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WISDOM, NATURE AND SPIRIT

Carol MacCormack

Wisdom¹

When I was a child and the missionaries came to tell us of their good work amongst primitives I felt very lucky not to have been born a native. Then I received the loving hospitality that people have offered me as an anthropologist, and I am humbled by their wisdom. When as a student I read Sir James Fraser and other learned men who assured us Europeans that we had 'progressed' from a world view based on magic to one based on religion, then to the far superior world view based on science, I felt very lucky not to have been born in past ages. Now I know how desperate our need is to relearn that the world is sacred and a place of wonder and enchantment. As a student I absorbed received knowledge and passed examinations. Now I know to listen intently to many voices: the wind, bird song, old African women full of body and mystical experience, and even students! Cultures change as people in their maturity reflect back on what they were taught, and then re-state the propositions. We may become more bold in our epistemology, knowing things not only through logical reasoning, but also from mystical experience, body wisdom and other ways.

The orthodoxies imposed in school and Sunday school have eroded in the acid rain all about me. The all powerful God, usually defined as 'up there' in a trickle-down theology of grace, has eroded in the same showers of experience that destroyed my faith in trickle-down economics. It seems a time to be asking questions we would not have dared to ask as children. Is monotheism a self-evident progressive step upward from pantheism? Quaker insight leaves us well poised to explore a middle ground; what Matthew Fox has called panentheism. God is in all things and all things are in God. The work of God's Spirit is from the ground, the base, the bottom up, or the inside out. "The spirit comes from within things".² We know this experientially in the gathered meeting, or in any small group anywhere in the world where people treat each other as equal, and share their common story of pain and grace. We know it with pets, in gardens, and all those other places where love and wonder replace fear and loneliness.

Wisdom and the Blessed Community

Three hundred people came to the U.S. Friends' Conference on Religion and Psychology last year, to be with each other and with Marion Woodman, the wise and witty Canadian who is extending the boundaries of Jungian thought.³ She concluded that institutions, including the institutional church, are not reflecting the needs of our culture, nor the healing process becoming born in

our culture. Images which the institutional church asks us to share are not adequately evoking heart, mind (logic) and imagination, pulling the whole personality together. For Woodman, the healing symbols we need come from the archetypal level, the realm of silence, at the crossroads between our personal selves and the larger social and environmental wholes which embed us. On our journey to that crossroads we give up part of our ego to Sophia, the goddess of wisdom.

Sophia survives through time, and through all the textual editing of the Bible. She is present at the transforming points in our lives, and she is also present in the historical transformations of cultures. In Greek translations of the Bible she is Hekate, and in ancient Hebrew she is Hek-Mae or Hokmah, 'maternal wisdom', whom Proverbs 8 describes as God's co-creator. Proverbs 9 speaks of her priestesses, her seven-pillared temples, and her sacramental meals. She is also Hawwah (Eve) from the Hebrew word meaning 'life'.^{4, 5} She is women in the Balkans today, and widows dressed in black, who are crying out from their body wisdom for life, peace and justice amidst war.

Explorations toward wisdom, through intellect, body wisdom, and mystical experience are part of the healing process which some Quakers are seeking within our community. This pamphlet intends to sensitise us not only to the process within, but also to the many people outside conventional religious congregations who are seeking in the same direction. The latter have given up the institutional church which they perceive as not reflecting the needs of our time. They long for holistic integration in the depths of their psyche, in human communities and with natural and cosmic processes. Our Religious Society of Friends is not bounded by creeds or ready-made rituals so we are well positioned to respond innovatively to the needs of our time. Meetings may be very good places in which such seekers might explore, and test their leadings within the gathered meeting. As we listen with hearts and minds open, we are unlikely to shrug them off with the negative connotations of goddess worship, neo-pagans, crones or witches. Listening, we offer the kind of spiritual hospitality which Harvey Gillman feels is so vital to our Quaker tradition.⁶ We all stretch and grow in meetings which are a safe place, a community in which we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, however it may be imaged in our time. Gillman suggests we are not seekers so much as explorers, active in the dynamic interplay between truth, openness, risk and tradition. This pamphlet opens a window on the kinds of explorations going on about us, focusing on wicca as an example.

