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What Canst Thou Say?

Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice

*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?
Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest,
is it inwardly from God?*
—George Fox

Feminine Aspects of the Divine

The Nature of God

Charles A. Harkness

For some time I have struggled, mentally, with the nature of God. This struggle has covered an extreme range, from “There is no God” to “God is an all-knowing, all-powerful supernatural Being.” In between these two extremes have been thoughts of God as Prime Mover, Creator, Facilitator, Moral Guide—manifested by such as Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed. One aspect of my struggle was resolved early on: God is certainly not the white bearded, severe and frowning individual portrayed by Renaissance artists; God—whatever the true nature—is feminine.

Some twenty-five years ago, Judy Chicago produced *Dinner Party*, a display of twenty-six place settings representing the most important women in the history of the world. The settings began with Mother Earth, and progressed through history with such as Helen of Troy, Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I to more contemporary suffragettes. Each place setting included a dinner plate containing a sculptured representation of the exterior genitals of the particular woman. My initial reaction was, “How gross! How ugly! Nothing here but Sex!”

As I moved about the dining table, my reaction slowly changed. No longer were these representations of the entrance to the vagina; all of these place settings depicted the exit from the birth canal. It is from here that all of human kind emerges; it is from here that we enter the world, begin to grow, and make our contribution—large or small—to the improvement of the world.

Some months before I viewed *Dinner Party*, my late wife had said, “My turn,” and I left a good paying and fulfilling job in San Diego and followed her to a house deep in the woods outside of Rhinelander, WI, where she had been appointed Director of Counseling at a small community college.

One snowy January day I acquired a three-month-old male black Labrador retriever. One evening Smokey and I were in front of the fireplace, and the pup, as pups often do, was asleep lying on his back, with his legs and feet curled down.

I pondered the eight little pink dots on his belly, thinking, “Why? Why do male dogs, and humans, and all other male mammals in between have utterly useless nipples? If God—as related in Genesis—created man in His image, did He put nipples on Adam?” I think not. God—again related in Genesis—seems

to lack foresight. It was not until later that He observed that Adam needed a companion, and created Eve. Take a hard look at it; the whole Genesis bit about creation is backward. The woman was created first, and from her came forth man in *her* likeness.

Whether we refer to God, or Prime Mover, Supreme Being, Creator, Jehovah, Allah, Mother Earth: We are referring to a feminine being.

And all of this as a black Labrador pup lay sleeping.

Charles A. Harkness is a member of St. Croix Valley Meeting in Stillwater, Minnesota. He was in the U.S. Air Force and then a counselor to University students and alumni, accepting the Quaker approach to spiritual living in the process. The most valuable experience of his life came at the age of 77, when he spent two years (2003-2005) as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kyrgyzstan.

From the Editor:

When we announced this theme, “Feminine Aspects of the Divine,” we received a letter to the editors expressing concern that this theme was divisive and reinforced stereotypes. That led to an interesting dialogue. The editors felt led to continue with the issue, but to publish the dialogue (p. 9). And then, as the deadline approached, much more material came than we could use. Most were wonderful, so rather than reject several, your editor edited those poignant stories down to their essence so we could publish more of them. Another that came in too late is on our website <whatcanstthousay.org>. I hope you enjoy these beautiful explorations of the nature of God.

Judy Lumb, Editor for this issue

Resonating to Feminine Images of God

Patricia McBee

In the summer of 1990 I picked up a book from a friend's coffee table. In the introduction the author, Judith Duerck, wrote about a friend whose mother had died at the time of the friend's birth. The daughter spent her lifetime feeling bereft and searching for that intimate feminine connection.

The writer suggested that women in the Judeo-Christian tradition are spiritual orphans, bereft of an ideal feminine that nurtures our souls. "How would your life be different," she asked from chapter to chapter, "if at critical junctures in your life there were a female model and womanly support?"

That book resonated with a chord in me that I didn't even know existed. I hadn't felt my loneliness because I believed it just to be a part of reality, something to be accepted. Over the next five years I read ravenously and quite broadly in feminist and womanist* theology. I read about creation myths in which God, a female figure, gives birth to the universe. Thus "all that is" is of God's own body, not some external substance out of which God created. That idea resonated with my soul.

I read angry "post-Christian" feminists who wanted no more part of the Judeo-Christian tradition with its masculine emphasis and misogynist stories. And I read Christian and Jewish writers who were uncovering places in the Bible—rarely preached on or talked about—where the image of God was not the Father/Warrior/Almighty of my childhood upbringing.

We all know the story of the Good Shepherd, "God is like the shepherd who, losing one sheep, leaves the other ninety-nine to seek the lost sheep." Far fewer know the story right before that one, "God is like the woman who loses a coin and sweeps her entire house to seek it." **God is like a woman!** What might such metaphors mean?

In other places in the Bible we find "God is like a mother eagle" and "God

is like a mother bear." Now there are some images of strength and tenacity that I can relate to.

Another writer, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, asserted that, in reading the New Testament, if a disciple isn't specifically named with a man's name, we are free to think the disciple is a woman. Take, for example, the very beginning of the story of Easter week. Some disciples come to ask Jesus how he wants to spend the Passover holiday. Now think about who those unnamed disciples might have been. In the Jewish tradition, who makes preparation for the holidays? Then read on through the story of Easter week. Who was left standing at the foot of the cross at the time of Jesus' death? To whom did Jesus first appear after the resurrection? Women. Oh, my! Women are not just bit players in the Christian story.

