

God/ess¹
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May 8, 2016
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Today is Mother's Day, a day of celebration for some, a day of difficulty for others. We come together as we do each week, with room for joy and sorrow, with room to go beneath the surface of things, to dive deeply into meaning and listen to our spirits in the circle of community. Today we will also explore the idea of the divine as mother.

Prayer: Honoring the Deeper Voices² Evin Carvill Ziemer

Spirit of Life,

Today, the advertising tells us what to buy for mom,
instead help us listen to and honor the deeper voices.

Today, let us honor all of those who have made this world possible for us.

Those who did the hard work of building a better world for future generations.

Today, let us honor the grief of those who have lost children,
through miscarriage, stillbirth, death,

those who long for children,

and those who for whatever reason cannot be in touch with their children this day.

Today, let us honor the grief of those who mourn for their parents,
whether separated by death, dementia, or disconnection.

Today, let us honor those who fill in for missing mothering—

fathers, grandparents, foster parents, aunts and uncles and more.

Today, let us honor the ways we have each been nurtured and mothered,

by the mothers who gave birth to us, by the parents who raised us,

by those many others who have supported and nurtured us, of all genders.

Today, let us honor those who survived damaging and traumatic mothering.

Spirit of life, help them to heal.

Let us remember that not every mother is ready for her children.

Let us turn aside from the myths of motherhood on a pedestal

and remember each parent is an imperfect human

in need of more support than adulation, in need of our support.

Today, let us honor those who are doing the hard work of nurturing,

striving to meet not only the physical needs,

but the many deep and complicated emotional and spiritual needs.

Spirit of life, nurture and sustain them so that they may be the nurturers you desire.

Today, let us honor all the ways each of us give to tomorrow,

knowing there are multiple paths of meaning

and more than one way to birth the future.

Today, with both joy and sorrow, let us be grateful for life,

for the chance to love, for those who love us,

and the opportunity to nurture the future.

May it be so. Amen.

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2 <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/honoring-deeper-voices>

Reading One: Excerpt from *Why Women Need the Goddess* (1978) Carol P. Christ³

Even people who no longer "believe in God" or participate in the institutional structure of patriarchal religion still may not be free of the power of the symbolism of God the Father. A symbol's effect does not depend on rational assent, for a symbol also functions on levels of the psyche other than the rational. ...Symbol systems cannot simply be rejected; they must be replaced. Where there is no replacement, the mind will revert to familiar structures at times of crisis, bafflement, or defeat.

Religions centered on the worship of a male God create "moods" and "motivations" that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same legitimating the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society. Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent....

The simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of Goddess is the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power. ...The affirmation of female power contained in the Goddess symbol has both psychological and political consequences. Psychologically, it means the defeat of the view engendered by patriarchy that women's power is inferior and dangerous. This new "mood" of affirmation of female power also leads to new "motivations:" it supports and undergirds women's trust in their own power and the power of other women in family and society.

Reading Two: Earth Mother Starhawk⁴ (#524)

Earth mother, star mother,
You who are called by
a thousand names,
May all remember
we are cells in your body
and dance together.
You are the grain and the loaf
that sustains us each day,
And as you are patient
with our struggles to learn
So shall we be patient
with ourselves and each other.
We are radiant light
and sacred dark—the balance--
You are the embrace that heartens
And the freedom beyond fear.
Within you we are born, we grow, live, and die--
You bring us around the circle to rebirth,
Within us you dance Forever.

