences less than trustworthy.

To ignore the feminine mode of mysticism, though, is to shut ourselves off from a wealth of resources that deserve our attention. Nor can we afford to ignore the masculine elements that are “interwoven in the work of those who use a predominately feminine mode of mysticism.”⁶⁵ Susan Wawrytko asks that we sympathetically survey all mystical resources, looking to the feminine and masculine interplay within.

One might contrast women mystics “then and now” in terms of the self and the expansion of self. Then: Boundaries of individual self were permeated and they experienced union with God. Now: Boundaries of individual self as ego-subject fall away into oneness or connectedness with nature and the natural flow of earth.

As our planet today shows signs of overuse and abuse, and with human suffering continuing in spite of scientific and technological gains, we must look for solutions that will expand and broaden our understanding of the connectedness and inter-relatedness of life. The feminine mode of mysticism offers us a means to this connectedness. Thus what may at first appear as a merely “academic” exercise in philosophical research becomes an opening that, when practiced, may heal the world.

“The universe, as many mystical traditions tell us, is the “child” of a sacred marriage between the feminine and masculine forces within the One, what Taoists call the yin and yang, what Hindus name Shiva and Shakti; it is the constantly self-transforming expression of their eternal mutual passion.”⁶⁶ Mystic Andrew Harvey feels that we must return to the unity found in the mystic traditions known as the sacred feminine—the portrayal of God as Mother as well as Father. The power of Mother is sensitivity, balance, humility and an infinite respect for the miracle of life. Harvey believes that by consciously incorporating the sacred feminine into every aspect of daily life, every area of understanding of the world and our relationship to it, a healing and balancing wisdom will be invoked. For the human race to have a chance to survive, Harvey warns:

At every level there has to be a fusion between our masculine and feminine energies, a fusion between those polarities we have been taught to keep apart—between our vision of “heaven” and our vision of “earth,” between what we have called “sacred” and what we call “profane,” between our innermost mystical awareness and our political, technological, and economic choices. Only such a fusion and “sacred marriage” can produce in us the necessary clarity, knowledge, and force of active love necessary to preserve the world. There cannot be a sacred marriage however, without a bride; until the Bride, the Mother, is recalled in all her wise splendor, the fusion of full mystical knowledge with the most committed economic and political action that alone can help us now cannot take place.⁶⁷

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