All of this reading awakened something in me. I developed a confidence that my experience of God and the ideas that flow from that experience are okay. If I can't relate to a warrior God, it's okay. It's okay if I envision God as like the mother of an almost-toddler, inviting her child to take a step toward her—to take a step Godward.

It was as though I could breathe more deeply and experience God in thousands of new dimensions. My re-

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lationship with God settled into a new intimacy. My spiritual life soared.

It is not that I now believe in a feminine God instead of a masculine God. I'm sure that the infinite, unknowable God cannot be confined in **any** of the finite images that help us see a glimmer of Godness. I do believe, however, that each image reveals a facet of God. Some facets reflect more light for me; perhaps different facets reflect the light better for you.

I no longer read heavily in women's theology. But I carry on deepening my relationship to the Divine. I feel free now to accept God in whatever form Godself is present in my life.

Patricia McBee is a member of Central Philadelphia (PA) Monthly Meeting and is on the WCTS editorial team. Her current leading is to help make Friends Center in Philadelphia a living witness to Quaker concern for the earth.

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*"Womanist" is the term favored by women of color.

My Search for Sophia

Mary Hopkins

I never missed Sunday School. It was Episcopalian. Something there gave me great happiness. Later, learning the Catechism and then going through the confirmation ceremony did nothing for me and so I became a seeker. The story of how I dove into Judaism and surfaced a Quaker must wait for another time. I sat in our little Quaker meeting, a woman in her thirties dedicated to meeting the needs of my four children, husband and parents. George Fox said that there is "That of God in every man." But suddenly it broke through to me that if there is That in every man, it must be in me too. I shook. My life changed.

Strong dreams haunted me as I explored my inner life. Before I went to sleep, I read of Goddesses: first the fifteen primordial Goddesses and then the thirteen fertile ones. I still remember the hair standing up on my neck as I read the description of Brigid. Perhaps it was then that I turned out the light and slept more soundly than I can remember before or after. Later I dreamed:

With strong emotion, I went into the Johnson Art Museum through the lower passage and into the basement. I was in a tiered room. I entered from the side and walked along a tier near the top. Above me, on a tier, sat my proud parents—happy in their expectation of my arrival. On the tiers below us were glass-topped tables in which their treasures were shown. The tables were made of cheap pine. I had a hard time walking past my parents on my right. My feelings for their treasures, below me on my left, were of contempt.



I approached a large door. I knew that I must go through it although I did not want to. It frightened me. When I pushed it open I was in a Great Hall—vaulted with beautiful muted violet and lavender paisley patterns slowly moving over the ceiling. Here was great meaning, not my parents' trinkets. Many wise women, white-haired, in black robes, were sitting around a U-shaped table. At the head of the room stood a great armored Viking holding a spear. The woman closest to me, on my right, gently smiled and said to me, "Welcome, we have been waiting for you," as she indicated the seat on the bench beside her.

In 1968, I read Elined Prys Kotschnig's "Womanhood in Myth and Life" published in the *Inward Light** and found myself deeply attracted to her description of Athena. In the midst of divorce proceedings and a rocky professional life, I was in a period of upheaval. The image of the strong woman, hand held high with a torch or spear, one foot firmly forward, gave me strength to deal with the difficult tasks of my life at that time.

I looked for pictures of the ancient Greek goddesses that form the matrix of archetypes that define women's journey, pictures of terra-cotta figurines of goddesses, queens, or women in daily life which date back many thousands of years. As I looked at them chronologically, the female experience seemed to fall away as the figures became square, not rounded; guarded not open; rigid, not realized. Some feminist theologians have wondered if the fall out of grace and into sin can be defined as the time when female qualities were eliminated from the godhead.

I began to realize what a female godhead would mean to my feelings about myself. Here was a soft, wise old woman who loved and nurtured me no matter what I did. Gone was the guilt, fear and distance of the male god. No demands were being made on me except to be my best self in relation to the world as it really is, with its dirty diapers, spilt milk, broken promises, dark and light.

It is important to recognize and honor the differences between male and female godheads. The male godhead is the father who orders life with law. The female godhead is the mother who loves unconditionally and intuits what is needed. It is possible to combine balanced law and order with unconditional love and nurture, and have all aspects of divinity flourish in society, if we attribute them evenly across the spectrum of gender.

Mary Hopkins is a member of Kendal (PA) Monthly Meeting. She is the author and narrator of the videos Woman and Her Symbols and Mother Earth: Revisioning the Sacred. She uses images from art history to raise consciousness of women's spiritual history and sustenance.

