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## Pathway to the Ecozoic

By Carmel Higgins

Ecofeminism as a cultural phenomenon emerged in North America and Europe in the early 1970s. A convergence of ecological and feminist consciousness, it represents a critical effort to understand the relationship between the subjugation of women and the denigration of nature.

My own journey into this most significant movement began with questioning and longing. I questioned my role as wife, mother, and woman in church and society and longed to be and belong. I could not have put my longing into words at the beginning of my quest, but now I know I longed to expand beyond culturally defined roles and to feel at home in the cosmos.

I was born during the Great Depression and grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition. A very spiritual child, I loved my religion: the rituals, burning candles, the smell of incense, the Latin chants, and the sense of a mysterious presence within it all. I married in 1953. My husband, Paul, and I lived in a small suburban bungalow, had five children, and drove the traditional station wagon. Back then, in what I now refer to as the “Father Knows Best” era, I was content to be a housewife—cleaning, baking, and having babies. Life was full and meaningful.

My life changed after my children left the nest and my husband, after a long spell of ill health, developed a malignant brain tumour. It was after his death in 1990 that I began to more deeply question my role as a woman and my identity as a person in my own right; for almost sixty years I had been my father’s daughter, my brother’s sister, my husband’s wife, and mother to my children. Who was I now? And for whom and what should I live and be?

In my search for a new identity and meaning, I immersed myself in feminist literature. I read *The Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Freidan, *The Female Eunuch*, by Germaine Greer, and *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir. These books opened my eyes to an oppression I had not been aware of. But it was not until I read the book *Beyond God the Father*, by Mary Daly, that I began to understand feminism as more than a social, cultural, and political issue; I understood it as a spiritual, theological, and ecological issue—ontological to its roots, an issue dealing with the very nature of ‘being’ both human and divine.

*Beyond God the Father* is about moving from patriarchal male rule. Since women have internalized patriarchy, and found their “being” within it, moving from

this social and religious system, according to Daly, would mean confronting a meaningless void, an abyss. She urges such women to confront the shock of living in freedom with “the courage to be.”

Daly’s solution left me gazing rootless into that “abyss.” I questioned whether such a radical departure from the known would bring me freedom and integrity. Yet my feeling of emptiness, I reasoned, seemed a good place to start. I moved on to reading the works of other feminist theologians.

*Sexism and God-talk*, by Rosemary Radford Ruether, lifted the veil further by exposing the twisted roots of sexism born and thriving in an artificial soil alienated from nature itself: “In the patriarchal mind-set, a woman’s body is the very symbol of finite nature,” she writes. “The logic that flows from this mind-set demands that both woman and nature must be subdued and controlled.” Ruether showed further how patriarchy, by relegating women to silence, obedience, and the domestic, suppresses their input to culture, their creativity, and their innate bodily wisdom.

Ruether’s insights are stunning; they literally “upset the applecart” for me. I felt betrayed, cheated, and robbed, somehow, of my femininity and my voice. I also realized that despite having been a mother and a wife, I was totally out of touch with my body and my sexuality. In this area of my being, I always felt flawed. After all, was it not the woman, Eve, as my religion taught me, who plucked the primordial apple from the tree in the Garden of Eden?

Theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, in her book *She Who Is*, came to my rescue. From her I learned of a positive feminine principle that has been working behind the scenes all along...slowly gathering “her” nuggets of Wisdom. Johnson’s book is magnificent. She showed me that the divine principle is very much alive in our midst, in history, in culture, in the world’s wisdom traditions, and in the daily lives of men and women.

The “She Who Is” of the title surfaces from cracks and fissures to appear on the pages of Holy Scripture; She is present in nature, and in the very plates and tectonic shift of Earth’s crust; She is the birthing, nurturing, and sustaining energy within the cosmos itself; She is God the Mother.

When I was growing up, to imagine God as Mother was unthinkable. For me, God was Father, Son, and brother; never Mother, Daughter, or sister. Johnson’s book moved me beyond God the Father by providing me with new metaphors and imagery.



Sculpture by Terry Whye, photo by Dan Meyers

Johnson claims the ultimate mystery of God is beyond male and female images, beyond naming. To name is to identify and wrap our minds around a mystery that is beyond our comprehension. But if humans are to speak of this mystery at all, then multiple metaphors are needed. And women, if they are to speak of their existential reality as women, need feminine metaphors.

Writing of the mystery of God, Johnson suggests the biblical figure of Wisdom as a symbol of God's active presence. "This active presence is depicted in the Wisdom books of Scripture as grammatically feminine. It has been named *hokmah* in Hebrew, *sapientia* in Latin, and *Sophia* in Greek." I learned that these are names for *She* who has no name.

Following Johnson's trajectory, I marvelled at the passages in Scripture that extolled the virtues of Sophia: In the Wisdom books I found a God-woman who is more of a verb than a noun or a pronoun.

