

Listening to the Wisdom of Women

By Julie Purcell

In *The Great Work*, Thomas Berry asserts that “the only acceptable attitude of any mode of being is to recognize that existence is a mutual dependence of diversity of components. The human is a single enterprise that brings together women and men, elders and children, the farmer and the merchant, the foreigner and the native. So, too, Earth is a single enterprise, composed of land and sea, rain and wind, plants and animals and humans, and the whole magnificent universe. Nothing is itself without everything else. The wisdom of women is to join the knowing of the body to that of mind, to join soul to spirit, intuition to reasoning, feeling consciousness to intellectual analysis, intimacy to detachment, subjective presence to objective distance.”

Marion Woodman, Jungian analyst and author, has spent much of the last 25 years of her life attempting to articulate the wisdom of the feminine. Woodman uses the terms “feminine and masculine principles” to differentiate these terms from female and male genders. This perspective understands that women and men both need a balance of the feminine and masculine principles in order to enter fully into the human enterprise.

An image that points to this interdependence of the masculine and feminine is the caduceus with two spiraling serpents twining around a central staff, meeting and parting until eventually they merge in the “union of the opposites” or “sacred marriage.” This ancient symbol of healing is still seen in medical settings. It has its roots in the Eastern understanding of the powerful complementary energies Shakti (feminine) and Shiva (masculine). These energies are within us moving freely up and down our spine (the central staff) through energy centers called “chakras.”

This ancient wisdom acknowledges that both feminine and masculine energies are needed, sometimes to balance, at other times to oppose and differentiate, and at still other times to unite, bringing new creation, new life. When these energies are in harmony, the human being reflects the divine energies of the Universe, or the cosmic “axis mundi.” When they are not in balance, masculine energy is distorted into gross patriarchy, whose energy is the drive behind our destructive activities on Earth.

The corrective is not nearly so simple as to let women be in charge. Woodman notes that women can be just as patriarchal as men. She defines patriarchy as the power principle and the obsession for “power over.” Both women and men need to go through a transforma-

tion process birthing the new feminine and the new masculine. According to Woodman, the “conscious” feminine has never been birthed in our evolutionary history. To some extent we are all stuck in the patriarchal system that has been operating for over 5,000 years. Woodman refers to these powerful archetypal energies as the Old Mother and the Old Father.

These archetypal forms are within and beyond all of us and have both positive and negative aspects. Woodman cites an example of these old energies at work in the movie “Dead Poet’s Society,” in which the young man is trying to live his own creative life, but his father insists that he give up acting and become a doctor. The mother passively looks on, unable to confront her husband or stand up for her son. Ultimately, the son commits suicide rather than give up his soul. The power principle of prestige, power, fame and fortune often twists us out of the reality of our own souls. At its worst, the Old Father principle can manifest as someone like Hitler.

Words that point to the conscious feminine are presence, process, paradox, receptivity, resonance, reflection, and beingness. “Presence” is a quality of relating from the heart and soul. Two wisdom figures who emphasize presence in their work are Eckart Tolle in *The Power of Now* and Thich Naht Hahn in his many books on the practice of mindfulness. “Process” is allowing things to happen and letting life go where it wants to go, rather than controlling the outcome. It is valuing the process rather than focusing solely on the goal. “Paradox” is the capacity to accept all of life and to not so quickly judge events as good or bad, realizing some experiences that seem difficult at the time may be seen as positive later on. Paradox implies an acceptance of mystery.

“Receptivity” is to feel and take in while suspending judgment. “Resonance” expresses the capacity to live in the body and to be aware of body signals of connection, of the “yes” of an intuitive center that vibrates when an experience fits with one’s deepest essence. The capacity to “reflect” means to ponder, looking at what happens and sorting out what is important and why. It is “being” as opposed to “doing.” The conscious feminine needs time to slow down, to take time off from busy schedules, and to allow time for relationship and connection.

Woodman describes “soul” in relation to the feminine energy and “spirit” in relation to the masculine energy. Soul is the eternal part of ourselves that is housed in our bodies while we are alive. Spirit is both

within us and beyond us. Woodman explains that we need to be in touch with, communicate with, and express these energies without identifying directly with them. Since the feminine has been lost to consciousness in the West, people get stuck in the archetypal energy of the Old Mother. Woodman suggests that one way this stuck Old Mother energy expresses itself is in the acquisition of things and stuff—consumerism. This archetypal energy has also taken on concrete form in institutions, such as “Mother” Church and Alma “Mater.”

To undo this sense of personal and institutional “stuckness,” a differentiation process must occur in which people connect with their own embodied soul in order to determine what brings their whole body to life. Where is one’s life energy? What are one’s feelings? This needs to continue until one develops a strong sense of “I am” and “This is where I stand.” This self-defining act is needed to overcome the bewitchment of the concretized Goddess of materialism, where people become like stone, “numbing out,” “tuning out,” or following predetermined roles, senseless responsibilities, and culturally mandated “have to’s”—and, in the final stages, slavishly chasing a multitude of addictive substances and activities.

The process of freeing ourselves from the Old Mother and the Old Father is a painful transformation. Before the new sacred inner marriage can take place, we must go into the darkness, the wilderness, the unknown. The new energy comes from dark, wild, untamed places. Woodman sees one of our new tasks as preparing a strong container, our bodies, our matter, in order to open to spirit. Consequently, the energy of the Goddess will be connected to our instincts and our bodies. Woodman asks, “How many of us are strong enough to receive Spirit into our matter and let it change our lives?”

As one is freed of the Old Mother and Old Father energies, new energy will come to the ego so that we can do the necessary hard work. This new energy will draw

us to like-minded people so that we can support each other on the journey. Woodman assures us that the unconscious and our dreams are also supporting this growth. The energy of the Divine Feminine comes in dreams to give us a nudge to action or to give us guidance and strength to reclaim our feminine values. She comes to both men and women alike.

In addition to the work of remaking old ideas and institutions, these new energies will release new creativity. Old images that have become rigid and lifeless will receive new life. Traditional forms, such as communion or Eucharist, will take on new meaning. Woodman uses the terms “the redemption of matter” or “the redemption of my body” or “Christ representing Sophia to embody the feminine.” She suggests that incarnation is about the redemption of Matter (Matter being Mother, or the Divine Feminine), and the manifestation of God in Matter, in the body, in Earth.

This is at the core of the new consciousness that is being born out of the sacred marriage of Spirit and Matter. We will know that the sacred marriage has been experienced when our consciousness merges with the flowers, the trees, the rivers, the birds, and the animals. This union of “all in all” leads to heartbreak when we witness the destruction of the planet, and it gives us the strength to work towards healing ourselves and Earth.

Source: “Sitting by the Well,” audio tapes by Marion Woodman, Sounds True Recordings.

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