**Inward Light*, Vol. XXXI, No. 74, Fall-Winter, 1968-9; and Vol XXXII, No. 75, Spring, 1969.

(image) Restoration of the Venus of Lespugue, Musée de l'Homme, Paris

Hymn to the Star Goddess*

*Hear the words of the Star Goddess,
the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven,
whose body encircles the universe.
I who am the beauty of the green earth
and the white moon among the stars
and the mysteries of the waters,
I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me.
For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe.
From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return.
Let my worship be in the heart that rejoices,
for behold
all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals.
Let there be beauty and strength,
power and compassion
honor and humility
mirth and reverence within you.
And you who seek to know Me,
Know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not
unless you know the Mystery:
for if that which you seek,
you find not within yourself,
you will never find it without.
For behold,
I have been with you from the beginning,
and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.*

*Traditional Ancient Hymn

Gratitude

Carmen Bruce

When I was a small girl, I knew Mystery. I knew Her as I sat in Silence in the embrace of the old weeping willow tree. I knew Her in my moonlit bedroom when the full moon's light and I communed. I knew Her as I smelled the purple lilacs and marveled at the beauty of the iris. I knew Her when I heard the whisper of the wind and watched the lightning dance across the steel-gray sky.

And then I lost Her—my—Mystery. I became socialized, conditioned, indoctrinated, inculcated into a world that seemed devoid of Her, until five years ago, the Sunday before Christmas. I found myself mysteriously sitting on a bench in a meetinghouse. In looking back, I knew Mystery led me to that bench. She sat with me in the silence among Friends.

Earlier this year, while walking, I met a professor who lived and taught at the seminary. He walked with Tillie, his four-legged companion, who effervesced with delight, playfulness, and spontaneity.

"She's a foundling," the professor said. "One of the seminarians found her, lost and abandoned, on the beltway." He then said the obvious, "She's very friendly."

"Do you think that is a quality of all foundlings?" I inquired.

"I think so," he responded reflectively, with a quiet certitude.

And again I knew it was Mystery who sat with the three of us on the side of the hill. I knew Her then; I know Her still. And I know today, as I knew from the start, of the gratitude in a foundling's heart. Amen

Carmen Bruce is a member of Providence (PA) Monthly Meeting. She lives as much as possible in the present moment, where she writes her poetry.

An excerpt of Elizabeth Gordon's book, *Walk with Us: Triplet Boys, their Teen Parents & Two White Women Who Tagged Along*, was in the August issue of WCTS. The book will soon be available. See their website <walkwithus.info>.

The Women under the Cross

Maurine Pyle

A great crowd of people followed him, including women who beat their breasts and lamented over him. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. ..."

—St. Luke 23:27

As a Catholic child I made the stations of the cross in a darkened, incense-scented church, pausing at each picture of the passion to pray for Jesus. His suffering, pain and death were imprinted on my child heart. There were others also pictured whose grieving faces will never leave my memory—the women.

Among them were his mother Mary and Mary Magdalene, his disciple—the two women closest to him during his lifetime. At the time of his death they drew near to share his pain.

As a mother, I know that my deepest pain is witnessing my child's suffering—whatever that might be. Yet, Jesus' mother Mary stood at a distance to witness her son's brutally slow death. All through the day he was dying, pulling up against the nails of the cross to catch a suffocating breath. How could she bear witness?

There upon the cross hangs my child. Who could have foretold such agony for a mother? To see her baby suffering such a painfully slow death. I cradled him in my arms, swaddled him, taught him. Joseph and I secreted him out of the land of Herod during the holocaust of innocent children. We, his parents, were his basket of reeds.

How my heart ached when he was lost at age twelve on a trip to Jerusalem. I searched the caravan frantically for him, asking each person, "Have you seen Jesus? Have you seen my boy?" After three days of desperately searching, we found him in the temple speaking with the rabbis. We asked, "Son, why have you done this to us?" He replied that he was doing his Father's business, and we should not be troubled about him. It was then that I first knew that he belonged not only to me, but to God.

Later when he became a man, I began to fear for his sanity. For long periods he would go into the desert alone, in total fasting and prayer. His brothers and I went searching for him when we heard of

his madness. He claimed to be a prophet! As we approached the small house where he was visiting, we saw it was filled with people and a great crowd surrounded it. I sent word to him that his mother and brothers were outside waiting. He answered, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Whosoever does the will of the Father is brother and sister and mother to me."

My child hangs upon a cross. I stand beside him in his hour of pain. Once they called him the son of Mary. Now he is called the son of man.

Standing nearby is Mary Magdalene. Magdalene, who is called a whore, has been rejected throughout the ages, but was actually a disciple of the Christ. Her many sins were forgiven because of her great love for him. Magdalene remained with Jesus while most of the other disciples ran to hide in their fear. She witnessed her beloved master writhing upon a cross. She comforted him by her faithfulness.

I have followed you from Galilee, Master. In this land of men I have been a slave. Yet you recognized me as a person and raised me up from the dust. You freed me. My sins you did not overlook—you counted every one of them. You healed me and forgave me—you loved me. No threats can separate me from you in this hour. I am without fear because you are near. Through your tender mercy, I learned of God's faithful love. Blessed are your words which fell upon my wounded heart. Blessed is the womb that bore you. You are the Christ, the messenger, the son of God....

We women do not turn our faces away from suffering. Life comes into the world by our bodies, by our willingness to bear the pain for a worthy cause. Life leaves the earth with the sound of our weeping. We are weeping for our children, as Jesus knew we would. We are weeping for ourselves.

The strong women under the cross are symbols of the powerful and loving Mother-God. If a man died on the cross and saved the world by his weakness, the women beneath him bore witness in their loving strength. Gathered here beneath the cross, we weep God's tears for his people.

