

Goddess Article

Goddess

The waves crash against me as I stand in the edge of the surf. The sun is hot, though it is still early morning. The water is cold and filled with the churning of millions of tiny pieces of seaweed, big clumps of which lie washed up in the tide. The salt in the water sticks to my skin, the sand under my feet shifts and shapes itself. As the waves rush out, I see a tiny, rounded shell exposed for a moment, it burrows quickly downwards. Is this goddess? This shell creature, this tide, this body of mine? I think so.

When I ask a group of women to name the goddess, a mixture something like this arises: 'the earth', 'my inner self', 'Diana', 'my mother', 'Kali', 'horses', 'angels', 'a vision in my dreams' - there is a multiplicity of naming, of recognition. And there is no argument over it, no debate; no-one seeks to say, 'No, your mother is not the goddess'. Instead, in that moment she is named we all see, we catch a glimpse of how, for that woman, her mother is the goddess and, further than that, we allow it to add to and expand our own concept of goddess.

To name something goddess is to name it divine, and in the feminine realm. Why place divinity within the feminine realm? Surely God can also mean the entire experience of living and dying, the everything? And, with less overtones of power and control, Great Spirit has an inclusive embrace of all of life, quite beyond gender. Goddess is, on one level, purely personal preference. On another level, I think that this wording is not just an act of named allegiance; I think that its results influence both a style of worship and also the fundamental realm of our relationship to each other, to ourselves, and to the earth. I think that there is a set of relationships intrinsic to the divine feminine and that acting on these is r/evolutionary in our capitalist and patriarchal world.

It is my feeling, and perhaps this is the feeling emanating from my female body, that goddess more precisely describes how I relate to the divine. This is not so much because I see those things listed before (the sea, the shell creature, my body), as feminine, as that I think the touchstone for being human lies within the feminine, and that in the feminine is where relationships originate. So that calling it God would create a dissociation from me (and perhaps this is a purely personal thing), but calling it goddess creates primary relationship. Further, the primary relationship is that of creating/destroying; that in the incoming wave I feel the power of creation sweeping through me, with the outgoing wave I release something into the universe. That in the sea creature I identify with the fragile beauty of its life, and also the resilience of what will remain long after its life, its shell. That in my body I feel the tides of life; on this day I am past ovulating and moving towards bleeding and feel that particular, exact resonance in my body, calling it sacred and part of the goddess.

I am not advocating replacing God with goddess. I am advocating the potential of relationship with the divine feminine, with goddess. Within my own realms of ordering, I include god or the god as part of - intrinsic to, balancing and born from - goddess. Their relationship is the great dance of becoming and unbecoming, through all of its stages and in all of its joinings and separations. I also think of Great Spirit - or some unnamed, universal force - as encompassing both of these poles and the union of these poles and resting also beyond this, although when I come to earthly realms, the gendering of the divine seems often appropriate. And recognising goddess, perhaps particularly in our current world, creates a re-ordering of things that is life-centred and primarily relational.

The fundamental relationship of the goddess (the feminine) is that she gives birth. And this is an experience - and perhaps the most fundamental one - that all humans carry, and have carried throughout time. We all have had the experience of being within the womb of our mother, and coming forth from there. In this primary way, I will say that we all have had the real, immediate, direct and fundamental experience of goddess. This shared experience is not to be lightly dealt with. This is the blessing of life-becoming, of incarnation - all that we have known in this body, in this life, stems from here. This is not mysticism, I am

talking about a relabeling of what is. We know we spend nine months within the bodies of our mothers. A way to name this experience is to name it the experience of goddess . Of being encompassed within and nurtured by the Great Mother. Of that being the whole world. A real, lived experience of the totality of love of the feminine for each of us, individually. An experience of the aliveness and completeness and immanence of the universe, the earth, in miniature.

