

A Spirituality for the Ecozoic Era

By Julie Purcell

What kind of spirituality is strong enough, inspiring enough, and realistic enough to move us into the Ecozoic Era? Many people are struggling, dreaming, reflecting, discussing, and praying about this important question. I believe the ecological crisis requires a spiritual transformation. We need the inspiration, hope and guidance of a spirituality that can lead us through this dangerous passage. Humans are capable of great sacrifice when they are inspired, passionate and confident of their guiding vision. If we were passionately in love with Being, with Life, we could not hold back. We would participate whole-heartedly in the Great Work needed at this juncture.

The mystical tradition is one stream where I find hope and guidance for an ecological spirituality. “The only cure for the angst of modern man is mysticism,” said Thomas Merton, well known 20th century Catholic monk. Mystical experiences are direct experiences of the human with God, Godde, Supreme Reality, the Other, the Sacred. The mystic is not a special kind of

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human being, but each person and even each animal, plant, life form is a special kind of mystic. Each of us can recall a moment, an experience that stands out and has special meaning—with another person, with a Spiritual Presence, with a flower, a deer, a squirrel, a sunset, an ocean. For that moment life made sense and we felt deeply connected to Life. It is an ineffable experience, both inner and outer, of God/Godde as the living core-center of our being, a core that is often

named Love or Beloved. This experience, difficult to express, often requires poetry, metaphor or love language. The words of Meister Eckhart, 13th century Christian mystic, are helpful. He wrote, “In the spark of the soul there is something like the original outbreak of all goodness, something like a brilliant light which gleams, and something like a burning fire which burns incessantly. This fire is nothing other than the Holy Spirit of God.” In the mystical tradition humans are understood to have God/Godde’s own seed within us longing to be reunited with the Beloved.

For all of time, nature has been the primary source for mystical experiences. Earth is our common home. None of the major religions are mother of the ocean; rather the ocean is mother of all things. Our religions, even oral traditions, are recent in relation to the lifetime of the sea or the creatures. Mechtild of Magdeburg said in the 16th century, “The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures.” Natural mysticism perceives the numinous reality of the source as it dwells in, surrounds and emanates from nature and the cosmos. It also recognizes an inner connection and bond between and among all things and experiences their unity. Thomas Berry expresses it this way, “For we will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things come into being. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world around us. Dostoyevsky says it in poetry:

Love all creation.
The whole and every grain of sand in it.
Love every leaf,
and every ray of light.
Love the plants.
Love the animals.
Love everything.
If you love everything
you will perceive the Divine Mystery
in all things.
Once you perceive it
you will comprehend it better every day.
And you will come, at last,
to love the whole world
with an all embracing love.

Brian Swimme, in his “Canticle to the Cosmos,” gives a scientific understanding of the universe that validates what mystics have known intuitively all along—that the ultimate aim of the universe is the fullness of differentiation, the deepest subjectivity, and the most intimate communion. Every moment is an unrepeatable treasure. The ultimate aim of the universe is for each thing—each subject—to be recognized in its sacred depths by every other subject. Each hawk, each tree, each bit of soil, each frog and each human has a different point of view of reality. Each flows into the other.

Each species has an intrinsic value of its own; we cannot even know the extent of the loss practically and spiritually when a species becomes extinct, lost forever. Our world is an interpenetrating symphony of consciousness.

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I think an ecozoic spirituality will be an interfaith spirituality, and the mystical tradition feels hopeful to me because it is non-dogmatic and accepting of diversity. There is no Buddhist river, or Episcopalian mountain, or Catholic meadow, or Hindu ocean, or Jewish rainforest. There is wisdom in all creation and all traditions. Just as all species are needed, so is the wisdom of all the ages. I agree with Miriam Therese McGillis when she says that consciousness is calling us to go back and recover everything – to recover the revelation within everything from the beginning 15 billion years ago. And when you go back, she says, you don't have to lose anything, you

can save the images of God that have been meaningful, and you can recover what has been neglected and distorted and ignored. The whole cosmos is scripture! Even though they have fallen far short and had many destructive distortions, I don't think we can afford to throw the classical religions out. Matthew Fox, in his book *One River, Many Wells*, says, "It is time for our species to grow up. This means, among other things, that instead of relating religion to religion with our reptilian brains and our testosterone in high gear (my God can beat up your God), we ought to relate religion to religion from our deepest hearts and most creative minds."