Explorers

In the back garden of a house, under the full moon, the priestess drew a line three times around the group. She cast the circle, and drew the five corners, making a magical space. She called on the five elements for protection: fire, water, earth, air and spirit.

I draw the circle thrice about
To keep the evil spirits out.

Then she said in a soft voice, "Now we have a sacred space. It is safe and it is ours." Thus began a wiccan ritual.

Wicca is the Old English term for witch, deliberately used in an attempt to reclaim its original meaning: the knowledge of wise women who were often healers and midwives, close to the creative energy of birthing and nurturing.⁷ The term evokes images of people comfortable with bodily and earthly humors in balance with a spiritual cosmology. Wiccans, or those who keep the craft, or neo-pagans, or worshippers of the goddess are only one of the alternative spiritualities being explored by Quakers and non-Quakers. The alternative spiritualities are kindred spirits with holistic therapies in health, therapies which promote the well-being of mind, body and spirit as a unity. They resonate with aspects of the peace movement as people explore the links between inward and outward peace. The post-Freudian psychologies, the ecology movement, and the feminist movement which encourages us all, whatever our biological designation, to value the feminine within are part of the picture. These alternatives are bubbling up within a culture which is technology-driven, materialistic and individualistic to the point of mass pathology. This pamphlet explores the possibility that much creative energy may be set to constructive ends with the birthing and nurturing of a more holistic world view, and wicca is only one window into that re-imaged world.

Dan Seeger wrote very sensitively about "goddess worship" in New York Yearly Meeting, where the boundaries or conventional images of our faith communities are no longer in sharp focus. Indeed, the focus has not been sharp since the quietist period in the history of Friends. However, he suggests it is good to seek an enlivening of spirit in novel places in historical moments such as ours. Paradoxically, this very seeking to 'perfect the world' could refocus us on the core of our life in faith together in a time when civilisation itself is in deep crisis.⁸

Wicca circles are loosely structured with no over-arching organisation. Since each person's spiritual journey has a different starting point and each seeker's journey is different, there is only a minimal core of shared belief.

Margot Adler, author of *Drawing Down the Moon*, has summarised this core as:

The world is holy. Nature is holy. The body is holy. Sexuality is holy. The mind is holy. The imagination is holy. You are holy. A spiritual path that is not stagnant ultimately leads one to the understanding of one's own divine nature. Thou art Goddess. Thou art God. Divinity is immanent in all Nature. It is as much within you as without.

In our culture which has for so long denied and denigrated the feminine as negative, evil or, at best, small and unimportant, women (and men too) will never understand their own creative strength and divine nature until they embrace the creative feminine, the source of inspiration, the Goddess within.

While one can at times be cut off from experiencing the deep and ever-present connection between oneself and the universe, there is no such thing as sin (unless it is simply defined as that estrangement) and guilt is never very useful.

The energy you put into the world comes back.⁹

Bryn Mawr College, where I have been teaching, was founded more than a century ago to provide a guarded education for Quaker women. Intellectual adventurousness rather than guardedness characterises undergraduates and postgraduates today, but many of the students are still superbly grounded in classical archaeology and mythology. They know their Greek and Latin and are well read in Celtic and other mythologies. One student reflected that her seeking began at about age eleven. "Every religious service I'd been to had been dull as Rye Krisp bread. I was already aware that my occasional prayers in times of stress were more from desperation than belief." A few years earlier she had been given three books: *Old Testament Bible Stories for Children*, *New Testament Bible Stories for Children*, and *D'Aulaire's Greek Myths*. "The Old Testament was okay. The New Testament was boring. The Greek myths I read until the cover fell off."¹⁰ Another student described her childhood in which she sought the magical, reading whatever she could find. "I talked to trees and gave them wreaths of flowers. I worried about hurting the feelings of my stuffed animals. I played at being Artemis, or Athena; I became a barefoot dryad in the woods of my garden and played dangerous games with the shadows under the ivy leaves, learning about the cycles from my cat's kills and the new eggs. And always I watched for magic, for the glimpse of the moon-coated lightning-horned shadow among the untended yards in the hills of the city."¹¹

