

From: The New Book of Goddesses and Heroines.
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When I was seven, I made a vow of perpetual virginity. I made it in a dim church, kneeling before an altar, my head bowed over a lit candle-the whole megilla. Not that I had any idea what "perpetual" meant, much less "virginity." But I'd noticed, in my St. Joseph's Daily Missal, that only a few of my sex got ratings high enough to be assigned their own feast-days. There was the mother of god, a position already filled by a suitable candidate. There were a couple of queens-I especially remember Margaret and Elizabeth, because my grandmothers had those names.

Beyond that, I found only virgins. Lots and lots of virgins. Not a very extensive list of role models for a girl aspiring to sainthood. Not only that, but queenship was out of the question, once my Irish grandfather informed me that, saints or no saints, royalty deserved hatred. (He seemed to imply that choice, not blood, was what kept us from being royalty ourselves.) That left virginity.

Oh, yes: there was also martyrdom. Unlike virginity, I was pretty clear on the details of this one. Frankly, death seemed easier than the prelude-being flayed alive, boiled in oil, beheaded, burned, dismembered. Faced with lurid descriptions of these pathways to heaven, I became both squeamish and flat-out cowardly. But I evaded acknowledging these craven feelings by telling myself that martyrdom was getting harder and harder to arrange. This was, after all, the 50's.

Now virginity-whatever it was, it didn't sound painful. And it definitely got you into the calender of saints. It was this line of reasoning that led to candles on a Saturday morning, the padded kneeler in front of the altar, and a whispered vow-

I remember that moment whenever someone asks me why I believe in goddesses. Believe? I'm not sure that's the right word for my abiding sense of the universe's sacredness. It's like asking whether I believe in air. In food. In the earth beneath my feet. I feel like Mark Twain, when he was asked if he believed in baptism. "Believe?" he answered. "Lady, I've seen it done!" That is how I feel about divinity. I do not so much believe in it as know, in my bones, in my elusive soul, that it is there, that it surrounds us, sustains us, recognizes us.

Yet I do not always think of divinity as feminine. Rather, I often conjure a non-gendered image: "the light within," for instance. The universal force of creation and destruction, the quantum potential of electron and quark, the implicate order behind all matter: surely this power cannot be a person. And thus it cannot have gender. Surely, its awesome otherness transcends the limitations of "masculine" and "feminine."

But if I imagine divinity, in its totality, as beyond personification, why do I spend my vacations searching for lost goddesses in off-the-track museums, on windy hillsides, within the yellowing pages of old books?

Because of the same inner compulsion that led me to take that vow, one Saturday morning in the 1950's, in Corpus Christi Church. Because our gods are more than an expression of our ideas about divine totality. They also express our own human capacity for god-ness.

At seven, ignorant of goddesses, I'd turned to the lives of the saints to find out how divinity

looks when it wears a body like mine. (Of course I had been told that saints were gods, but seemed the nearest I could personally get.) These stories had offered various plots for my life. I'd examined them and settled on the most likely part for me to play. If queenship was impossible and martyrdom unendurable, I'd take the only other role available.

Shortly after I'd made that solemn vow, however, I found that there were other possibilities. I discovered stories of hunters and warriors, leaders and dreamers, artists and inventors, saviors of their people, creators of the universe. All of them girls or women-people like me.

I discovered mythology. Like many girls, I first discovered modern retellings-dazzling, vivid,

heart-stopping. I read through every book on mythology (almost all about the Greeks) in the children's and young adult section of the library. That only whetted my appetite. I learned from the encyclopedia that there were goddess stories from other lands as well. How I wanted to learn them!

This led to my first conscious attempt at law-breaking: I got busted trying to sneak Bulfinch's Mythology out of the library. It was classified an "adult" book, and youngsters like me were forbidden to read it within the library, much less remove it to corrupt our minds at home. I stuck it into a pile of duly-checked-out young-adult novels and walked casually towards the door. At the final check-this was before electronic scanning, when librarians tediously hand-checked every book-my theft was discovered. I tearfully begged the librarian to let me have just that one book, just that once. Imperiously, she denied me and removed my stolen treasure-thus strengthening my resolve to have the information it contained.

I talked an older friend into checking out the book. It's not an easy read, but I savored every page. The fierce Icelandic tale of Ragnarok, when the beautiful hard-working sun goddess is devoured by the evil Fenris Wolf-but not before she gives birth to her shining daughter. The powerful Welsh tale of Arianhod, who mates with the king of the sea. The mysterious women of Arthurian legends: Vivianne, Guenievere, the Lady of Shallot. Unlike the civilized versions I'd read from the children's section, Bulfinch introduced me to myth in its primal power-and to the goddess in hers.

Decades have passed, but I am still thrilled when I discover a new goddess story. I love the one about Amaterasu, the Japanese sungoddess who grows angry at her importunate brother and hides herself in a dark rock cave, from which only dancing and joke-telling can lure her out. I love the Inuit tale of the little girl who is so noisy that she's sent up to the sky, where she becomes the thunder. I love the beautiful Irish story of Fionnula and her brothers, the Children of Lir turned into singing swans. I love the classic Greek myth of earth-mother Demeter and her lost daughter Persephone, who

returns like spring at story's end.

These stories nurture me. There is boldness in them, and courage, and lust, and joy. There is also pain and disappointment and the enormity of grief. I find in these stories images of all the ways a woman can be. I find wild freedom there, embodied in the virginal huntress Artemis, who roves with her hounds and maidens in the moon-swept forests. I find the home-loving comfort of Hestia, whose emblem is the hearth fire that warms and joins the family. I can see myself as an artist like the Hindu Sarasvati, a gardener like Rome's Pomona, a weaver like Athena of the Greeks.

Our lives are lived in story. When the stories offered us are limited, our lives are limited as well. Few have the courage, drive and imagination to invent life-narratives drastically different from those they've been told are possible. And unfortunately, some self-invented narratives are really just reversals of the limiting stereotype; thus a sensual woman, where only virginity is honored, can believe herself marred or even evil. Heroic myths, by comparison, offer positive life narratives, inspirations for living in power and strength.

But it is not just as patterns for action that myths are important-otherwise, good novels and excellent movie roles would serve just as well. Myths are not about human life; they are about the divine within. Thus when only the masculine is dignified as god, human women suffer. If we cannot imagine ourselves as god-as men so easily can-we can never become fully human either. Our gods express us. If we cannot find ourselves in god, we find it hard to find god in ourselves.

The most important fact about goddesses, it seems to me, is that they are invariably connected to polytheism. Put another way: there is no monotheistic religion based upon a goddess. Not a single goddess appears without friends, companions, lovers, children. The presence of the goddess demands the presence of other goddesses, and gods as well. This is comforting to me, for in my vision of the world redeemed, the world made whole, I yearn for connection, not for separation. Throughout human history, gods have banished the goddess, demanding that we hold no other gods before them. But the goddess did not respond in kind. In the religions which honor her, she had welcomed-even embraced-the other. By welcoming her back, we do not banish the god but only make space for the connection he has, for millennia, denied.

So, in a sense, I do believe in goddesses-for I believe that women touch the divine as men do, in as many ways. We are children and parents and lovers and creators and warriors and artists and dancers and healers-

We are also, sometimes, queens and virgins and martyrs. But we're so much more besides. In the mythology of the goddess, we find stories that testify to the vast variety of women's ways of bearing witness to the divine. It is these stories that I remain forever grateful I found as a girl.

As to the results of my vow of perpetual virginity-well, let's just say that that's another story.