Fox's treatment of the Cosmic Christ is an example of how mysticism can reinterpret the elements within a tradition. The Cosmic Christ is an ancient image that includes more than Christianity; it includes Cosmic Wisdom, Goddess, Buddha Nature, and the Wisdom tradition in Judaism. The Cosmic Christ is closely connected with praise, celebration, and dance. The Cosmic Christ brings back Eros, the ability to connect with the life force and to love life. Our spirituality must include and love the body; it must be embodied. "Prayer is the inhaling and the exhaling of the one breath of the universe – 'ruah' or spirit," said Hildegard of Bingen. By putting the Cosmic Christ archetype back into the life of the historical Jesus, we can find that all the events of Jesus' life are set in a cosmic context. There are many connections to Sophia, Lady Wisdom that have been neglected and covered

over by the patriarchal church. This is just one example of the exciting possibilities of reinterpretation in existing traditions.

Another aspect of mysticism that is critical for the Ecozoic Era is its emphasis on transformation. We must change if we are going to move into an era of mutual harmony of the human with other sentient beings. We need to go through a painful process of surrendering our egocentric egos and we can receive help and guidance from the Christian, Buddhist, Sufi and other traditions. This may be why Rumi, a Sufi, is the most popular poet of our time. In the mystical tradition there is an intense purification/transformation process, which is well documented in the Catholic writings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila. Buddhist practices help to achieve detachment and to learn compassion for self and others. I have found Andrew Harvey's description of the purification process very helpful. He names these stages of mystical transformation: awakening, illumination, union, and birthing. The birthing stage is important in that it stresses the need for ongoing service through love and compassion to all. This love and compassion becomes possible in the union with Cosmic Wisdom.

My final concern is that this spirituality for the Ecozoic Era addresses the recovery of the Divine Feminine. It has been disastrous for the Divine Feminine to be lost and denigrated and along with it, Earth, the body and half of the human race. Ecological feminists have concluded that any environmental ethic that fails to take seriously the interconnected domination of women and nature is simply inadequate. I say that a spirituality is inadequate if it fails to take seriously the loss of the Divine Feminine. A spirituality that can take us into the future must address our deep despair and underlying loss, which is sometimes unconscious. This loss has its deepest roots in our loss of connection to our first Mother, our primal matrix, the Earth.

As a psychotherapist working with survivors of childhood abuse, I have understood for a long time that all abuse is spiritual because abuse is shaming and shame cuts us off from our essential worth. I have understood that child abuse has had a negative impact on our image of ourselves and our image of God/Godde. Now I see that this insight has not gone far enough. Abusive parenting must certainly be changed and the impact understood, but the loss is much bigger than our relationship with our personal parents. There is a more primary Mother and Home that we are cut off from—the natural world.

Our woundedness from this loss is far greater and needs to be named, grieved and restored. In her book, *My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*, Chellis Glendinning calls this woundedness our original trauma. She suggests that this is really the Fall (Original Sin) which is described in different religious myths. "Original trauma is the disorientation we experience, however consciously or unconsciously, because we do not live in the natural world. It is the psychic displacement, the exile that is inherent in civilized life. It is our homelessness."