3 "Why Women Need the Goddess" was presented as the keynote address to an audience of over 500 at the "Great Goddess Re-emerging" conference at the University of Santa Cruz in the spring of 1978. It was first published in *Heresies: The Great Goddess Issue* (1978), 8-13, and reprinted in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader on Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 273-287, as well as in Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 117-132. Available online at <http://www.goddessariadne.org/#!/why-women-need-the-goddess-part-1/cufo>

4 #524 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, (Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993)

Sermon

Pagan activist, Starhawk, writes about her experience of the *Goddess*. She says:

People often ask me if I *believe* in the Goddess. I reply, ‘Do you believe in rocks?’ ...The phrase ‘believe *in*’ itself implies that we cannot know the Goddess, that she is somehow intangible, incomprehensible. But we do not *believe* in rocks—we may see them, touch them, dig them out of our gardens, or stop small children from throwing them at each other. We know them, we connect with them. In the Craft, we do not *believe* in the Goddess—we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the earth, through trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all.⁵

Today, I want to explore some questions about the *Goddess*. You may have seen them in the eblast: What do female images of the divine offer to women? What do they offer to men? And why does it matter how we imagine the divine anyway? But the more I thought about it, the more challenging it seemed to bring that topic into this sanctuary, into a sermon of words. Because my experience of the *Goddess* is more like what Starhawk describes—a connection through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the earth; it is a connection through trees, through dance, through fire, through other human beings; and most importantly, through something deep within myself. Playwright Ntozake Shange said, “I found God within myself and I loved her fiercely.”

And my deepest wish would be that you might also experience that discovery and that sense of fierce loving. But here we are, with words as the primary tool I have available right now for our gathered community in worship. So I will try to explore those questions in words.

To do that I need to share something of my own life before finding the goddess. It was in 1979 that I first became aware of the option of female images of divinity. Prior to that I had been steeped in the religious tradition of *God* the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I already had grown into a fairly nuanced understanding of *God*. I knew that *God* wasn't really a male—that all the images of *God* were just images. And when the Bible spoke of “men,” I had a practice of mentally included myself into that category. But those male images worked at a deep subconscious level and reinforced what I experienced all around me.

In my family, my mother's life revolved around my father. She deferred to him, and we all did, a family of seven daughters and two sons. At church, even though some things were changing, only men could be priests, and only priests could say Mass. In college, I had many friends who were seminarians training for the priesthood, and it never even occurred to me to imagine myself in that kind of religious leadership.

In 1979 the work of feminist philosopher Mary Daly⁶ changed everything. She helped me be able to see how my religious tradition had been overwhelmingly shaped by the dominance of men. She helped me see how dominance itself was a pervasive paradigm in our culture: putting men over women, white people over people of color, rich over poor, humanity over nature, soul over body, heaven over earth. I learned how these social hierarchies infiltrate even our most personal images and experiences. A white male-dominated culture will create within us white male-dominant images of *God*. The King. The

⁵ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979) p. 77-78.

⁶ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

Judge. The Lord. The Father. And those images in turn construct the cultural norms by which we live. The male dominated religions had excluded women from spiritual leadership, and even burned them as witches.

Daly's book turned my world upside down. Everything I thought I knew became suspect. I didn't know what to do about *God*. That word began to break my heart, and I felt lost and bewildered and unsure of what to do next.

Images matter. The kind of images that fill our thoughts matter. If we imagine the *Divine* as male, that says that males are most important. If we imagine the *Divine* as a judge, that teaches us to be afraid. My saving grace was to find connections to other women who were wrestling with all of this together. Together we intentionally re-imagined *God* as female, and called her *Goddess*. We reclaimed female power by calling ourselves *witches*. We remembered that many cultures have worshipped the *Divine* in female form, and began to explore those *Goddesses*. Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna. Brigid, Cerridwen, Persephone, Athena, Iyatiku, Freya, Gaia.

But we didn't only change the gender of the *Divine*, or look to ancient names. We re-imagined the *Divine* as inherent within our bodies, within nature, within sexuality, within all the elements of the universe that had been excluded from sacredness. And so it was that we set out to see if we might experience the *Goddess*. Is it possible to imagine a *Goddess* and also experience her as real? What is real and what is imaginary?

