

2. *Book of Shadows*

The book is *Book of Shadows, A Modern Woman's Journey into the Wisdom of Witchcraft and the Magic of the Goddess*, by Phyllis Curott, Wiccan High Priestess (Broadway Books, 1998). The reason I read it is because just recently I read about the Hindu mystical tradition¹ and it called up for me some memories of readings I had previously done in Muslim (Rumi)² and Christian mysticism³ that partook of the same, or at least similar, sentiments based on comparable spiritual insights. So since I now had this book in my possession I began to read it for the purpose of comparing its spiritual insights to the ones I had previously written about.

I will write down what I found interesting on several pages, and why.

Pages: 76-77

Quote:

From my reading I had learned that a number of neuroscientists theorized that transcendental experiences and mystical states—such as those brought on by yoga, meditation, psychotropics, and other ecstatic practices—might be the means by which we can gain access to

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<http://thoughtsandplaces.org/Being%20Alive%20in%202014/VirginiaandUpanishads/VirginiaandtheUpanishads.htm>

² <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/rumiruminations/rumiruminations.HTML>

³ <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/rumiruminations/wizzg.html> and <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/WIZZK.HTML>

quantum reality. . . . Would we discover that the nature of reality was sacred? . . .

The poet in me responded to the idea that the imagination could be a portal to divine revelation. . . .

. . . I was thrilled to learn that there were keys to ecstasy and the world of the spirit that did not require the use of psychotropics and that were powerful, effective, and legal.

Comments:

I like Curott's saying that the poet in her responds to these ideas. Suggests she is divided in her perceptions along poetic and logical lines, and I can very much relate to that. But, in my opinion Curott is taking advantage of the existence of (currently) imponderable quandaries in quantum physics by suggesting that in that aspect of science her logical side can now judge that her new spiritual-cosmological longings and insights have scientific merit. That is a stretch, in my opinion. But a harmless stretch.

I agree that being alive and able to perceive reality, to some degree is an insight into what is sacred. Reality is what is sacred. We are part of reality. With her, I am glad there are ways to attain the revelatory ecstatic state without having to resort to drugs.

Pages: 78-79

Quote:

. . . here was a community whose values might truly heal the wounds that haunted all of us, an ancient artistry that knew the body as a miraculous instrument through which the sounds of the Divine, if it existed, could reverberate into the world. It was an ancient system based upon the goodness, even more, the essential divinity, of the human heart. . . .

[Having agreed to practice what would lead her to “another way of knowing” she describes these thought-exercises that were part of the ritual:]

I concentrated on the feeling of being loved, and giving love. Mother love, with its warm arms and soothing words, family love with its laughter and support, the love of friends with its shared secrets and discoveries. . . . My pulse quickened . . . I tried not to think about my unfulfilled yearning for a dark-haired, working-class poet, or kisses that awaken a soul from its chrysalis of dreams, or calloused fingertips like flint against skin, leaving trails of fire through the forest of night.

On the night of Venus’s full moon, in an hour when it filled my window with silver light. I decided to set aside any lingering skepticism I had. I decided not to question or to doubt, just do it and enjoy the experience of magic.

Comments:

There is much in these snippets that caught my attention. The idea that the Divine enters the world so we can perceive it

through us, that we are in fact essentially what is Divine, rings bells all the way back to my review of the Upanishads of the Hindus and also the mystics of Islam and Christianity.

Then as she enters the mind-state that prepares her for her revelatory experience she focuses on love, but rejects that aspect of love that she longs for, sexually ecstatic love making. This rings bells back to my treatises on the idealized practices of the “Religion of Love,” or “Courtly Love,” in the Middle Ages.⁴ A man becomes more noble in his heart, and his mind is expanded, as he worships Love through the lady to whom he has pledged his devotion and sacred honor. There was a God called Love, and he is mentioned in the poetry of Dante Alighieri (*The Divine Comedy*).⁵

Turning this sacred love into carnal love refocuses on the body and shuts off the channels that could otherwise be opened into the other dimensions of reality. Of course some critics of the Religion of Love charged that it was the religion of adultery. Since humans were involved there was no doubt some degree of truth to this charge. It was declared a heresy.

The final phrase cited above is key to her ecstatic experience: she shuts down the rational mind and all its doubts and questions and objections. Don't think, just feel. Many mystics of a variety of backgrounds have said this shutting down of the

⁴ <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/WIZZN.HTML>

⁵ <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/WIZZJ.HTML>

mind is essential to feeling and sensing the ineffable manifestations of the Divine.