The Bible, in its canonised form, now relegates the followers of Hokmah or Sophia to hell. Similarly, the concept of witch has been given fearful connotations by the church. However, wiccans feel that reclaiming the original meaning of the concept is part of the process of women reclaiming their right to be powerful, and the process of men relearning the divine nature of the feminine within. A witch is a 'shaper', a creator who bends the unseen into form.¹² This kind of imagery is very helpful to people at transformation points in their lives, and does much to infuse life with a sense of magic which is an aspect of wisdom. Through this kind of exploration one student found a sense of wholeness. "The world around me breathed again, everything had a personality. And everything was sacred, EVERYTHING. Trees and stones and rain and sky and my own body." It was a great release from the Christian teaching she had, that "body is filth, spirit is All." Ultimately, by moving out of Christianity she was able to spiral back into what she felt was the heart of Christianity.

In that ceremony under the full moon, those reclaiming the craft sang:

We have come from the Goddess
And to her we will return
Like a drop of rain
Floating to the sea.

Wicca seeks to ground itself in the energy of the universe, within what theoretical physicists call the plenum, that cosmic sea of energy that is the creative ground of everything.¹³

Wicca similarly seeks to ground itself in the universe, and is concerned with energy patterns in nested systems of cosmos, biology, community and personality. In some ceremonies drumming may raise the energy level of the group and people may be asked to close their eyes and begin to ground the energy.

James, in the role of priest, loosely bound the hands of each person with string, asking in a loud calm voice "What binds you?" "Fear" said the first woman. "Fear, fear, fear..." the group chanted. "Anger" said a man. "Anger, anger, anger..." "Feelings of inadequacy..." Inadequacy, inadequacy, inadequacy..." "Loneliness" said a very quiet man. "Fear of failure" said another. After all had named what bound them the priestess bound the hands of the priest. All stood isolated in a world fragmented by fear for the self. The priestess turned her face to the full moon and began to chant:

Everything she touches changes.
Everything she changes touches.
Change me, touch me.
Change us, touch us.

All began to chant in unison, and after a time the priestess changed her sequence so that the chant became a round, its parts interwoven. This round increased in intensity and speed over ten minutes as people concentrated deeply. Suddenly she called out, all broke loose their bindings, joyously moving their arms and bodies. The drums began with full force, and the movement evolved into dancing. After a few attempts to lure in the shy lonely man the priestess grasped his hand and swung him into the circle. There was laughter as in our games of childhood. Gradually the energy spent itself, the drums beat softly, the spontaneous dancing returned to an ordered circle, and the priestess closed the circle with ritual blessing. People chatted, then began to gravitate toward a small neighbourhood restaurant.¹⁴

Interpretation

What do we make of all this? Are alternative spiritualities such as wicca 1) an invented tradition, 2) part of a neo-Transcendental movement, 3) a remnant of the 1960s, 4) a psychological phenomenon for dealing with stress in our post-industrial age, or 5) part of a transforming world view? The answer is probably yes to all the above. Wiccans are trying to reclaim a sense of spiritual and physical wholeness, celebrating a sense of wonder and respect toward nature, the body and the psyche. They are turning away from a technocratic world view toward one that balances the energies of nature, including a healthy balance of feminine and masculine energies. Some observers suggest they are seeking for a new totality that may take away the occasion for wars.¹⁵ They are also working within a spiritual community on fear, anger and despair. Joanna Macy, in her book *World as Lover, World as Self*, and Matthew Fox in his book *Creation Spirituality*, encourage us to face --to even befriend--the darkness of our time in order to empower ourselves to deal with it. They suggest that when we face the darkness, openly and together, we tap the deep reserves of strength within us. Many of us fear that confrontation with despair will bring loneliness and isolation, but on the contrary, in letting go of old defences truer community is found.^{2,16}