Here's the thing I discovered. The *Goddess* began to feel real to me when my life started to change. Something is real when it makes a difference to us, when it causes transformation. Images become real when they open a door and shape the world. The *Goddess* became real when we danced together at the top of a hill on the evening of the summer solstice. The *Goddess* became real when the power of women became real—when we were able to embrace our own sacredness, affirm our own intrinsic value and dignity, and live out our own gifts and talents and leadership. Gradually, we moved from taking supporting roles in the stories told by men, to become the authors of our own stories. And in this way we began to experience the *Goddess*. She became incarnate in our lives.

Today, almost forty years later, what has changed? And how has the *Goddess* shaped or changed Unitarian Universalists? UU's have had two engaging curricula on female divinity created by UU women—*Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, and *Rise Up and Call Her Name*. There has been a lot of de-gendering of hymns and readings. But I was surprised, when I was looking for hymns or readings for today, to find how few options there were in the hymnals for reimagining divinity as female. So I wondered? Is it enough to de-gender the symbols? Do we still need the *Goddess*?

There *have* been changes in the situation of women in our society. More women are pursuing careers that were once the domain of men. Among UU's more than half of our spiritual leaders are women—though there are still gender differences in pay and status. In the United States, we even have a woman who is a front-runner in the primaries for the White House. But if we look more closely at the role of women in society, there is still an incredible amount of inequality. Only twenty percent of congressional seats are held by women. Only twenty-five percent of state-wide offices are held by women.⁷ There is still an epidemic of violence toward women. We still see young women struggling

⁷ <http://www.thenation.com/article/why-does-us-still-have-so-few-women-office/>

with poor self-image and body-hate manifesting as anorexia or sexting or effacing themselves to try to please men. We see older women suffering from job loss and higher rates of poverty.

We definitely have further to go in the quest for equality for women. I also notice how devotion to the *Goddess* became marginalized in our culture. While originally a critique of mainstream religions, now it is mostly found among small pagan groups, and often combined there with a reclamation of older pagan images of the divine masculine. Perhaps these groups include more balance between male and female power, but there has been a de-emphasis of the critique of the pervasive power dynamics in our culture.

Perhaps this leads into the second question—what do female images of the *divine* offer to men? What can men gain from the *Goddess*? I turned to two men who had been involved in some way with *Goddess* work to see how they understood it. Robert Gass, who has produced music about *goddesses*, was quoted in an essay called, *What's In It For Men?* He says:

Reconnecting with the Goddess is important not only for women and their spiritual journey. Men, especially in our western cultures, have been taught to fear and reject the "feminine" qualities of their own nature such as the ability to feel deeply, compassion and the instinct to nurture. The great social challenges of our times demand that all of us, women and men, become more sensitive to the suffering of others. The honoring of the Goddess has also always been associated with a deep connectedness to the Earth and nature. Our urgent need to learn to live in balance with the Earth ultimately depends not only on an intellectual understanding of ecology, but also on an experience of the natural world as sacred.⁸

Unitarian Robert Fisher, who with his wife participated in *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, writes:

One of the gifts we men receive from the women's movement and the CAKES curriculum is clarification of a fresh interpretation of "power" and the relationship between the sexes. I realized that what women are concerned about is the "power over" ethic of the dominant social pattern, or paradigm, of much of contemporary culture. What many women oppose is the subordination of women and the domination by men that a hierarchical structure usually advocates. They also oppose a dominate deity. ... I soon learned the power of the Goddess was different than the omnipotence of a traditional male God I had been acquainted with. One of the most crucial questions that women have raised is, "What do we mean by power?" The Goddess religion spoke of "power within," not dominance and "power over."

Both women and men speak of how the image of the *Goddess* has created a new paradigm for relationships between people—a paradigm of partnership, rather than hierarchy. Power with, rather than power over. It has also opened up a larger wholeness to both women and men—traits that were stereotyped to one gender over another are seen to be accessible to both women and men, and this has also carved out new space for those who fit neither of the binary genders, but find their identity somewhere in between, perhaps as transgender or gender queer.