Page: 83

Quote:

[A quotation within the book:]

“. . . everything that exists, at least in the natural world, is an embodiment of the sacred. So it's to be treated as sacred—with respect and care.”

[Another person reinforces this point:]

“And that is also how magic works—everything that exists is sacred and interconnected . . . everything that exists in the natural world is an expression of divine energy. Therefore, because everything is interconnected, we can have a positive influence on all sorts of events. When we do magic, we become one with the object of our magic.” . . .

Comments:

This page goes on to cite Chief Seattle on the same subject. This is where the author moves this universal mystical insight of the divine in all, and all in the divine, into the Wiccan domain: This interconnectedness can, once one is adapted as a Witch, be used to do good through projecting one's divine power onto an object or a circumstance.

At the risk of angering any Wiccans reading this, to me this is basically what is called prayer in some other traditions—projecting one’s most sincere desire onto another person or situation. The only real difference, in my very personal opinion, is that prayers invoke an intermediary, a deity or a saintly person, in whom resides the same power to influence the object or situation that Wiccans feel lies within themselves.

Page: 191

Quote:

[A priestess has gone into a trance and the very voice of the Goddess is speaking to the assembled believers through her:]

“I am the gracious Goddess, who gives the gift of joy unto the heart of humanity. Nor do I demand aught in sacrifice, for behold, I am the Mother of all things and my love is poured out upon the earth. . . .”

. . .

“I am the beauty of the green earth, and the white moon among the stars, and the mysteries of the waters and the desire of the heart of humanity. I call upon your soul: Arise and come unto me, for I am the soul of nature who gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed and unto me all things must return, and before my face, beloved of Gods and of humanity, let thine innermost self be enfolded in the rapture of the infinite.

“Let my worship be within the heart that rejoices, for behold—all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. Therefore, let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And you who think to seek for 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.”

Comments:

I was bowled over by this speech. I would like for every God/Goddess to speak to the world of people with such a loving, comforting, healing message. No rantings or ravings about sin and damnation and demands for blind obedience! Instead a call to practice love and find joy, now and forever, through focusing on the Divine within you! Beautifully said!

Several subtler aspects also seem worth mentioning, such as the Goddess being the desire of Gods and humans and being that which is attained at the end of desire. Both of these ideas seem compatible with the idea that Brahman is the desire of all gods and goddesses and humans, and can be encountered now by coming to a state of being beyond desire. The words seem compatible, but the context suggests a somewhat different intent of meaning, the fulfillment of all human desire lies in our

ultimate reunion with the Goddess, who represents the indwelling Divine in all that is (just like Brahman).

Pages: 193-196

Quote:

[I will start with a description of what is contained on these pages. The witches perform another ritual that has them in a circle, partially disrobed, and the magic of the power left among them by the presence of the Goddess makes each rotate and feel the Divine beauty within themselves and see it in the radiance shining from every face and body around the circle. No one seems aware of their own imperfections in body, and none there are even close to physically perfect by societal standards. Then when Curott comes home, she disrobes in front of her mirror and continues the dance and experiences the presence of the Goddess again, but this time it is a very personal epiphany:]

My mask was gone, and as I danced before the mirror I felt an energy unlike anything I'd ever known rising within me. From a cavern in my soul so deep it sprang from some measureless chasm of the universe, something stirred. And from the sheltering emptiness and inexhaustible possibility that surrounded me, from the Goddess's womb in which I lived, something came to me. The placental boundary between inner and outer, call it consciousness or skin, was permeable. The Goddess I expected to manifest in the world that surrounded me was

already within. And this unfamiliar epiphany would shape the expression of my life. I hadn't lost my mind; I had found my heart, and it was the Goddess's temple.

Comments:

I have not before read a more convincing and riveting account of an actual religious or spiritual conversion. At this point she "knew with certainty." Doubt was gone, her rational ever-questioning mind was silenced. For the moment her 'mask' of intellectualism was off. But masks are hard to leave off.

