

**W**hen I was growing up in the fifties and sixties goddesses were not acknowledged. It was "God is dead" or "God is disgusted" or "if God is so good, why the Nazis?" Never goddesses. In the early seventies my consciousness was raised. I encountered a few texts about goddesses... historical, psychological, mythological. These goddesses usually embodied energy far different from that provided by the God I had heard so much about in my youth. He was too distant, too judgmental, too all-powerful yet not powerful enough to right most wrongs. Most importantly, he was not personal for me.

But the Goddess was tangible immediately upon my first encounter with Her; She being the moon, nature, emotion, enveloping joy, hard fighting ancestral mother. I discovered She was present and accessible to the men I related to as well, so gender was not the driving force behind Her appearance in my life. We didn't talk of our feelings about female deities much then except in intimate circles. As it turns out, lots of other people were having similar experiences during those years. Then books and art began appearing. The wider dialogue was quickly begun.

Others, however, have become dismayed by goddesses rising up. They ask who is She? Did She exist in the minds and hearts of pre-Christian folks? What is Her legitimate claim to religious reverence? Or, is She only a fabrication of those looking for a sentimental symbol they can relate to in a technological world removed from plants and animals? Judging from these challenges, religion is suppose to be static, monotheistic and unquestioned. For many attempting to control contemporary culture, goddesses just don't fit in the picture.

These critics claim the existence of the prehistoric Goddess documented by archeologist Maria Gimbutas and others has been dethroned by more knowledgeable archeologists. I for one do not look to Maria Gimbutas' theories as the final word, since in the business of interpreting prehistoric symbols finality is not likely. I never doubted knowing our ancestors is by necessity a many-faceted process requiring interplay of diverse voices.

What I deeply value is Gimbutas' unique and inspiring interpretations. Receiving such a body of work from a woman whose skills as an archeologist had won her widespread respect, prior to her bold presentations on the origins and nature of the ancient goddess, is such a gift to humanity. This multidimensional woman grew up in a rich folk tradition, steeped in direct experience of the land and seasons. She was also a scholar with a sensitivity to cross discipline synthesis. Her elaborate and stunning story of prehistoric communities carries spiritual truth so many have found nourishing. Academic certainty was not her goal nor should it be her judge.

The Goddess did not just appear in the work of Gimbutas. The early eighties gave us Merlin Stone's *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*, a wonderful collection of historical and mythological information about varied manifestations of the female divine cross culturally. During the ensuing years, a staggering number of volumes of literature, scholarship and works of art exploring the female divine emerged. Worldwide, religions with diverse roots and robust contemporary practice – including Taoism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Yoruba, Native American spiritually diverse practices and neo-paganism in North America and Europe – provide rich stories, images and practices that honor female divinities. For me there is something akin to group imagination going on here... over time and across space... which offers durable wisdom.

These goddesses are not dependent on academic pronouncements but rather the extensive and constant emotional responses to arousing stories and images. Conversations, reflections, and research framed by those who honor and love goddesses have changed the course of modern spiritual inquiry. I sense these goddesses are not about to be dispossessed or go underground but rather have decided to stick around and correspond with artists, writers, lovers, ritualists, researchers and free spirits.

The symbol of the Goddess for many has come to mean the natural system itself. She is not about excluding the male or making the human woman a formless supreme deity. Rather, belief systems featuring goddesses are about a freeing up of the ability to live consciously, sensuously and vividly in a world that holds so many natural treasures that teach valuable moral lessons.

An admirable set of useable spiritual guideposts has been produced by these musings. Here are a few: the feminine is diverse, not role bound; the natural world is a divine web encompassing all in relationship; body is temple; pleasure is good, attainable and different from destructive hedonism; nature is home; creative mind interacts with emotional experience producing meaningful context; and values are central to female honoring practices.

May we all have the will and the wisdom to ask searching questions about the female divine and delight in the answers we settle on without fearing the wrath of those who seek to prevent us from acknowledging Her existence. Let's honor and protect our personal beliefs and practices that are vital components of our ongoing exploration of mystery which is our birthright.

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