She makes her presence felt by crying aloud in the street and speaking her words; She calls us to attention,

to intelligence, to instruction; She renews and challenges; She has knowledge and insight, creative and redeeming agency is hers; She is a storyteller, homemaker, teacher, judge, social activist, caretaker, craftsperson, liberator, giver, and fountain of life.

She builds a house, prepares food, sets a table, and invites us to feast:

"Come eat of my bread and drink the wine I have mixed" (Prov. 9: 1-6).

"Why, this woman could be anybody," I mused. "She could be my great-grandmother, an old crone wise and withered, who lived to the ripe old age of one hundred and two! She could be my sister, or my mother who was a strong-willed woman ahead of her time. She could be the woman down the street who runs her own grocery business. She could even be me!"

Wisdom Sophia, it seems, is a multi-talented woman of many colors.

Johnson writes of Mother-Sophia as the generating matrix of the universe from whose womb comes forth into being all that is, and of Jesus-Sophia as the Wisdom of God made flesh. Jesus is not only Mary's offspring, but he is also Sophia's prophet and child. He too invites us to a banquet.

Spirit-Sophia is divine becoming, guidance, and sacred presence all in one. She is the transforming energy that animates and pervades Earth as a living flame; She is reality operating through human action, natural phenomenon, and loving relationships; She can be seen bursting forth as a flowering meadow, heard in the sound of the wind, and seen shining in the eyes of a child; She is in the fruit of the fields and in our daily bread; Hers is the call of the wild, the spirit of mountains, and the mind of the Milky Way.

All encompassing, God-Sophia is ancient mystery old and new. Pregnant in time and filled with promise and possibilities, She is the restless urge of Life itself calling us to liberation beyond measure. In Her, women can begin to rise, to shine, and to feel at home in their own footprints.

*She Who Is* confirmed for me all that is positive about the past while pointing to a better future; a future where women will be respected for their relational values and their innate biological desire to birth, care, and nurture; desires and values that will be channelled, under the guidance of Sophia, toward building a new sustainable culture and toward healing Earth.

In 1998, my feminist and spiritual quest led me to Sophia Center at Holy Names University in Oakland, California. There, through the gifts of a remarkable faculty, feminism, spirituality, and cosmology came full circle for me, blending as one into complementary paths to a new ecological age.

Thomas Berry refers to this new age as the emerging Ecozoic Era, a time when humans, as one species among many, will live in a more mutually enhancing relationship with the whole of creation.

Sophia Center is a Wisdom school. It explores the depths of what it means to be spiritual and human at this moment in history. It explores the wisdom of science, feminine wisdom, the wisdom of indigenous people, and the wisdom of Earth, art, and spirit. Soaked in all this wisdom, and forged and fired in the Universe Story as a new creation story, I acquired a new understanding of who I really am. I was able to get in touch with my own story in relation to the Universe Story and to let go of certain belief patterns in preparation for what Berry calls the “Great Work” of our time.

Ecofeminism, by incorporating ecology, feminism, and spirituality with cosmology, is very much a part of this “Great Work.” The spirituality for this work begins with identification of the Self with Earth and the cosmos; that is, with the realization that we are, literally, and in body, mind, heart, and soul, the journeywork of stars.

Women adapt readily to identification with the larger Self that is the whole. The very dynamic of our lives is intimately connected to the monthly cycle of the moon and to the ebb and flow of tides. We feel the wounds of Earth in our womb of wombs and the death of species in our heart of hearts. The very fertile ground of our “being” rocks in tandem with “All That Is.”

If Sophia Wisdom were to address the challenges of going into a new ecological age by writing a scriptural letter to contemporary women, imagination would have her say:

*Dearest Daughters of Earth,*

*I call you to come to the banquet and to a feast of consciousness. Come out of your culturally imposed shells and go forth into the unknown with flaming hearts, knowing that my wisdom is with you and the creative powers of the Universe are within you. You have been innately empowered with the gift of womanhood and agency by none other than the Universe and creative evolution itself. You and your descendents need no further endorsement.*

*The creative powers of the Universe are as near to you as the air you breathe, and operative at the tip of your pen, the tip of your tongue, the sound of your voice...as well as in friendship, passion, love making, music making, home making, justice making, and storytelling. In co-operation with the principles of the Universe, all of your works and loving relationships make you participants in the “Great Work” and co-creators of a more sustainable future. So step out and cry out for human and Earth justice!*

*Go forth, bearing your unique gifts to the table of life. Bring your gifts of intuition, imagination, relationship, birthing, caring, and nurturing to a starving world and a landscape in need of healing. Give birth to your dreams and visions in poetry and prose, in song and dance, and in rituals old and new. Imagine a world filled with promise and prosperity and embody the justice and the cultural changes you seek to create.*

*I call you, and Earth calls you, to honour “her-story” by celebrating and telling your own. Tell where you have been, what you have seen and heard, and where you wish to go. Celebrate the sacred women that you are...in congruence with the great narrative of our time—the Universe Story.*

Sources:

Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1973

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Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is*, Crossroads New York, 1992

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