The Wiccans mildly whirling in unison to achieve a state of ecstasy also reminds me of the Whirling Dervishes, like Rumi who dictated all his many thousands of poems while rotating in a trance state. Her feeling knowledge rising up from within her deepest parts is also reminiscent of Carl Jung's description of revelation as messaging from the subconscious into consciousness in response to a very strong need.⁶

Page: 253

Quote:

[The context is a harvest and a sabbat ritual that reinforced her new knowledge:]

The beauty and abundance, the actions and poetry of the sabbat ritual, had deeply moved me, my intellectual reservations and sophisticated skepticism were finally overcome. I realized the rituals of these Wise Women

⁶ <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/DivineFem.html>

were not archaic, meaningless theatrics, but enacted prayers, active meditations. The ritual was art, and prayer, a living mandala, an evocation of spirit and an expression of the spirit's presence in everything that was life. The symbols were not merely allegorical, they were also real forms of divine energy. . . .

Comments:

Although the previously described personal conversion experience had been powerful, it is now being brought into the larger context of the movement of which she has become a part. This is interesting because it was experiences of this nature that set people apart from their fellow believers in the Middle Ages. They felt their personal revelation made them superior to the church, and spiritually independent of it, and were dubbed "Free Spirits," denounced as heretics, and hunted. Curott here shows that she needs the ritual and fellowship of her fellow Wise Women to keep this flame within her burning brightly and to keep her ever-ready questioning intellect at bay. Her personal revelation of the Goddess did not set her apart from them, and especially not above them.

Page: 254

Quote:

[This is an attack on patriarchal religion, I wondered for many pages if she was ever going to say something like this, the context is the human disregard for the well-being of the planet:]

The finest scientific minds have warned us that we stand on the brink of extinction, the result of our uncontrolled overpopulation, pollution, and depletion of resources. But species evolve when their survival depends on it. Religious forms change when the old metaphors and explanations no longer reflect people's reality and understanding of the world. A transcendent God from whom man is eternally separated, having been born in sin and in flesh; a God who is only male and can be reached only by male priests, or rabbis, or mullahs; a God who is vengeful and who condemns women and requires their submission; a God for whom the earth is a mere storehouse and source of spiritual downfall; a God for whom all manner of war and violence is even now being justified, is not God. We live in a culture of cynicism and despair and these sides of God are merely a tragic image projected from man's lost and haunted soul.

Comments:

I find no fault with many of these observations, having made not just a few of them myself on this web site,⁷ though not as coherently perhaps.

Where was I not in full agreement? The 'storehouse' observation is not one I identify with. I also wondered where she was going with the idea that species evolve when under

⁷ <http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/WIZZP.HTML>

pressure. She left me dangling on that one even though some New Age gurus are predicting a massive spiritual shift in humanity once the natural consequences of current planet- and people-abuse play out. Maybe that is what she also means with what follows: human religious notions will change to adapt to new realities as hers just have.

Pages: 275-277

Quote:

[These pages tell of her spiritual trials and visions during her final initiation. I won't go through the rather interesting details, I will just cite her conclusions about her new faith after this experience:]

I heard the sword's exaltation as it responded, slashing the air between my spirit and my mind. Now, resting on my crown, the sword had severed the fear from my faith. Beyond the keening winds of doubt, I heard the ancient songs of wonder and, surrounded by darkness, recognized the womb of the Great Mother. Confronted with death, I embraced time and conceived radiance. Lost in the wasteland, I found the sacred wellspring. My heart knew the unity and beauty, the joy and promise of life. My soul, now joined to all that was, that is, and will be, had come home. . . .

Acting in perfect love and perfect trust, I overcame my soul-crippling fears in that moment of initiation. I became the Goddess in her ancient journey to the hidden

world. There I confronted death and discovered the eternal, mysterious capacity to return with miraculous gifts of spirit and life, gifts I had received throughout the year and a day which had been the rite of passage to my new life. . . .

[Speaking of the blessings bestowed on her through this preparatory year, she returns this individual and personal experience back to the whole earth and its urgent needs:]

It was the promise of new life, of transformed consciousness, of healed heart and renewed divinity which might someday help restore vitality to the dying earth.

Comments:

I was impressed with these statements, reflecting the teachings of many others with comparable mystical experiences and insights, yet calibrated to the language and cosmologic understanding of her newfound faith.

I chuckled a little bit at her saying for at least the third time in this book that this experience cast out all doubt. That is how I interpreted the sword separating her mind (her logical way of knowing) from her spirit (her intuitive way of knowing).

If this is something she has now actually achieved, more power to her. As for me my two ways of knowing will remain divided. No problem. I can live with that.⁸