We do not know how much of the traditional wisdom in our European past is forever lost, and people must use their experience and imagination to

augment what remains. Some of the reclaiming is a scholarly process as people read, for example, archaeology and contemporary ethnography. They conclude that the more socially and ecologically balanced societies--the more peaceful societies--are not dominated by masculine ideology, driven by manipulative technologies nor hierarchical. Befriending the feminine, for example, will surely change the way we view ourselves, our environment and our neighbours. In her important forthcoming book Susan Starr Sered looked at a sample of twelve religions throughout the world that were founded by women, theologically guided by women, and have large but not necessarily exclusively female membership.¹⁷ Some of those women's religions have millions of members, as with my case study of the women's Sande society in West Africa.¹⁸ Sered found that women's religions have important characteristics in common. Firstly, the divine is immanent--within us and all creation, not external, remote nor judgmental. Secondly, rather than concentrating on sin, and rules and organisational structures for redemption, these women's religions are concerned with life as we all experience it--birth, nurturing, suffering and death. Women's lives are especially concerned with these experiences. And finally, there is little hierarchical organisation. Each local congregation is relatively autonomous.

It is not an historical accident that the Religious Society of Friends constantly guards against overly centralised organisation. Our blessed community is the most gender blind, or gender just, that I have encountered in Western society. Where there is centralised organisation women tend to be excluded from leadership. Furthermore, centralised organisations are largely concerned with power and conquest. The centralised churches focus on how to bring new members into the faithful, and how to make sure old members do not leave. Historians and sociologists have documented how the centralisation of religion is linked with the rise of political centralisation. Women have little part in monarchy and foreign imperialism. Indeed, monarchy and foreign imperialism have a detrimental effect on women's status.^{17,19} This is true in Western history, in the Inca civilisation of Peru, and throughout the world. The highly centralised religions also tend to be monotheistic. Stover and Hope looked at 312 societies throughout the world to try to understand the relationship between gender justice and religion. They found a clear relationship between monotheism--usually a belief in a male god--and inequality for women.²⁰ Susan Sered explored the other side of the coin. In women's religions monotheism was either absent or muted (e.g. Shakers), and there was much justice and social equality.

Sered considered the complex interactions between theology and organisation in great detail. The theologies of women, concerned with birth, nurturing, suffering and death, are experience based, not credally based, as

with the Society of Friends. These 'supple' theologies, as Sered called them, do not require centralised organisation to spread them, nor to enforce them. When they genuinely speak to our condition they simply spread. Creeds are not necessary for maintaining power and domination, because that is not the way they spread.

We might then return to the question of why some people are turning from centralised religion to the alternative spiritualities such as wicca. T. M. Luhrmann gives us valuable insight from her extended anthropological fieldwork within several wicca circles in London.²¹ This is not 'fringe' scholarship; the book began as a Ph.D. thesis in social anthropology at Cambridge University, and was published by Harvard University Press. She found what I and other colleagues had earlier found for people who were attracted to holistic medicine in Northern and Western Europe. The converts by conviction were much better educated, and in higher social and economic categories than the average population. In Luhrmann's study many of the members of wicca groups were men, and many of the men were quite senior civil servants. A large number were also computer programmers. The women, too, covered the entire social and economic spectrum, but on average were well educated. Many in Luhrmann's sample, like Bryn Mawr students, were well educated in classical Greek and Latin literature, and conversant with a wide range of European and non-Western literature. They were simply seeking a more holistic existence than their dreary jobs allowed; a creative outlet for their imagination, emotion and religious promptings.

Margot Adler's mature description of her spiritual journey gives us insights into what might be drawing civil servants and computer programmers into the alternative spiritualities. At the age of twelve, after studying the Greek myths in school, she recalls that "in my deepest and most secret moments I daydreamed that I had become those beings, feeling what it would be like to be Artemis or Athena. I acted out the old myths and created new ones, in fantasy and private play." As she grew older the experience "became a strangely discarded part of youthful fantasy. No one told me directly 'people don't worship the Greek gods anymore, much less attempt to become them through ritual and fantasy,' but the messages around me were clear enough." Adler had been raised in a family of agnostics, and embarked on an adolescent religious search through Catholic masses, Quaker meetings, synagogues and churches. She wrote: "Today it seems to me that I thirsted for the power and richness of those original experiences, though I found only beliefs and dogmas that seemed irrelevant or even contradictory to them." Her first encounter with wicca was emotionally powerful because it "had simply given me permission to accept a part of my own psyche that I had denied for years."