Maurine Pyle is a member of Lake Forest (IL) Monthly Meeting, soon to be Friend in Residence in Urbana-Champaign (IL) Monthly Meeting. She is Field Secretary for Illinois Yearly Meeting.

Within the Womb

Hazel Jonjak

I am within ceremony at Circle Sanctuary in the Driftless Area of southern Wisconsin, naked among women on Midsummer's Eve. The water poured on the Grandmother Stones hisses intense steam, enveloping each of us, creating seven cores of consciousness with the womb of the lodge. Beads of sweat form rivulets down the contours of my rounded squat body. Persona, ego, pretense, even cells of my outer self drip onto the cedar upon which I sit, then return to the soil of Mother Earth. When our praying and collective chanting end, completed, each of us crawls out of the lodge on all four "legs." Not one of us can stand.

Each of us oozes into the woodland pond nearby, craving wetness. Muck soothes, and the frogs we've interrupted begin their songs anew. Swirling, gyrating Earth steadies—though it's difficult to discern up from down. When I become an organism again and reach toward land, I find I must grasp a young birch to grope toward perpendicular. I know our human-tree bond at this moment—they, too, stand upon earth and reach toward sky, but are rooted, while we flail, walk or skip. Our head-priestess, Selena, is unable to climb from the pond. At first I somehow assume she, our guide, won't need a hand, then accept that each of us is vulnerable and help her rejoin us upon land.

Each of us seven sits scrying as moonbeams glint upon the water surface among leaf-shadows and insect ripples. I see that which I found miraculous in my ex-husband, David, is truly within me! In my eyes, his purplish-dark Ojibwe skin "caught" my Earth-bond. His delight in story and word-play springs within me, too. And with a bit of David, I have created Child from my substance and spirit, mimicking Mother Earth's infinite sexuality and creativity. I saw the god in David; now I know goddess within me.

Streaming energy, fulfilled, I wind my way through the trees to the sandstone cave I had chosen as my resting place for the night. I creep into the crevice—slanting rocks forming a slabbed room just above my head. Beneath the vulva of the Great Mother, I sleep—protected, loved, connected.

Hazel Jonjak appreciates the Inner Light and the peace witness of Friends, and also values sweat lodges and living in the woods for insights and guidance. She was married to an Ojibwe man, and has a Polish-Ojibwe daughter.

Love Was Strong Between Us

Barbara Clearbridge

I was brought up Jewish. We were taught that Jesus Christ was not the Messiah; he was just a man, though a wise prophet. Therefore, his mother Mary was just a normal woman, and so on. As I grew up, I rejected the Old Testament God. I studied a variety of religions and God became for me gender neutral; since God has no physical body, gender vanished. Also, due to the wide variety of people I know, I can't classify qualities into "feminine" and "masculine." So I haven't thought of divinity as having feminine and masculine aspects. But I want to tell you about Mary.

A few years ago I suddenly found myself living in a Chicago suburb after 20 years of rural life. It was tremendously difficult to tolerate the continual noise, crowds, traffic, and general chaos of a big city, so every few months I needed a retreat. I found several hermitages within a few hours drive.

One place was in rural Indiana, part of a Franciscan Monastery. There was a little hermitage cabin some distance away from the main house, near the woods. There were neat gardens, for-

mal walkways, and a fancy lake with a fountain in the middle. I was exploring the tiers of flowering landscaping around it when I stumbled onto a sort of cave—a series of three little stone rooms tucked into the side of a hill.

I can never resist "the road not taken," or a tiny, beckoning path, or a mysterious, dark, stone doorway. The first tiny space was a sort of anteroom. It had small stone benches and holy objects. The next room was somewhat larger, though still very small. It also had stone seats, which faced a larger-than-life statue of a woman. The third room branched off the other side of the anteroom. It was like the second, but the statue was of a different woman. Both statues were festooned with flowers, and there were lit candles in front of them. One statue was interesting, but the other—I stood transfixed.

After a while I sat down on the cold seat and told her what I was struggling with spiritually. The stern expression on her face seemed to turn loving, and she answered me. I heard her speak clearly in my mind, plainly and with wisdom. She explained atonement—what it is and what it isn't—and relieved me of guilt. She helped me see the path forward. She gave me homework. At the end of our talk, I couldn't help asking, "Who are you?"

The Divine Feminine

James Baker

*By the inner gentleness with which her spirit armors me
against the forces around me trying to steal my life
By the beauty of a sunrise, the stars, a dewdrop
By the determination of a spider plant pushing through the pavement
placed over it until its flowers burst forth again
By the joy evident in that-of-God bubbling forth from a skipping little
girl happily chattering to her mother whose hand she holds
By the utter dependability of the stately, rooted-in-the-earth oak trees
around the house I used to have
By the fifty years of my journal
in particular the thousands of dreams by which
she corrects, informs and encourages me
am I ever sustained*

*to try
and try again.*

*James Baker is a Friend away from his beloved Downers Grove (IL)
Monthly Meeting.*

“Mother Miriam.” “Miriam” is a Hebrew form of “Mary.” I realized she had used a Hebrew holy woman’s name to get past my Mary-closed mind. I was charmed and glad that she had told me in a way that could slip sideways into an open part of my mind. I visited her the next day again. Her face remained stern and we didn’t talk, but love was strong between us.

