Stepping Into Ourselves
An Anthology of Writings on Priestesses

Edited by
Anne Key and Candace Kant
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“It’s Easier to be a Priest than a Priestess” by Nano Boye Nagle/Ziji Salaam. Based on “Queer Spirituality” in MatriFocus: Cross-Quarterly for the Goddess Woman (Lammas 2003), www.matrifocus.com/LAM03/queer.htm. All rights reserved, used with permission by the author.
The Role of the Priestess*
By Delphyne Platner

What does it mean to be a priestess in a patriarchal world? Because our culture does not recognize the feminine counterpart to “priest,” and, with few exceptions, initiation into priesthood is not an option for women in mainstream religions, even the word “priestess” needs defining. Contemporary priestesses of many different spiritual paths continue to carry on the legacy of their ancestral foremothers throughout history and pre-history, women whose “specialties we would say today fell under such varied pursuits as religion, philosophy, prophecy, ethics, writing, dance, temple construction and maintenance, ritual, fund raising, tourism, social work, and medicine.” Often the priestesses among us go unrecognized, as we lack a common terminology and understanding of their existence.

Contemporary priestesses are diverse in their background, training and devotion to spirit. Some have received formal initiations and taken vows within a traditional or organized forum, whereas others have created their own vows and initiations. While many different practices and traditions co-exist under the umbrella of women’s spirituality, there are essential similarities between them. Women’s spirituality is a way of perceiving and interacting with the world, not merely a philosophy, a doctrine or something learned from a book. There are many ways of gaining knowledge and accessing the Divine.

Embodyed knowledge is highly valued and may manifest itself in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, visual, auditory and sensory perception. Often this knowledge appears in the form of a dream, or is activated by other forms of sacred arts such as meditation, yoga, dance or ritual. Despite apparent differences of geography, race, language, lineage, socio-economic status and religion, the essence of the rituals performed by priestesses is very much the same. Ritual can be understood cross-culturally because it taps into the mytho-cosmological reality of human experience. A fundamental tenet of women’s spirituality is that anyone can have direct and deeply meaningful contact with the Divine.

This matrific worldview understands time as cyclical, or spiral, rather than linear, honoring the seasons, cycles and the process of transformation. The only thing promised to us in life is transformation, divinely symbolized by the Goddess in all her (actual and symbolic) guises: life, death and rebirth. Embracing women’s spirituality means consecrating women’s cycles with their connections to the cycles of the moon, the tides and the seasons. Of course, men have cycles too. All living beings do. Perhaps if our 21st century fathers, brothers, lovers and friends were able to embrace, celebrate, consecrate and honor their own cycles, they would recognize their interconnectedness to all life, instead of standing outside of nature and attempting to control it.

A priestess deeply venerates this interconnectedness and is dedicated to healing herself, others and the planet. She knows all things have a purpose, and thus reveres all that patriarchal religions have dichotomized as sacred and profane. She strives to balance light and dark, both within and without, for failing to recognize one without the other has sent the world spinning out of kilter. A priestess draws much of her strength from the underworld, domain of the Dark Goddess. She realizes that, although the chthonic realm has been demonized, suppressed or neglected by most religions, the Dark Goddess holds the power to bestow many gifts, including treasures such as creativity, passion, sacred sexuality, protection, ferocity, courage and death of the ego.

The priestess communes with spirit and the ancestors, performing rituals and divining for herself and others. “The High Priestess is the original Sybil, whose ability to enter the trance state and divine the future made her the mouthpiece of the Goddess.” She may consult the oracle through reading Tarot, throwing coconut or cowry shells, swinging a

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pendulum, inducing trance states, doing dream work, reading palms, studying numerology, astrology or the I Ching, scrying or reading coffee grounds, tea leaves or eggs. While there are countless methods of divination originating in various cultures, their intent is usually the same: a quest for divine guidance. The priestess listens with her entire being—to herself, to the Divine, to the earth, to her devotees.

In *Voices of the Goddess*, Caitlin Matthews articulates the role and responsibility of the contemporary priestess: “Fundamentally speaking, a priestess is one who mediates Goddess by making her power available to all creation. A priestess guards the mysteries of the Mother and helps initiate other travelers on the road to the spiritual home. A priestess changes things, concepts, people.”

A priestess navigates the space between the worlds, accepting her fate as a portal or doorway to the Divine. She is a resource for knowledge, information and healing in her community. She knows how to dance with the forces of the ancestors, gods and goddesses, spirits and natural elements. She resists the urge to believe she is the power, while trusting herself to be a vessel.

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**Endnotes**


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**The Path of Priestess and Priest: Initiation into an Ancient Tradition**

*By Jalaja Bonheim*

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*What is a priest? What is a priestess? Images of men in stiff robes in church on Sundays, and exotically clad women making offerings to their bizarre-looking gods suggest that priestesses and priests inhabit a world other than our own and have little impact on our lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. To understand the essence of “priest” and “priestess,” we must look beyond the clichés to reconnect with our inner archetype: the vortex of power in the depths of our own psyche. Since the beginning of human history, this archetype has found expression in countless religious traditions. However, since archetypes are never static, contemporary priests and priestesses look nothing like their ancient Indian, Sumerian or Egyptian counterparts. As human society unfolds, so do archetypes, appearing in ever-evolving guises. In fact, priests and priestesses are everywhere in our midst; they just don’t look the way we might expect. Rarely do they wear special robes, and many have no ties with organized religion, yet their contributions are crucial to our welfare and even our survival. Priests and priestesses serve the spiritual lives of their communities and hold open the lines of communication between the human and spirit worlds.

Over the years, I have worked with thousands of people in whom this archetype has been awakened, and I have formed my own understanding of what it means to be a priest or a priestess. I would like to share some of my thoughts and invite you to explore the personal meaning of this archetype for you. Let me start by telling the story of how the priestess awakened in my own life.*