I began exploring the ideas in this pamphlet during a dinner table conversation with a dear academic friend. We had jointly organised one of the first university women's studies courses. Angela commented that all the great leaders of the early feminist movement have now turned toward religion; why was that so? As we considered this question Angela reflected on her childhood in Italy. She explained that throughout childhood she adored Athena and identified with her. As many well educated liberal Italian women are, Angela is deeply agnostic with regard to centralised religion, but her life is filled with grace and she has fought many successful battles for social justice. If she were ever to find her way into corporate religious celebration, wicca could well be a doorway. These mature reflections resonate well with the reflective statements of students in their early 20s. They all give us glimpses of the work of those healing symbols from the archetypal level, the realm of silence, that Marion Woodman has helped Quakers understand.

Social Injustice and Healing Images

People are attracted to alternative spiritualities such as wicca for many of the reasons people are attracted to Friends. They are seeking the spiritual healing of a loving community, and they are concerned with issues of social justice. A Bryn Mawr student explained that when she was in school she read everything she could about witches or wise women. She identified with them, and wanted to know what they knew. She wanted to reclaim the wisdom that was obliterated by Christianity on the one hand and modern materialistic and individualistic alienation on the other. She did not want to let their lives go unmarked. We might feel the meaning of this through analogy with the Jews who died during the Second World War. Can we just say "they are dead and gone, let us forget them"? Rather, we want to celebrate their lives and we want their wisdom to enrich our lives today. With the medieval women, we do not know how many were killed, and how much of their wisdom was destroyed. Scholars estimate that the church's witch hunts could have killed from one to six million women, or perhaps more. In the process, they overmasculinised centralised religion, and indeed our whole culture.

Think, for example, of Hildegard of Bingen, a wise woman born in 1098. She was a healer and herbalist, a poet and composer. She was an artist and an intellectual, a mystic, a prophet and a leader of men and women. In many media she still tells us today how much she loved the earth and all creation.²² In one of her meditations she wrote:

The earth is mother of all, for contained in her are the seeds of all.

The earth of humankind contains all moistness, all verdancy, all germinating power.

It is in so many ways fruitful. All creation comes from it. Yet it forms not only the basic raw material of humankind, but also the substance of the incarnation of God's son.

Today her meditations, music and paintings help us reclaim that holistic medieval world view. But what if Hildegard had been born a few centuries later? She would have been a marked woman, just another heretic.

Fortunately the insights of those wise women are not entirely lost, and have re-emerged, much as mysticism in the Society of Friends, pushed underground by masculinised scientific rationality, is coming to the surface again as an alternative way of knowing. So, we might re-interpret our history to see that the alternative spiritualities about us now, hand-in-hand with other holistic movements, have been an healthy--indeed an essential--counterbalance to this process of masculinisation. We must treasure all memory we have of previous blessed communities. Much, not only of wicca, but of our Judeo-Christian tradition, has been erased. However, the feminist critique which has been sweeping the better theological seminaries is employing formidable scholarship to try to reclaim it.²³ Where too much has been erased, we must use our creative imagination. Listen to this voice. "There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember... You say there are no words to describe it, you say it does not exist? But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or failing that, invent."²⁴

Casting the circle, drawing the five corners, and calling on the energies of fire, water, earth, air and spirit are examples of symbolic acts which confirm the wiccan world view. But the meanings which the symbols evoke today are not exactly the same as the meanings evoked for medieval wise women. The meanings change as the symbols shape themselves to current social and psychological conditions. But social and psychological conditions, in turn, are shaped by the meanings and emotions we may now be investing in symbols. Symbol-enriched rituals fuse together the world as we live it and the world as we imagine it. Social historians have described in more detail how all 'tradition' is indeed invented.²⁵

The meanings of symbols and the course of history change in a feed-back relationship. Sixty years ago Germans began to observe--or participate in--torch-light pageants outside the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Germany had been defeated in World War I, their national identity spoiled, much as the personal identity of children in school is spoiled when they are given failing

marks and relegated to marginal 'streams' in the life of the school. The decision to punish Germany by requiring heavy reparation payments further weakened the economy and national self-respect. All this was exacerbated by a world-wide economic recession. The torch-light mass gatherings symbolised a new kind of national identity. They released new energies. The denigration which Germans felt was projected onto others; first the gypsies, then the Jews, then other nations. No one stopped to ask, in an healing ritual, "what binds you?" Fear and feelings of inadequacy fed upon themselves. The firelight increased energy, centred it, directed it, but it was based on fear and hate.