I keep running into her. Once I found her in a forest belonging to a different monastery. Quite far into the woods a narrow, barely noticeable side path led me by surprise to a statue growing out of the front of a monument that looked like a tiny house, far too small to go into, ornately carved all over and brightly colored as in the Mexican tradition. Another time I noticed her on a medallion worn by a foreign student. In a book of fiction chosen by chance, she turned out to be the confidante of the main character. Now whenever I pray, I include Mother Miriam. She helps me to help others. I don’t try to figure out who or what God is, or how Mother Miriam is a part of That. I just welcome her in my life.

Barbara Clearbridge, nicknamed “shulamith eagle,” attends Lake Forest (IL) Monthly Meeting and Port Townsend (WA) Monthly Meeting.

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## Wings of the Hen

*Lois Pomeroy*

Little did we know—four post-retirement-age women friends visiting Hawaii—that we were about to come face to face with the Eternal Feminine, experiencing “that of God” in ourselves and in each other. As we relaxed on the front porch of the Honolulu Meeting House, we were suddenly energized by the arrival of a young Quaker mother who came bounding up the steps followed shyly by her adopted 7-year-old daughter. They were on holiday from the Big Island. “Come with us,” she invited, “On my island you will see the beauty and power of God the Creator.”

We couldn’t refuse. Once there, we clambered down a muddy path into a caldera in Volcano National Park. Warm rain washed our faces and dripped from our ponchos, nurturing tiny plants springing up in every opening in the cool, gray lava. Mother Earth was actively giving birth to new life and hope; but there was also danger. In places the road had been covered by a gigantic cinder cone. Elsewhere it had dropped away completely leaving only open sky beyond a sheer cliff. We were acutely aware of the molten lava just below our feet. Birth and death mixed together. Yet life predominated. Everywhere it

## Worshipful Vision

*Zarinea Lee Zolivea*

*Observe blue black shadows whispering a quiet reverence  
 Experience the thunderous cloudbursts before the purple storm  
 Listen attentively to screaming violent wind  
 Dare to bear bitter icy cold winters  
 Smell spring’s misty rose petals  
 Savor sweltering hot summers  
 Recall sweet gardens of elaborate beauty  
 Relish the autumn equinox of stupendous colors  
 Flood mother sky with worshipful  
 Stroll along the foaming waves of the oceanfront  
 Feel the cool raindrops upon your skin  
 Perceive luscious moons  
 Revel in the glory of the rainbow  
 Love the birthing process of wondrous creation  
 Chant the symphony of the forest while picturing music in eternity  
 Use life like a delirious goddess singing a delicate dream*

**Zarinea Lee Zolivea** is a literacy teacher, and a writer of poems and short articles.

was burgeoning with all the muck and mess that birth usually involves.

Later we picked out exotic goodies for lunch at the open air market where smiling vendors greeted our guide with warmth and love. One used his machete to cut open green coconuts for us to drink from on the spot. Climbing into her rickety, old VW microbus we felt safe and nurtured. It was not so much like being in a womb (although something was growing and coming to life among us) as like being sheltered beneath the Wings of the Hen—words used in the New Testament to describe the mission of Jesus. All morning we explored and talked and laughed and shared, daring to be completely open with each other.

Our lunch stop brought us zig-zagging steeply down into a narrow valley where a school had once been overwhelmed by a tidal wave. Lush vegetation had sprung up around the ruins and framed the memorial to the dead. Watching the breakers smash against the rocks with force even on

this calm day, we relished our food and the fact that we were alive to eat it. The young daughter demonstrated hula movements to one of us who was just beginning to study that native art. As the two women moved—one young, one older—we watched in a kind of trance, sensing the spirit of the drowned children and their teachers. We were quieted by a sense that the two were dancing on holy ground.

A sense of the holy stayed with us for the rest of the day. Was it the power of place, the quality of the lives led by our two guides, the relationship growing amongst us? Perhaps it was all those things. Surely it was a gift to us from the two Quakers, both so nurturing and generous, both so tuned in to life’s glories and pain. Today in my everyday life, I can sometimes get in touch again with the spirit of that day. When I am blessed, I can still see God in the remembered smile of the mother, in the body of the dancing daughter, in the faces of my friends and, even—can it be?—when I look at myself.

*Lois Pomeroy is a pastoral counselor and a member of New Paltz (New York) Meeting. She says, “Our Meeting is small but thriving with many children from babies to teens. We are, however, short on elders and would welcome visits from anyone so led.”*

### Breaking News!

Check [whatcanstthousay.org](http://whatcanstthousay.org) for “Message from the Great Mother” as delivered to Alicia Adams, too late for printing.

