

Transforming the Tower of Babel

By Joanna Haymore

The Tower of Babel story conjures up potent images for those of us who grew up in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the time of the Babel story, all of humankind was said to speak one language. As the story goes, ancestral kinsmen, recent descendants of Noah, said to one another, "Let's build this tower so it will reach heaven, and give us recognition amongst all our kin." God, seeing their labor, said, "The people are one . . . and nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do" (Genesis 11:1-9). They so displeased God that he confounded their ability to speak the same language, and commanded them to scatter across Earth.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this story has been used as an explanation for why there are different languages and as a morality tale about the consequences of displeasing God. If we look more deeply, however, the Tower of Babel story calls forth a deep vein of angst in our psyche, pulsing with tacit information about the relationship between human culture and the Divine. The men in this story were engaged in planning a great building to reach the heavens, an act of imaginative power with a goal of achieving an authority that opposed or challenged Divine authority.

The role authoritarianism has played in cultural development is vital for us to consider when thinking about women and the Ecozoic vision. Sue Monk Kidd, in *Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996), describes her slow and often painful realization that her way of thinking and her way of seeing herself as a woman was defined by her internalization of the cultural bias that sanctioned the authoritarian rule of her husband, father, male colleagues, clergy, and of God. She says, "Living without real inner authority, without access to my deep feminine strength, I carried around a fear of dissension, confrontation, backlash, a fear of not pleasing, not living up to sanctioned models of femininity" (p.29). Kidd, in coming to understand her emergence into her own internal authority, tells about her awakening to a wider perspective: "Disconnected from my feminine soul, I had unknowingly forfeited my power to name sacred reality. I had simply accepted what men had named" (p. 21).

All of us, not just those of us who are women, are creating lives reflecting the schism referenced in the Tower of Babel story. We are confused when we live without authentic inner authority. We are subject to a fundamental fear of failure and the drive to prove our-

selves. We are taught that we are fundamentally flawed and that our quest for connection and relationship is overshadowed by a divine pronouncement of confused communication.

Across a huge time frame, perhaps four thousand years, a great deal of human behavior has been modeled after the image of an authoritarian God. This has perpetuated a belief that domination, even aggression, is the most desirable behavior and the most likely to succeed. We have been conditioned to believe that this is the gold standard by which everything else must be measured, and it has affected every aspect of life: government, law, religion, economics, health care, nature, and family relationships. This has created social agreements within cultures, with rigid rules that affect our relationship to each other, Earth, and ourselves. It has placed God or church over man, and man over women, children, animals, and Earth.

Primo Levy, in his autobiography *Survival in Auschwitz*, describes the chilling consequences of power based on absolute authority, evoking the image of the Tower of Babel. The tower in the center of the concentration camp had bricks, and every time he passed this tower he was reminded of the old fable. As he tells it, the concentration camp's inhabitants came to hate even the bricks in the tower as symbols of the insane dream of those who deemed themselves masters. Those in absolute authority exhibited an utter sense of separation from the humanity and spiritual dignity of their fellow human beings. Levy described the Tower of Babel's confusion of languages as a curse hanging over them, as he struggled to understand how anyone could isolate their feelings so as to be able to inflict such suffering upon others.

I would like to explore what could be learned if we widen our lens¹ and look at the story of the Tower of Babel from a feminine perspective that supports the concept of making decisions based on inner authority.

In the culture of that era, towers were religious structures, ziggurats, built to foster communication with the Divine. I wondered why God would be so upset with those ancient builders. I saw it as an attempt by those men to create an outward representation for an inner process that is more about sensing, feeling and imagination than about the external action of building a tower. This, to me, was the confusion that so upset God in this story.

These kinsmen were drawn towards the act of building a tower that would represent their power, dominion, or authority. At its deeper or symbolic levels, the tower represents the dominance of thinking over feeling and the separation of mind from heart, and the confusion about the true power inherent in human imagination.

If we observe today's busy shopping centers or notice our highways with their advertisements designed to engage our imaginations, we can get a feeling for how we have created a world where we are always grasping for fulfillment from our outer world, much like those kinsmen of old. And we may notice that satisfaction cannot be gained from grasping. The more we grasp, the more we are aware that we don't have what we need. And the more unsatisfied and bereft we are, the more we grasp. Our interior selves hunger for true connection from within and with one another. We long to be understood and to be satisfied with life.

We can look at the nature of our imagination in our language. If we pay attention, our language reflects two dimensions of experience, an outer one of observation and an inner one of sensation. Consider the word "tree" for a moment and notice what happens in your imagination. Do you begin to go over the kinds of trees you can name, or do you visualize their color and shapes? Does your mind race with its desire to name the colors or how many kinds of trees you know?

