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8/2005
A Conversation between Mara Keller and Carol Christ

A candid, Friday afternoon talk about the Goddess, the power of fantasy and what’s wrong with monotheism.

In November, 1997, at the national meetings of the American Academy of Religion, Carol Christ was given the special honor of a panel focused exclusively on her work. The panel—which was attended with a great deal of excitement by an overflow audience—consisted of Christine Downing, archetypal psychologist and first woman president of the Academy; Gordon Kaufman, Harvard professor emeritus and past president of the academy; Kwok Pui Lan, Asian feminist liberation theologian; and Judith Plaskow, Jewish theologian and president-elect.

In addition to being a fascinating discussion of differences by leading Christian and Jewish theologians about the significance of Christ’s new systematic exposition of Goddess theology, this event also held a keen historical significance, especially for those who witnessed the birth of the contemporary women’s spirituality movement some 25 years ago.

As one of these first voices, Christ (rhymes with mist) is a pioneer and founding mother of the women’s spirituality movement in this country, bringing to voice the experience of women’s spiritual quest for the divine as imaged in female terms.

Despite critics’ attempts, Christ cannot be dismissed as a New Age guru or an overzealous Wicca priestess bent on the glorious return of pagan mysteries. She holds a Ph.D. in religion studies from Yale and has taught at numerous well-known and respected schools in the United States, including Harvard Divinity School and Columbia University. It was Christ’s vision and energy that led to the creation of the Women’s Caucus at the 1971 annual meeting of the AAR, the most important professional organization in the field of religion studies. In addition, Christ helped found the Women and Religion section in the AAR a few years after that, and later was actively involved in establishing the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion. Christ has explored her connection with the Goddess in her books, Laughter of Aphrodite, Odyssey with the Goddess, and Diving Deep and Surfacing, as well as in the feminist spirituality compilations, WomanSpirit Rising and Weaving the Vision, where she worked with Plaskow. Since 1988, Christ has lived in Greece where, in addition to teaching and writing, she leads Goddess pilgrimages to ancient sites as a director of the Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual. Her writings remain some
of the most articulate statements concerning the needs and hopes that underlie the contemporary renewal of interest in Goddess traditions, and are widely used by undergraduates, graduate students and scholars.

Christ admits that her work came out of the women's movement with its emphasis on consciousness-raising, but she insists that her efforts are no psychological fad designed to lift the self-esteem of oppressed women. Rather, Christ purposefully places herself in a long line of female scholars such as Jane Ellen Harrison (who studied the rituals of archaic Greece and argued that a superior social system, matriarchy, existed before the institution of patriarchy) and Marija Gimbutas (who conducted excavations and analyses of several Indo-European archeological sites which she believes demonstrate the existence of widespread Goddess worship in Old Europe).

In fact, Christ's work relies upon these scholars. Gimbutas especially, for a certain amount of legitimacy. In Rebirth of the Goddess, for instance, Christ writes that although she once felt "alone and vulnerable when I spoke the name of the Goddess," now her experiences and ideas are firmly grounded in history. Still, she ac-knowledges that "the history of the Goddess ... is controversial in the scholarly world."

While many scholars are drawn to the myths and stories (i.e. texts) to engage their religious imagination, Christ has always been drawn directly to the earlier preliterate, prepatriarchal period. Downing notes that Christ's "imagination and devotion are most powerfully inspired by images, particularly by statues, by figurines small enough to hold in one's hands, by places, by excavated temple sites, and even more by the caves where worship took place long before any temples were built, by rituals through which one gets access to the life-affirming, women-empowering energy of the Goddesses." It is Christ's passion for images over texts that contributes, in part, to the criticism of her work.

It is not surprising that some critics attempt to dismiss the entire field as a mass delusion and assert that its adherents are impervious to logic, reason and arguments based upon knowledge. Although the emotions and rhetoric of critics may run high (one respected classicist has called the Mother Goddess a "remarkable fable"), that is not to say that the criticisms are without merit.

One of the main lines of argument against Gimbutas' work, and therefore against Christ's, is that the evidence supporting the Goddess hypothesis originates in pre-history, before written records. In short, the evidence consists of artifacts, not documents: pottery, ceramic seals, design patterns, carved figures, etc. Putting aside the reasonable retort that the interpretation of written records is subject to multiple reasonable interpretations, to the average person on the street, it is a large leap to conclude the existence of a Great Goddess religion from archeological finds of female figurines across Old Europe.