## In the Land of the Great Mother

Kathy Tapp

I followed the huge throng of passengers crossing the Mexico City airport. Speaking only a few words of Spanish, I was nervous to be traveling alone to Mexico. A huge wave of relief washed over me to see a woman standing near the exit, as promised, holding out a sign that said “GATE.”\*

Over the next 10 days, by bus, subway, taxi and on foot, we visited many ancient sites of the Great Mother in the central highlands of Mexico. Our guide was Cecilia Corcoran, a Franciscan nun who did her doctoral research among the ruins, following the trail of the goddess through the many layers of history. We visited the circular pyramid of San Cuicuilco, the oldest ceremonial site in the Valley of Mexico. We walked the spiral path to the top, where a sanctuary has been unearthed. The sun was hot, the atmosphere calm and peaceful, even though the site is completely hemmed in by modern high rise buildings. Many female figures have been found here.

At Teotihuacán, we learned the story of Chalchiuhtlicue—Goddess of the Flowing Waters. Her thirteen foot high stone statue reveals a well developed head and torso, with her lower body undeveloped as it blends into the earth, like a mountain. It is said that on the day she was moved to the Museum of Anthropology, there were huge storms.

We visited Tepeyec, where the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to a Nahuatl man named Juan Diego in 1531. She appeared at the same spot where the Aztec goddess Tonantsin had long been worshipped. Juan Diego’s cloak, imprinted with the Lady’s image is hanging on the basilica wall and viewed by millions of pilgrims each year. In Nahuatl language, she was known as “She Who Comes Flying from the Lake Like an Eagle of Fire” and “Mother of the True God; Mother of the Giver of Life; Mother of Heaven and Earth.”

I had felt a gentle summons in dreams and other nudgings to take this pilgrimage—especially to Tepeyec. I knew it would take time for me to inte-

grate it all—the vast sweep of history and the Presence evidenced in so many ways, both at these ancient sites we visited and at places where modern women were hard at work establishing low cost clinics, agencies to help victims of domestic violence, and women’s cooperatives.

And over a year later, the pilgrimage to Mexico is still imparting its grace. As world events spiral ever more alarmingly toward unrest and violence, I remember the words that the Virgin at Guadalupe spoke to Juan Diego, at a time of great destruction when his world was being totally altered by the Spanish conquest:

“Do you not know that I am your mother?—Do not be troubled or disturbed.—Is there anything else you need?”

*Kathy Tapp is a former editor of WCTS. She travels all over the world, seeking out holy places.*

### Icon

Kathy Tapp

*When you came into my dreams  
you wore a guise of chocolate  
and so, I knew you not.*

*First, a chocolate curtain  
of intricate design;*

*I wondered idly  
what lay beyond,  
felt vague yearnings...*

*Then a tall woman appeared,  
rich dark milk spilling  
from her breasts.*

*One morning  
before dawn I drifted  
into a light sleep,  
and saw a goddess  
made of chocolate.*

*And then I knew.  
About the chocolate.  
How it spoke of unknown realms  
rich, deep,  
mysterious...*

*This chocolate, sweet talisman  
dark icon,  
tossed from the night shores—  
a sign of your veiled presence,  
O Black Madonna.*

## Maanidoowin: The Spirit with and without Gender

Lillian Heldreth

She has been with me for most of my sixty-eight years, although for a long time I did not recognize Her. Instead, I was troubled deeply by Her absence from the spirituality I knew. God was in three persons, and all of them were men. Baptists of the more traditional kind don’t even have the Virgin Mary for comfort. I became a Seeker after something I could not name.

Early in my marriage, I experienced one of those awful disagreements that seems to flow from an essential difference between men and women. That night I could not sleep, so I walked out the back door of the farmhouse. Along the path, pale roses shed sweet fragrance, making my pain seem worse. On the hillside, under the shelter of a great old beech tree, I lay down and bawled.

Finally, quieted, I became aware of a Presence. Real as the hillside, alive as the beech, She seemed to enfold me, yet She was so huge as to be formless, and had no visible shape. She simply held me, and let me know, through my very skin, that She was the Mother of all mothers, and She would always be with me, helping me bear what women have always born, what She has born, in the Making of Life. To me, she is still very real, and I believe She is the Spirit of Earth Herself.

Since that time, though, finding a spiritual path has been quite a journey. I tried many paths, but all gave precedence to the masculine divine—as for Her, She didn’t exist. Sixteen years ago I was exposed to the beliefs of the indigenous people of the region where I now live. They spoke of “Our Mother” with reverence. Now I am part of a small all-peoples community who hold ceremonies largely after the manner of the Ojibwa people of this area.

The first time I entered a sweat lodge, I wondered what sort of thing I was getting into, but the moment I sat down in the soft darkness of the cedar-lined lodge, which is sometimes called “Our Mother’s Womb” and sometimes “the Spirit Nest,” I said to myself, “Why, I’ve come Home!” This is probably the oldest ceremony, the oldest form of prayer still being practiced, once

\*Global Awareness Through Experience (GATE) also sponsors women’s spiritual quests to the sites of the Black Madonna in Europe, and other pilgrimages. <[www.GATE-Travel.org](http://www.GATE-Travel.org)>.

known in every place where birch trees grow, and I am not the first non-Native person to experience that deep sense of recognition.

I have thanked Her many times from that safe and beautiful place, built of maple saplings by our own hands, covered with canvas and blankets, floored with soft twigs of fresh white cedar, heated with stones from Lake Superior, steamed with Her water—for water is Her blood, it is said.