However, the wider society has not abandoned hierarchy or dominance or power over. Just look at Donald Trump. And this time I am going to say his name, because the ideas he embraces are

⁸ http://www.riseupandcallhername.com/images/What_s_In_It_For_Men.pdf

dangerous and life-threatening. He thrives on power-over, being the boss, being aggressive and being proud of his dominating behavior. And that is resonating with a large number of people. The rule of the most powerful is just the opposite of the values I hold dear, and I think perhaps most UU's would agree. We are living in very precarious times. It has been said that we no longer really have democracy, rather we are in the midst of an oligarchy, rule by a few wealthy families. Despite the gains made by marginalized groups, we could easily regress into greater violence and greater hierarchy. So the values symbolized in the *Goddess* are still needed by our world, if we hope to keep moving toward equality and compassion.

One of the strongest aspects of the image of the *Goddess* is how it has been connected with the image of Mother Earth. For some this has been a lovely metaphor for how the earth has birthed us from her substance, and still supplies all of our sustenance. For others, this is an honoring of the Earth as a being in her own right, a mysterious self-organizing life force that must be reckoned with as we contemplate the issues we face concerning the environment today. When we feel overwhelmed by the destruction that human beings have wreaked on the earth, might we draw comfort and courage by calling for help from the Mother Earth as *Goddess*, as Gaia.

On Friday I attended a workshop on Reading the Forested Landscape, and our teacher, Tom Wessels, spoke of discoveries made in the last twenty years in the field of ecology. For example, it was only in these last years that scientists discovered that mycorrhizal networks carry nutrients from healthy trees to struggling trees underneath the soil of the forest. These nutrients are even shared with trees from other species, and with stumps of trees that have fallen. Tom suggested that there is so much we do not understand at all, and he had a great faith in the self-organizing principle of forests and other ecologies.

But finally, some might ask, “Why do we need divine imagery at all?” For those who don't believe in *God*, why bother with *Goddess*? Carol Christ attempted to answer that question almost forty years ago—speaking to how these images work at the subconscious level, even if we do not believe in them as “real beings.” She said, “A symbol's effect does not depend on rational assent, for a symbol also functions on levels of the psyche other than the rational.”

And I go back to what Starhawk said—“We don't have to believe in the *Goddess*. We experience the *Goddess*.” One of the ways that *Goddess* practice has moved beyond the old *God* images is that it has not created a creed or dogma that it requires others to subscribe to or obey. Rather, it is more like an invitation to a possibility. It is in the realm of imminence, rather than beyond the boundaries of logic. It asks the question, how do we shift our imagination to create the more beautiful world we know is possible?

I would like to close with a Meditation for Mother's Day written by my colleague, Jeffrey B Symynkywicz.⁹ He writes:

This is the kind of God I could worship:
a heavenly Mother who prefers
imitation to adoration,
and who sees in all Creation
the indivisible smiles of Her children.
Our Mother, Holy Wisdom, draws one breath

9 <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/19968.shtml>

and even we who are miles away
are warmed by the glory of Her inspiration.
Our Mother, Holy Wisdom, reaches out
and even we locked-up against ourselves
are immersed in the blessing of Her embrace.
This Earth is Her body,
and we, children of the Earth,
are Her children.
It really is as simple as that.
Let us honor our Holy Mother
by loving our bodies made in Her image,
by loving one another as she has loved us,
by loving this Earth, our beautiful and eternal home. Amen.

Meditation

During our time of meditation, think about your own life journey.

Have you felt touched by a Divine presence?

If so, what images were a part of that experience?

How might your experience change, if you imagined the Divine as female?

Closing Words

Today I will use the words that we used to close a Goddess ritual:

May the circle be open, but unbroken.

May the peace of the Goddess be ever in your heart.

Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.