Now consider a tree you have sat beneath. Invite yourself to experience for a moment the feelings inside your body as you remember the coolness of its shade, the wind blowing across your face, your back leaning against its firm trunk, the smell or the colors of its leaves, dappled by warm sunshine. And what do you notice as you respond to this way of connecting to a tree? These are different doors of perception, one an outer response and one an inner.² Which door do we use more often? Do we not need both to ignite the fullness of our imagination for deepening our capacities for connection and relationship?

I invited my imaginative perception, or the *Mundus Imaginalis*,³ to delve more deeply into my inner wisdom. In my imaginative narrative, God might have taken a nurturing stance, rather than an authoritarian one with those ancestors of old, and said to them, "You are missing the point regarding your power to imagine and create. I want you to go wander Earth to see and experience its diversity and its beauty, and let that help you reflect on your own. You will not find that I communicate best with whoever can build the best or biggest or who can make the most powerful name for themselves. You have a confused way of thinking, so I will scramble your speech to reflect your thinking. Now, go wander about a bit. Take some time to diversify and grow up.



Tile artwork by Carol Hegedus

The doorway to my mystery lies within you, not in what you can create without. You are powerful, so powerful that whatever you imagine, you can do. Take some time, even thousands of years if need be, and let yourselves discover what it means to access your inner authority to create community within and without. You will find, perhaps, that your identity, your differences, and your commonalities will again emerge." What would our cultures across the centuries have been like if the story had been told this way?

In 2007, Unicef reported that when women are given equal decision-making power or authority over household resources, not only the health of children and women improved, but also the local economy and the state functioned more prosperously. The reverse is also true. When women are not allowed the authority to make the choices that support themselves and the family, everybody in the larger community of life suffers. How do women know how to make such choices that have the potential to build healthy lives and strong communities? What will happen to our world if we begin to listen to this wisdom?

Bruce Lipton, Ph.D., pioneer in the new science of epigenetics, wrote in the *Biology of Belief* (2005): "Your beliefs act like filters on a camera . . . and your biology adapts to those beliefs. When we truly recognize that our beliefs are that powerful, we hold the key to free-

dom” (p. 143-144). Thomas Berry tells us that the 20th century, full of innovation in science and in the industrial-military complex, reached the pinnacle of male dominance. Berry asks us, in essence, to change the filter of our beliefs about what it means to be human in order to create healing in the 21st century. Berry, like Lipton, is asking us to change what we imagine about ourselves.

Berry also talks about the infancy stage of development of human culture and religion as a time of isolation and separation and then a turbulent period of adolescence, from which we are hopefully emerging towards the wisdom of maturity. The Ecozoic vision holds this hope for maturation of human culture and religion. Maturity as a species asks that we imagine community and communication, rather than dominance, as our paradigm for life with an Ecozoic purpose.

Both men and women have what we need in our biology to feel inside ourselves, clear our vision, and harness the power of our imaginations to create a world where all life moves forward together. We can choose to face the issues created by centuries of cultures focused on the importance of authority and dominance. We can find within ourselves the fresh perspective that allows the principal core of the feminine: nurturance and feeling spreading into all aspects of life, beginning with how we see our relationship with the Divine.

The inner ripeness of feminine consciousness is now revealing itself as one of the primary touchstones for this wisdom. Women’s wisdom is about reclaiming feeling in our bodies and allowing its wisdom to inform our knowing or our consciousness about the Divine and about our relationship with Earth. It is recognition of the gifts of the mind for judgment and discernment, but not used in isolation from the sensations and feelings of the body. It is also about reclaiming our gift of imagination to create connections and relationships that nurture all life.

My own recent dive into reclaiming this imaginative wisdom was a glorious experience that came out of a few days of sanctuary along the coast of southern California. Walking on cliffs high above the beach, I saw the colors of wild flowers at eye level, and shapes and textures in magnificent natural diversity surrounded me. The sound of the ocean was powerful and free, resonant, and crashing on rocks below. The sun varied warm to hot, its breeze keeping me comfortable. Then there came this experience of spaciousness, a freshness of perception of a Presence being taken in though my senses and grounded in my body. This nurturing Intelligence within every cell of my being guiding my action in the world is the creative touchstone for me, upon which all else revolves.

Just as it is told to us in the story of the Tower of Babel, whatever we humans can imagine, we can do. What then, with an Ecozoic awareness arising, shall we imagine?

¹ Widening your perceptual lens, one of the Five Principles of Living Life Joyfully, from Healing from the Core: Grounding and Healthy Boundaries, a workshop and audio series developed by Suzanne Scurlock-Durana.

² Small acts of perception, by Susan Harper, In Em’Oceans and Sensations workshop, Chapel Hill, 2007.

³ *Mundus Imaginalis* by Henry Corbin (1964), a concept derived from Islamic theosophers, describing an order of reality perception, the imaginative consciousness or the cognitive imagination.

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