We address our prayers to grandmothers and grandfathers in each of the four directions; then we address the spirits of sun (Grandfather) and moon (Grandmother), and then Our Mother, and last “Most Kind Great Spirit.” Those of us who can, make the formal part of our prayers in the Ojibwa language, a practice I treasure because Ojibwa pronouns don’t have gender! The Great Mystery, the Great Spirit, cannot be called “He” in Ojibwa.

I especially treasure the word “Maanidoowin,” for it describes that quality of spiritual transcendence which lies in and beyond our natural world. It names the essential Mystery that we all experience, but imposes on it no form, no face, no preconceived image. It simply means, “This (place, story, experience, dream, feeling) has the quality of being spiritual.” I love that, and so, I think, does She.

*Lillian Marks Heldreth is a retired professor of English and Native American Studies. A former member of the Champaign-Urbana (IL) and Marquette (MI) Friends Meetings, she is a free-lance writer, sculptor, and confirmed tree-hugger.*

## Coming Around to Love

*Kathleen Mavourin*

My first lesson in the essential nature of God came when I was very young, perhaps three years old—God is love (Love Him, love Him, all ye little children...). I was fortunate to be a child who was loved and nurtured, so I found this perfectly credible.

Most of the subsequent lessons offered in church had less to do with love. I was instructed to believe things about God that made little or no sense; believing the incredible frequently was made into a test of faith.

As a young adult, I migrated toward the liberal edge of the religious spectrum and found it too wordy and rationalistic to be very satisfying. Eventually, I gave it up and settled for a secular belief in social equality, justice, and mercy.

In my forties the women’s movement made me aware of the male-centeredness of the religion in which I was raised and I embarked on an exploration of feminine divinity. I read and read myths and feminist theologies; I shared with other women, attended ceremonies and even made up a few of my own.

When finally I found Her, it was first as a graven image—a photograph of the Warka Head, a 5000-year-old marble head of a goddess excavated at the site of the ancient city of Ur. I am grateful that I had moved far enough beyond the strictures of my childhood that I could hear Spirit speaking to me from that image. Her effect on me was galvanic. She is sovereign, serene, beautiful, independent, powerful, and wise. I had found Inanna, Queen of Heaven.

Studying her stories, I learned much about life and death, love and kinship, anger and regret, honor, foolishness and pride. I rediscovered love as the core of divinity—not only warm, comfortable, nurturing love—also deep, giving, sacrificial love and fierce, protective, sometimes angry love.

I began attending Quaker meeting at about this time, and in the immediacy of silent worship encountered repeatedly and with breathtaking directness the divine feminine presence of which the goddesses are manifestations. I experienced this divine reality not as purely transcendent, separated from the material world, but inherent and present in all of creation. We inhabit the very body of God.

Knowing that I live inside God, I discover God around me in all that is. I encounter God in rocks, oceans, animals, people, forests, gardens, in ideas, scientific formulas, songs, dreams, stories, and in the silence. I have experienced Spirit variously as feminine, masculine, multi-gendered, and altogether beyond gender.

My spiritual life is now fuller and richer, more vitally connected to my everyday experience. I experience life more as an integrated whole, not as an aggregate of categories piled up in hierarchical order—physical, emotional, rational, and spiritual. I now know experimentally that these aspects of life are intimately connected. They nurture and balance each other.

I think of God as underlying reality, both source and destination, like the continuum of space-time-matter-energy from which all the reality we know emerges and into which all reality folds and vanishes. I know that I am included, accepted, and loved within this divine reality.

I am much less likely now to hang up over names; all names are God’s names. I attempt to live within the paradoxes and uncertainties of divine reality, without demanding explanations or justifications tailored to my imperfect understanding. It is enough to know that God is love and the universe is my home. This is where my search for the feminine divine has led me.

*Kathleen Mavourin is a member of West Knoxville (TN) Monthly Meeting. She recently enrolled in the online learning program at the Earlham School of Religion. She is a wife, grandmother, story-teller, shape-note singer, gardener, and poet, and aspires to be a crone.*

### Tell Us Your Stories!

**What Canst Thou Say** is a worship-sharing group in print. We welcome submissions of articles of 350-1500 words and artwork—line drawings or artwork suitable for black and white reproduction—that illustrate the theme of an issue, or that we might retain for use in future issues. Please send your text submissions in Word or generic text format and artwork in high resolution jpeg files. Photocopied art and typed submissions are also accepted. Send via email to <mariellen.gilpin@gmail.com> or diskette, or hard copy to **WCTS, 818 W. Columbia, Champaign, IL 61820.**

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## Letters

I am dismayed to see that an issue of *What Canst Thou Say?* is coming out on the feminine face of God. I have come to the strong conviction that we need to see and experience God as genderless or a container for both genders. The idea that God is either male or female is an anachronism, an ancient cultism that has to go. We do not need writing that further polarizes the sexes by celebrating ideals so closely identified with gender.

Feminism has already won for women the legal battles and to a large extent the cultural battles they have most needed. The remaining battles are in part the dregs of a dying paternalism, such as is championed by the Catholic church in refusing female priests. It too will pass. Quakerism should not act like a branch of feminism. Men and women learn from each other all the time, from George Fox's time to this. This fruitful exchange must not end. This learning must be seen *from the light of God within*. But virtues of compassion, lovingness, nurturance, etc., are not and must not be seen as the possession of women. They are the possession of humanity.