Put in other words, the critics' argument goes like this: suppose some catastrophe next year destroyed all written records on the planet. Then, tens of thousands of years from now, alien archaeologists unearth perfectly preserved plastic Barbie dolls, sometimes more than one, in almost every house in the United States, as well as numerous pictorial representations of women having approximately the same shape. Would it be reasonable to conclude that these artifacts demonstrate the existence of a great female deity, a Goddess, worshiped throughout the land?

Female figurines, however, are not the only evidence supporting the existence of a wide-spread Goddess religion during the Neolithic period before the rise of civilizations with writing. Christ's writing is part of a larger body of scholarship that has reexamined historical artifacts, as well as texts, in an effort to see beyond modern day cultural prejudices that they argue blind men and women alike to the image of the divine feminine, the Goddess.

Christ believes that the institutionalization of warfare as a way of life is the single most important factor leading to the subordination of women. Thus, at the end of the 20th century, with the end of the Cold War, it is not surprising that part of the political debate has begun to shift from issues of security to issues of race, class, and gender.

Without warfare, Christ would likely agree, patriarchal power is vulnerable to questions concerning its validity and necessity. With this in mind, it is to be expected that any attempt to rewrite, modify, or change history, regardless of the veracity of such revision, raises cultural hackles.

And this debate is not small. It ranges in time from the Upper Paleolithic (that is 30,000 years B.C.E.) to the present and covers the cultures of Europe and the Near East. The arguments encompass science and religion, archeology and theology. The intellectual stakes are huge.

We asked Mara Keller to interview Christ during her most recent visit to the United States in which she spoke at the AAR conference, lectured at various universities and theological schools and taught a graduate course on Goddess Theology at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco.

Keller reports: Carol was visiting in my home, which provided us some time to share our personal stories, thoughts and reflections on the meaning of women's spirituality and Goddess religion in our own lives and in society at large. This conversation, which took place in the warmth of my living room overlooking the San Francisco Bay on a stark winter day, offered me one more opportunity to explore this special woman's mind and spirit.
What led you to write Rebirth of the Goddess?

I was always a mystical child, and I felt a sense of power and oneness with the universe when I was very young, when I was swimming in the sea at Huntington Beach, crashing in the waves; I felt the sense of mystery when I was falling asleep in my grandmother’s bedroom and hearing peacocks screaming overhead; walking in the woods in the San Bernardino Mountains, I felt one with the trees and the paths and the mountains. But I certainly never had an idea that I would major in religion or write a book like Rebirth of the Goddess.

When I was in college I took a course in the Old Testament. I took it mostly for background but I fell in love with the Bible. I started studying Hebrew, so I could catch up with the class and learn to read the Bible in Hebrew. I felt that if I could learn Hebrew, I could understand better what God wanted to tell people in his own language. I wrote my senior thesis on nature imagery in the Hebrew prophets. It was one way of trying to give articulation to my deep feelings of connection to the sea and the trees I had felt since childhood.

It was really surprising when I turned my thesis in and one of the English professors said, “You don’t really think the trees of the field would clap their hands on the day of redemption, do you? That’s a pathetic fallacy!” I didn’t know that a “pathetic fallacy” is the attribution of feelings and thoughts to other-than-human beings. I have coined a new term, the “a-pathetic fallacy,” and that is the belief that only human beings have thoughts and feelings—that seems to me to be the real fallacy.

When I went to graduate school and spoke to my professors about the parts of theology that meant the most to me, such as Martin Buber’s idea of an I/Thou relationship—to be with another person, or with a tree, or even a piece of mica—and that this is where the divine power is felt; my professors said to me, “That is where Buber got confused.” When I spoke of Paul Tillich’s image of God as the ground of being, they said, “Oh, that’s just poetry.”

Also, as I was studying theology, I found that I wasn’t taken seriously as a student. The professors would say, “When a man finishes his Ph.D., he’ll go out and he’ll get a job.” And I would ask, “What about when a woman finishes her Ph.D.?” They would say, “Well, you probably won’t finish. And even if you do, you’ll get married, so you won’t really need a job.” The other students, all men, would say, “If I had a choice between a woman and a man, of course I would hire the man because he has a family.” I would say, “Well, I’m single and I don’t know if I’ll ever get married; what if I have to support myself?” Then they’d say, “We’d hire the man anyway, because he’d have a family to support.”