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I first experienced remembering my Great Mother through an image that came during a Reiki bodywork session on an 8-day silent retreat. Having been in silence for several days helped me to be available at a deeper level. While the therapist moved her hands above my head I had a vision behind her going all the way back—thousands and millions of women—and thousands of years. At the end of this stream of women was an enormous tree—the Mother Tree. At this time I knew nothing intellectually about the Goddess religions, but my body knew and my grief was overwhelming. I cried inconsolably, and as I looked at myself in the image

I was on an altar and my legs had been cut off at the knees—blood was streaming down as tears literally were streaming down my face. I had been cut off from my Mother, my roots, my Home. I had no legs to stand on.

After this experience and several others that were more joyful, I began to read and explore everything available about the Divine Feminine in the oldest Goddess religions and in all the classical religions. Marija Gumbatus' groundbreaking archeological work in *Language of the Goddess* describes a pervasive culture throughout Old Europe who worshipped the Great Mother in varied forms, often animal-human combinations, or just animal forms. The *Myth of the Goddess* by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford traces the image of the Goddess throughout prehistory and history. In the last 20 years a groundswell of books on the recovery of the Divine Feminine has lined the shelves of bookstores and even some libraries. In my study I have found that the mystics in many of the traditions, including John of the Cross in the Christian tradition and the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna, connected deeply

with the Divine Mother, even if she was not explicitly named. So again, mysticism has been keeping alive a tradition that honors the deepest wisdom of the earth.

We not only need to recover the Divine Feminine in general, but certain aspects of the Divine Feminine are specifically needed at this time. China Galland, in *Longing for Darkness*, focuses on the stories of the Black Madonna, Tara, Durga, and Kali. She emphasizes the need for not only the Feminine side of the God image but the Dark Feminine, which she connects to darkness, Earth, the deep underground root system that has been rejected, forgotten, and repressed. The Dark Mother allows us to go below the surface where everything is connected. Going deep down and back into the earth where we are all connected with each other, we can once again be in communion. For we are not here to control. We are here to be in communion with the larger Earth.

China Galland tells the story of Durga, the fierce, warrior Goddess of Hinduism who came to save the world when long ago it was threatened by demons. In ugly, messy, and seemingly hopeless situations, fierce, courageous, justice-loving Goddesses are needed who stand up for the poor. They empower us to have the courage to stand up for truth, love and compassion. This is not a magical rescue motif, for they need us to be their hands and voices in the world. Although hidden, marginalized, covered over and reinterpreted, this Dark Feminine Presence is found in many cultures. Its stories, images, and metaphors can inspire us and give us hope. Using the powerful practices that go with each of these Dark Feminine figures, we can become empowered to undertake difficult actions where needed.

Many people are having personal encounters with the Divine Feminine at this time in history. Bede Griffiths, a Christian mystic of the 20th c. who lived most of his life in India in an ashram, met the Mother in his 80's. She came to him in a powerful bodily experience in which he almost died. She often comes in a physical, bodily way, but these Divine Feminine figures are also reappearing in more public ways. Sitings of Mary, Tara and Kuan Yin are coming with a message of love and compassion for all, and almost always in a natural setting. Mary has also expressed concern for our Earth home and what we humans are doing to it. The Mother is coming back to help us.

I experience the Divine Feminine very differently than I experience the God of my childhood or my beloved personal relationship with Jesus. For me the Mother comes through nature. She comes through dancing and body prayer. She speaks to me through animals, trees, and rivers. She often breaks my heart by connecting me with the suffering of animals, the suffering of Her body, the Earth. She is often powerfully present in Her absence, as in a church service that ignores the Feminine and Earth, yet still has a vase of roses on the altar. Or a male-centered liturgy that has a woman signing for the hearing-impaired. Suddenly I will know She is here and I will be moved to tears. She is always expanding my connection with all of reality so that now I feel so much more connected to flowers, plants, trees, wild animals and birds. She breaks me open to deeper and deeper levels of desire for the wisdom of nature. This wisdom, while I learn about it through reading, is mostly a wisdom that comes through participation with my body and I recognize it and follow my inner knowing. I resonate with this passage from Tibetan Buddhist Scripture: "As a bee seeks nectar from all kinds of flowers, seek teachings everywhere. Like a deer that finds a quiet place to graze, seek seclusion to digest all you've gathered. Like a crazy person beyond all limits, go wherever you please and live like a lion completely free of all fear."