To place this at the centre of religion, of our concept of the divine - this being carried within a woman's body, and being born from it - and to recognise the feminine as the guardian of this, is to create religion that respects life before authority, before obedience, before faith. Goddess creates a religion of honouring, being a guardian to life, creating life and nurturing life. We are born of women. Sometimes this is elevated, sometimes reviled - the commonly understood version of the biblical story of Eve relates the concept of original sin to this reality - that we are born of woman. I am suggesting we simply recognise it. From that place of recognition, we can begin to ask questions. Questions such as, what does this mean for us as individuals, as women, as humans, as a planet?

This birth-giving that is so central to goddess - and I am including the birth of the planet, the birth of each one of us, the birth of ideas and art and relationships - is balanced by her other pole. To be born entails dying at some point, so she gives us both; life and death. Each child that I bear I give the gift of life to, and with that life comes the necessary death. I cannot give one without the other. And when I say that it is not so much a goddess of life and death that we are discussing, but where life and death themselves are the goddess, then we move immediately into intimate, necessary relationship with this thing, goddess .

With this way of naming goddess, any question of belief or non-belief becomes irrelevant. We are naming things that we all know, that exist in particular relationship to us, and calling those things, and perhaps that relationship, goddess. I am not claiming some mysterious knowledge, unavailable to everyone. I am not talking about a teaching, only to be received through a certain lineage or teacher, or the one true path. I am not even talking about a profound, inner belief that I can never know precisely matches up to anyone else's belief.

The earth gives birth to us - literally to the life-forms it sustains and more personally in that our bodies are made up from her substances, which return to her at our deaths. Our mothers give birth to us. The universe has given birth to us; to our planet and therefore our individual lives as well. In some ways our lovers and our teachers give birth to us. As for us, as humans, we give birth to our children, our ideas and creativity, to spirit-within or consciousness, to our students and friendships, to ourselves again and again in our different roles and stages of life and to the earth itself in the form that we create. And so we participate in goddess , we become goddess.

All this happens equally in the death realm: We end relationships, complete projects, allow ideas or friendships to wither and die, neglect or even actively harm ourselves and others, use up or destroy the earth we live on, recycle, discard, compost and, in the end, rot back down into the humus from which life is born again. This half of goddess is severely neglected in our culture and collects huge fear and power so that the Dark Goddess becomes separated from and seen as lesser than, or an adjunct to the supposedly more benevolent goddess of life. More deeply, they are understood as two faces of the one face, the life/death that governs and shapes us. When we become co-creators with this force, when we consciously participate with and as goddess in the living of our lives (and deaths), then I think we are approaching the meaning of goddess.

In saying that life and death themselves are the goddess the question is no longer one of belief, but one of relationship. Similarly when we say that the goddess is Earth, this planet we live on, then what becomes important is our relationship to that earth. And the relationship is already basically described - one of birth (beginnings, or openings or differentiation) and one of death (endings, closings, merging). This can be taken down to its most intimate form - that of each breath in and out, for instance, or each heart beat - or out to its widest imagining - the birth of the universe and its as yet unknown eventual end.

I am going to explore three ways of relating to goddess . My experience is that each of these ways leads to the other ways, with increasing depths, and that in our current reality they support and sustain each other, so again it is not that there is a right or correct practise or behaviour with regard to goddess, but simply different moments or movements in the relationship.

Many women who relate to goddess have one or several named goddesses that they feel particular relationship with. This might include having the goddess appear in dreams or visions, working with or

praying to that goddess in ways magical or devotional, working with the archetype embodied in that goddess as it relates to the woman's own life, and asking for some aspect of that goddess to be shared with or learnt by her. These individual goddesses, who mostly have a history and come from a culture foreign to our own still intersect in a number of ways with our reality.

To begin with, their histories - both mythological and archaeological - provide some evidence for the pre-existence of more life-centred cultures than our own, where a (more) central place is held for the feminine mysteries and powers. This in turn provides a base for their recognition as archetypes, which are sometimes worked with psychologically by individuals but are also understood as being part of the background of influences upon us at social levels. They operate as symbols of the goddess culture itself, both past and current and they also exist as patterns, aspects or models of consciousness and divinity. From all of these perspectives, but particularly when they are layered together, it becomes possible for a woman in our culture to form relationship with one or more of these goddesses.