The world was not so foolish as to lay punishing reparations on Germany following World War II, and the German economy is among the strongest in the world. However, unemployment in the former West Germany is about 8% and in the former East Germany it is about 15%. As immigrants from the east flood in, some Germans feel 'they' are taking 'our' jobs. The discontents of the unemployed and socially marginal are once again being projected, sometimes in torch-light rallies, and sometimes in frank burning and other violent pogroms against refugees in Rostock, Hunxe, Molln, and elsewhere. Throughout Europe there are increasing neo-Nazi attacks on the 'other.' But counter to these destructive meanings of fire, an alternative meaning is being conferred upon the fire symbol by thousands of ordinary German people. German cities have recently seen processions of thousands of candle-carrying people, the *lichterketten*, signifying with their rivers of gentle light that people cannot be simply murdered because they are different. Their candles before Berlin's Brandenburg Gate spelled out "never again." This has been called by some the birth of a new 'civic' religion which derives its strength from the symbols of traditional religion and has transformed them to serve collective humanitarian sentiments. This religion comes without God, but not without the power to appeal to our sense of community. It has been described as colouring a new world view in which people are brought closer together.²⁶ This exploration of alternative spiritualities is a worldwide phenomenon. People talk with one another, perhaps at international peace and ecology demonstrations or in scholarly conferences. They read the same magazines and books, many rapidly translated into several languages. Charlene Spretnak's *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* is an example of this international literature.²⁷ That Philadelphia garden reflected the ecofeminist ceremonies taking place in many countries. They, as do we Quakers, find light as a helpful symbol. Herbs may be ground and burned to raise the energy of the group, or the group may centre around a candle, or dance around an open fire outdoors. At some level might there may be a 'tuning' with those thousands of Germans making rivers of candlelight

through their cities? The energy is grounded in community and an interdependent cosmos.²⁸ Gaia is just one of the goddesses evoked, one we might all take to heart. She is the symbol James Lovelock chose to help us understand that the world and its atmosphere might be understood as a single living organism. The destructiveness we people--tiny cells within the organism--put into this one living entity damages the all, including ourselves. This is scientific language for the wicca knowledge that "the energy you put into the world comes back."

Conclusion

Wicca has been described as an example of a new seeking, especially outside the Protestant churches which have often displayed a rather biblical arrogance toward nature and toward the creative impulses of life. Within Roman Catholicism, Matthew Fox and others in the creation spirituality movement, have also tried to reorient organised religion away from sin and redemption theology; away from 'religious terrorism' as Matthew Fox has named it. He was first silenced by the Vatican for a year and has been expelled from the Dominican Order.²⁹ The alternative spiritualities are characterised by direct experience being valued over doctrinal beliefs, and non-manipulative social relations being valued over body-denying concepts of sin.

In wicca circles and in other alternative spiritualities people are seeking a sense of extended family, a quality of *communitas* or sacred oneness with other people as an alternative to bureaucracy, status rankings and the hierarchy of gender and ethnic oppression. Many people are attracted to wicca at a period of transition in their lives, at one of those 'leaving home' stages that Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins document so well in *The Feminine Face of God*.³⁰ It is a ritual process in which people are betwixt and between careers, partners, or life stages; in a period fraught with both danger and the potential for spiritual growth.³¹ Woodbrooke and Pendle Hill provide a safe place for people in this kind of transformative stage, but are there thousands or millions of others feeling fragmented by the materialism and individualism of our post-Cartesian culture? They too are seeking spiritual growth and profoundly holistic health in safe and loving communities.

If this hypothesis is valid, then wicca and the other 'invented traditions' for alternative spiritualities are one of a piece with alternative therapies in the holistic health movement, much of the green movement, aspects of the peace movement, the feminist movement, and therefore of interest to Friends.

Notes and References

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