At the same time, in the theological texts I was studying, in Thomas Aquinas, for example, I would read that man represents the head, the mind and rational capacity, that woman represents the body and sensuality and that’s why God created marriage—so that there could be a head and a body within the family. Aquinas asked if man alone was created fully in the image of God and his answer was, “Yes, because a man has both a head and a body and, even if he is alone, man is created fully in the image of God.” He wasn’t so sure if woman, who was primarily a body, would be fully the image of God, unless she was in relation to a man. And this type of thinking was carried on all the way up to the 20th century in Karl Barth, who said, “Man must always have initiative, precedence and authority; and woman’s duty is to be obedient and to follow.”

As I was reading these things and being treated this way, it dawned on me that part of the problem was the idea that “mankind” was always portrayed as being in the image of God, and that God was being portrayed as a man. So if God was a man and I was a woman, could I really be fully in the image of God? This led me gradually to the search for, and to write, The Rebirth of the Goddess. I felt I needed the image of God as a Mother and God as a Woman to symbolize my own spiritual, intellectual quest within the unity of my mind and my body.

When did you first come to this realization that you wanted a female image of God?

I began studying theology in the late 1960s, and it was probably within the next couple of years. At first I don’t think it would have even crossed my mind to question the traditional image of God. But as my own sense of disempowerment within the study I had chosen became stronger and stronger, I was forced to question, at a very basic level, if the way in which I was being treated related to what I was studying, and if this was related to the theological tradition that had been handed down by men.

Were there no female images of God you could find anywhere in your studies?

It was a different world then. I remember checking out a few library books. I found Simone Weil and a few other women writers: I read St. Teresa of Avila. Nothing seemed to speak to me. I was looking for something else, but I didn’t know what it was. I chose to write my dissertation on Eli Wiesel and the Holocaust. When I first read The Gates of the Forest, my own faith was deeply shattered, because I didn’t understand—as Wiesel didn’t—how God could have abandoned his chosen people.
This was not a God I could worship. And if this was the way he was going to bring about liberation, this was not the way I wanted to bring about liberation.

And if there were an all-powerful God, why didn’t he intervene to save them? I was also very intrigued by, and identified with, Wiesel’s expression of anger at God, saying, “Why did you betray me? Why did you betray my people?”

This caused a deep crack in my Christian worldview, because I didn’t understand how the Christian God could have done this. It caused a crisis of faith. But I continued with Wiesel, accusing God, expressing anger at God and waiting for a response from God.

Tell us more about this crisis of faith. What happened?

I felt I couldn’t believe in an all-powerful God who would let genocide happen. And I began to understand that Christianity is very much implicated. Wiesel portrays the acting out of the Passion Play with its accusation of the Jews as the murderers of Christ as being one of the impetuses for killing the Jews. I felt that as long as the Easter service continued to portray the Jews as the killers of Christ, I couldn’t participate in it. At the same time, I felt increasingly that I couldn’t participate in any service that referred to God as a Father or Lord or King. I was increasingly involved in the anti-war movement and couldn’t stomach “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” or “Onward Christian Soldiers” and the many militaristic images found in the Bible. It was at the celebration of the ordination of a woman priest that I couldn’t sing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” and I walked out the church door.

In your first anthology, Womanspirit Rising, you and Judith Plaskow brought together many of the early voices of the contemporary women’s spirituality movement. You took a “revolutionary” voice and Judith took a “reform” voice.

I just couldn’t stomach it. I was asked to be the godmother of a child. In the service she was to be baptized into “the brotherhood of Christian men.” And even though her mother was a feminist, and I was a feminist, these words were used. I didn’t say anything during the service, but I did speak about it at the reception. And that led me to write one of the very first articles about how women should express their anger toward God.

What was that like, expressing your anger toward God?

My anger built up until one night, when I was working on my dissertation. I left my typewriter and went to my bed where I just started expressing to God, first, how angry Wiesel was with him about the Holocaust, how angry I was about the Holocaust, and how angry I was about Christianity’s participation in the hatred of Jews. Then I started talking about my sense of betrayal as a woman, and how I felt betrayed by God, expressing my resentment of texts in which I didn’t exist or in which my right to study or my right to be a full human being was not being expressed. Just as Wiesel had said, “If you have power, why didn’t you intervene?” I said to God, “If you have power why didn’t you intervene when women were being raped, when women were being killed as witches?” Why didn’t you say something when someone, a man, wrote the Bible in your name, and said you were a man and that you were a father, Lord and King? Why didn’t you throw a tablet down from heaven and say, “That is not the real Bible; here is the real Bible!”? I don’t know how long I lay there, but I heard a voice within my own psyche saying, “In God is a woman like yourself. She shares your suffering.” That was my first experience of a female God and a compelling affirmation of my search for a female God.