There are hundreds of them. There are ancient goddesses, from the first recorded history, such as Asherah and Inanna, Lilith and Ishtar. There are goddesses from Greek and Celtic cultures that have overlapped our culture; Rhiannon and Demeter, Aphrodite, Hecate, Gaea, Dana are a few of them. In India, there are goddesses being worshipped currently, as part of the mass culture; from there come Kali and Lakshmi. There is Kwan Yin, Chinese goddess of compassion. There are Egyptian goddesses, Isis is one, whose devotion travelled over much of the known world. There are Native American goddesses, Grandmother Spider and Changing Woman are just two whose stories have made their ways across to our own culture. From the Christian mythos come the Marys - the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene - both of whom form an active part of worship for many many women across the world, most of them not actively goddess-identified. There are volcanic goddesses and deep sea goddesses and butterfly goddesses and uncountable others, from the many diverse cultures and heritages that our earth has nurtured.

Most of the ancient goddesses held both the light and dark aspects, or sometimes quite specifically the powers of life and death. The more recently dated goddesses still carry this, although sometimes only in hints. For example, Artemis, a relatively recent Greek goddess of the hunt is also the goddess who assists women through childbirth; so she is at the very teeth of the life/death moments. Freyja, the Norse goddess of love is also the goddess of war. The Sumerian goddess Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth is the one who condemns her beloved consort to the Underworld, whilst her sister, who is Queen of that realm (and therefore of death) is the one who grants Inanna her life again after she has descended into death.

Almost any goddess worked with or invoked deeply, even if apparently one-sided, will bring through her opposite or balancing aspects. I believe that this is because, even in their comparatively broken-down, single aspects they still represent the great goddess, truly carry a facet of her, and that facet when explored reveals the whole. It is an irony that working most deeply with the dark and the goddesses that carry that name, the Dark Goddess - goddesses such as Lilith, Ereshkigal, Hecate, Persephone, Kali and Sekhmet - we find ourselves eventually tumbling into the light. Similarly, setting out to work with supposedly bright, or light goddesses - Isis, Inanna, Venus or Aphrodite to name just a few - we almost immediately go past that cover and into the depths of questioning and possibly pain and difficulty around our power, radiance, sexuality, self-love; whatever the current issues may be.

It is impossible for us to know what 'Inanna' meant to an ancient Sumerian, or 'Freyja' to the Norse people, but I am fairly certain that it meant something far more vast, numinous and immediate to them than it ever can to us. What might approach this vast/numinous/immediacy in our world is something like the concept of 'life-force' - that mysterious combination of breath and consciousness in humans, or more basically, the impulse in plants, animals and ourselves towards life. Our current concept of the Universe also might approach this, might stand in for a relationship possibly similar to the relationship an ancient Sumerian had with Inanna. Both the grand scale of the Universe, and the microscopic level of life-force, with all their mysteries and unknowns, their undoubted sway and might, their indefinable origins and inexplicable existence might exist in similar relationship to us as once the goddess did. And our relationship to these things, that we appear tiny, of apparent utter insignificance and yet also - apparently - of moment, of consciousness, even of co-creation might echo an ancient relationship with goddess.

Perhaps within our world these named goddesses can be recognised as gateways to that vastness - vastness both within and beyond ourselves - and the multiplicity of them can be experienced as flavours, or facets of an infinitely faceted diamond, the whole of which is divinity/ is the life-force/ is the feminine/generative face of god/dess. This is the second of the most obvious ways I know of to relate to goddess. Here she does not need to be named. Here she can be experienced in the wonder of our bodies, the mysteries and revelations of experimental physics, the night sky, the birth or death of any individual -

including an individual flower or insect - in the existence of rock and tree and sex and breath. This is unquantifiable, this definition of goddess.