Jesus was a man. He is an example of a male God figure who is not war-like and, in our culture, perhaps he is the supreme example of peace-seeking and egalitarianism. People talk about the feminine side of Christ when they should be talking about the loving side of Christ. Similarly there are many spiritual icons who are female. It is a shame that the early church maligned and apparently suppressed Mary Magdalene, whose inclusion in the discipleship would have helped to humanize Christian culture substantially. If anything, in order to break down biased stereotypes, your readers of both genders need to experience the so-called feminine virtues you would extol, coming from *male* figures. It is that kind of writing which helps to teach us that maleness contains compassion. In my opinion, the world suffers far more today from men's lack of connection to God than from women's.

We have a tendency to project aggression onto men and compassion onto women. But these stereotypes are not fair and I feel your proposed issue helps to perpetuate them. I would much rather see you have an issue that focuses on the transcendent virtues in both genders, or an issue that explores the expression and meaning of compassion and other Godly virtues that are without gender association. I cannot but be distressed at the perpetuation of these stereotypes. At best they suggest that men must become more like women, when what we need is not that, but that all people become more like God.

William Mize (Friend Will)

WCTS Editors respond:

I definitely agree that compassion, lovingness, and nurturance are also male characteristics, but I find it hard to relate to a genderless God, an "it". Rather than "either/or" or "neither/nor", "both/and" makes more sense to me. I believe God has both male and female characteristics.

I think we need to strengthen our awareness of the feminine aspects of God. We may also be strengthening some stereotypes, but that's how we think—in stereotypes. I think there are useful stereotypes and some not so useful ones. We need to image a feminine God to destroy the strong stereotype that we have of God as having only traditionally masculine characteristics. I don't think an image of a genderless god is strong enough to contest this stereotype. A recent article in *Friends Journal*, "On Sexism as a Spiritual Disaster" by Judith Fetterley, has convinced me that some "affirmative action" is needed. I will now be using female pronouns to refer to God (when I don't slip up!).

Rich Himmer

Spending five years studying about the feminine face of the Judeo-Christian God is what kept me from bolting from Christianity. It is a very important part of my spiritual life and I am delighted that we are doing an issue on it. We are a journal of religious **experience**. Some people experience God in this way. We want to hear their stories, to allow those stories to touch and stretch others. However, Friend Will's letter is extremely thought provoking. We're doing our job if we provoke people to think about who/what is God.

Patricia McBee

Friend Will responds:

It is true that we seem incapable of relating to a God without anthropomorphizing "him." Indeed it appears to be one of the reasons for Jesus' mission, to help humanity comprehend the incomprehensible which is God. And I agree with the notion that most of us tend to relate to God as either male or female, or both, rather than neither. This is one of the perennial limitations of humankind. The "both gender" model would work.

My plea is simply, that we not deepen the wounds between men and women by identifying either gender as carrying the Godhead. I repeat, the task calls for us to celebrate both genders as exemplars. Not to do so implies again the one-sided bias we need to eliminate from our poor thinking. We would be no better off with God as "woman" alone, than we have been for God as "man" alone.

Just as Jesus was more accepting of women in a paternalistic age than the church which followed, so were George Fox and early Friends. These are the kinds of examples we need. Jesus did not principally embody typical masculine values of the time, and this needs pointing out. Just because humans tend to view issues in stereotypes is no justification for perpetuating the practice for some half-baked notion of balance. True balance would acknowledge the genderless dimension of the virtues in a "God container for both," with beautiful examples of each. Transcendence would be to uphold both genders equally in the Godhead.

William Mize (Friend Will)

Look for the new book: ***Divine Duality, The Power of Reconciliation between Women and Men*** <divineduality.org>.

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## Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*

(See instructions for authors on page 8)



**February 2008**

### **Called**

**Editor: Patricia McBee**

The Lord said to Abram, “*Leave your own country, your kinsmen...and go to a country I will show you....I will bless you.*” Sometimes we are called so subtly we hardly notice; other times, like Abram, we are profoundly altered in a moment. How and when and where did you feel a call? How has your mission unfolded in the time since? How do you listen for God’s continued guidance for your mission? What supports have you found for discerning and following call? Into what strange lands has your calling led you? How have you been blessed?

**Deadline: November 15, 2007**

**May 2008**

### **Transforming Conflict**

**Guest Editor: Pam Melick with Mariellen Gilpin**

*But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). When have you attempted to answer conflict with love? What prepared you to respond this way? What did the Spirit ask of you during this conflict? How did you respond? How did the other person respond to you? What transformations did you experience?

**Deadline: February 15, 2008**

**August 2008**

### **Telepathy**

**Guest Editor: Maurine Pyle with Mariellen Gilpin**

Sometimes we hear our friends’ thoughts before they speak, or see something happening thousands of miles away. Maybe we feel it in the pit of our stomachs, or dream it, or simply know. What has been your experience of telepathy? Was the experience helpful? Did knowing help you respond in a better way than you might have otherwise? Do you do anything to foster telepathic experiences? How has your experience of telepathy affected your spiritual life? How has your spiritual life affected your experience of telepathy?

**Deadline: May 15, 2008**

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***Feminine  
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