Our dominant mechanistic worldview has feared and scorned mysticism, angels, imagination, the body, women, and Earth as a living Being.	The mystical tradition along with the recovery of the Divine Feminine holds great promise for a spirituality that can move us into the Ecozoic Era. This spirituality will have a kinship structure, a circle with all beings having equal value. Our images of God/Godde will include a continuous, creative Presence immanent in this historical world. This immanent Presence will create, nurture and sustain these kinship bonds. Our dominant mechanistic worldview has feared and scorned mysticism, angels, imagination, the body, women, and Earth as a living Being. A prayer written by Sophiologist Valentin Tomberg restores many of the lost aspects I consider essential. Pointing to the Sacred Marriage image, it offers a balance to the traditional Christian prayer, which begins "Our Father." This prayer is called "Our Mother."
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Our Mother, Thou who art in the darkness of the underworld,
May the holiness of Thy name shine anew in our remembering,
May the breath of Thy awakening kingdom warm the hearts
of all who wander homeless,
May the resurrection of Thy will renew eternal faith even
unto the depths of physical substance.
Receive this day the living memory of Thee from human hearts,
Who implore Thee to fight the sin of forgetting Thee,
And are ready to fight against temptation,
Which has led Thee to existence in darkness,
That through the Deed of the Son,
The immeasurable pain of the Father be stilled,
By the liberation of all beings
from the tragedy of Thy withdrawal.
For Thine is the homeland and the boundless wisdom
and the all-merciful grace,
For all and everything in the Circle of All.

In closing, here are principles I would offer for reflection on spirituality in an Ecozoic Era:

- The Universe is the primary Sacred Reality.
- The inner life of the human depends immediately upon the outer world of nature.
- The planet Earth is our sacred home.
- Its kinship structure grants equal value to all sentient beings—all life forms—as manifestations of Spirit's creative energy.
- This structure is inclusive, emphasizing interdependence and interrelatedness without sacrificing uniqueness and diversity.
- Ecozoic spirituality is based on love and compassion rather than fear and guilt.
- It is respectful and knowledgeable of scientific discovery, the laws of nature, and the continuing evolutionary process.
- Its Images of God/Godde describe a creative Presence immanent in this historical world.
- This Presence is creative, on-going, changing and growing.
- It recovers the Divine Feminine, which has historically been so identified with the Earth, the Body, and Women.
- It understands life, death and rebirth as natural cycles.

- It accepts chaos, violence, pain and death as intrinsic to life.
- It faces the reality of imperfection as the way things are.
- It acknowledges the capacity for moral choice in human beings, recognizing their capacity for wrongdoing.
- Ecozoic spirituality is embodied.
- It recovers Eros and a sacred sexuality that helps us connect with the cosmic energy of the universe and inspires us to love life.
- It understands the dynamics of transformation, change and healing, using the gifts of psychology.
- It addresses the suffering of humans and all other life forms.
- It honors sacrifice redeemed from the distortions and abuses of hierarchic systems.
- It assumes the spiritual nature and inclination of all life forms.
- An Ecozoic spirituality seeks out and employs the myths and stories, images and rituals of 20 billion years of universe history.
- It gives humans ways to praise and express gratitude.
- It is participatory, non-hierarchical, and empowering.
- It honors and is skilled in using the languages of metaphor, poetry, dream, symbol, and imagination.
- Its forms of worship help us celebrate the daily and seasonal cycles of nature, and the transitions in an individual's lifespan.
- It addresses our intrinsic need to love and be loved and to have home and be at home in a mutually enhancing community.