The third way that I relate to goddess, and that I observe other women relating to goddess, is the earth-as-goddess. In this understanding, the planet (specifically the planet, not the stars or the solar system) exists as one being. We are parts of that goddess, some would say the mind of the planet - but whatever part we are, we are just a part. Every other part (minerals, all life forms, air and water, the molten core) is also intrinsically the goddess. This concept is different from the earth-as-benign-goddess who takes care of us as we walk upon her; this is where she is one entity, Gaia, and we are merely a tiny - and we could say even unnecessary or destructive - part of the whole. She is not here because of us. If anything, we are here because of and for her. And if we are the consciousness, or any part of that, perhaps there is a co-creation happening in this relationship and we are not as entirely insignificant as it is also possible that we are.

This is the most political of the three relationships, for it immediately has us asking, how do we relate to the earth? How do we treat other parts of this being/the goddess/ourselves? What is our immediate purpose in being alive, and how do we live that? What is our collective responsibility? And how do we look after ourselves, and our loved ones, and our relationships with people, earth, resources and divinity? Are we supporting terrorism, oppression, famine and how is it possible to not support that? Are we polluting or destroying, and how would it be possible to enrich and create instead? How would it be possible to live in alignment with goddess? There is no simple answer to this question, but it is immediately clear that much of how we live is not sustainable, does not support life-centred or ecological values and is not reflective of true relationship with goddess, even taking the more difficult aspects of the dark goddess into account with her destruction (sometimes apparently random), her disease and death.

For me, the goddess is Inanna and inevitably her sister, Ereshkigal. She is Isis and Aphrodite and Persephone. She is the snakes who live on my property, the changing faces of the moon and the depths of the night sky. She is my woman's body. She stands behind me as I work ritual and magic, and sometimes speaks or acts through me. She is my understanding of life and death. She is the earth, the rocks her bones and the living things her heart's blood; all of the stories of the earth are the thoughts that play through her mind. The moments of my life that I treasure most deeply are moments when I have been entirely held in her presence: the birth of my son, moments in dreams and rituals and love-making when I held and was the whole world; moments of reverence and revelation as I stood in her temples or observed the beauty of the river/the clouds/a tree.

I think that journeying in some way with one or more of the named goddesses is an invaluable experience of divinity, especially for women. I think that viewing the Universe and the life-force through the lens of the feminine divine is powerful and potentially revelatory. And I think that regarding the Earth-as-goddess is political, necessary and maybe will save all of us from the excesses of consumerism and the divided world mentality. Relating to the feminine divine, recognising and becoming goddess is an invitation offered with each breath, each birth, each life.

All of these relationships with goddess; through named goddesses, through the more numinous aspects available to us in our culture and goddess as the earth itself, lead to and through each other. None of these ways are best, or first. And there is no right way to do it, no starting point and probably no ending point. There is no particular word to follow, though plenty of words that may inspire, and I have listed some at the end of this article. This is not the path of individual salvation and though I do think our lives will be immeasurably richer by it, I don't think you will get to heaven at the end. Possibly, we will return into a place of natural balance with the earth. There is the waves in the tide, the tiny sea creatures, our bodies as guides; and the stars and moon and ancient myths and songs, there is art and relationship and breath, there is the great, shared, body-knowledge of being held within the womb. This is goddess.

Recommended Reading:

Harding, Esther. *Woman & Mysteries*, pub. Rider, 1989. Jungian interpretation of the centrality to women of goddess myth and archetypes.

George, Demetra. *Mysteries of the Dark Moon*, pub. Harper San Francisco, 1992. Powerful interpretation of the place of the Dark Goddess in our world.

Leeming, David and Page, Jake. *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine*, pub. Oxford University Press, 1994. Clear, concise retelling of Goddess myths, from ancient to modern.

Sjöö, Monica and Mor, Barbara. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, pub. Harper and Row, 1987. Extensive study and interpretation of past goddess cultures.

Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, pub. Harper San Francisco, 1989. A how-to of goddess centred ritual and magic.

Wolkstein, Diane and Samuel, Noah Kramer. *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, pub. Harper and Row, 1983. A translation of Inanna's myths that were recorded on stone approx. 4000 years ago.

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