It was shortly after that, that by chance I took a class from a young woman named Starhawk, in San Francisco. She talked about the Goddess as the power of nature, in the flowing streams and in the turbulent winds. She expressed everything I had always felt since I was a child, confirming experiences that my professors had discounted. And she began speaking about God as a female, as a mother, as a woman. I felt such a sense of relief. It was the first time I had heard someone name the Goddess. I never had any second thoughts about it after that.

Did you have any fear, any sense of blasphemy or hereesy, or that this would be dangerous to depart from the Christian God?

I never had any sense of God as the punisher. I did fear I wouldn’t be understood by others. And I certainly had reason to feel I might be crazy, because whatever I was saying, I was being told that it didn’t really make any sense. So either they were crazy or I was crazy.

What really helped me was my friendship with Judith Plaskow. She came to the graduate program at Yale a year after I did, but we didn’t talk that year. When we finally met and began to talk, it was such a relief! Because we agreed with almost everything the other thought. We both were interested in Buber, we both felt a sense of spirituality in the I/Thou relationship; we were both upset about the Holocaust and God’s relationship to it; we both had been reading Wiesel and were inspired by his work; we were both studying Christian theology. We began calling each other whenever one of us was in a class and our views were dismissed. We’d say, “Well, I said this or that about Tillich yesterday in class, and no one said anything,” or, “They said it wasn’t important.” Then she would say, or I
would say, "Well, yes, what you said makes good sense, that's what I would have said too." And, "That's what I was thinking when I read the book." We'd be on the telephone practically every day. It's hard to imagine it was as bad as it was; but this was the only affirmation of our sense of reality we were finding.

Why didn't you just give up?

One inspiration was that in my undergraduate years I studied with Michael Novak who at that time was involved in the anti-war movement and teaching his book, Belief and Unbelief. He talked about theology being about the questions: Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? What should we do? What is the meaning of suffering? What is the meaning of death? These are the questions theologians ask. He said we all ask these questions and we all have the right to explore them and answer them. He gave me a model that has served me all these years: that all theology is written from a standpoint. Theologians write about the deity but what they say is always expressed from their point of view. This idea proved useful for the feminist study of religion. We argued that all theology has been written from the standpoint of men's experience.

And, I should not discount the fact that I had a full-time scholarship. If I had had to earn money to pay tuition while asking all these questions, I don't know if I would have had the courage and strength to do it.

This was during the Vietnam War and there was, ironically, a lot of money available for women to go into higher education and pursue graduate studies, and there was also room for women. I've always seen that connection, how during the 1960s the feminist movement was a companion to the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement. I'm wondering how that nexus of history influenced your standpoint as a developing feminist theologian.

That was another point of controversy I had with most of the other students in the program and the faculty. The majority of them were (Hubert) Humphrey Democrats in favor of the Vietnam War and I was very opposed to the war. This has affected my theology up to the present day. I am very, very much opposed to war. I remember living with images of burning children, dead children, dead men and women etched into my mind and thinking how we could stop the war. I watched the news and I was shocked by the images of the war. I was totally moved by this. I wanted to stop the war. I believed we could stop it. I believed people were of good heart and that if only they knew what was happening, they would want to stop it.

My opposition to the war made it difficult for me to remain Christian, given all the warlike images of God. Some feminists found Exodus an image of liberation: God leading the oppressed out of the land of Egypt, out of their slavery. This was becoming popular as an image in the Latin American liberation theology, and it was adopted and adapted by feminists for women's liberation. But I couldn't accept that because God threw Pharaoh and his army into the sea. This was not a God I could worship. And if this was the way he was going to bring about liberation, this was not the way I wanted to bring about liberation.

In The Laughter of Aphrodite, you wrote about how the image of God as a Holy Warrior does not suit us well in this age of nuclear weapons. You also critique the notion of the warrior God — and also the warrior Goddess — in your latest book of theology, Rebirth of the Goddess. I wasn't a child who had been read Greek mythology as bedtime stories, and I didn't study it in high school or college. So I didn't really have a knowledge of the Greek Gods or Goddesses. So, when I turned to books on Greek mythology and I found Athena the warrior Goddess, I couldn't find her to be the image I was looking for, because I was very opposed to war. And when I found some Hindu texts, with Kali or Durga portrayed as a warrior Goddess going into battle and slaying demons — even though I knew they were spiritual or metaphorical interpretations — I couldn't use anything that had to do with slaying or killing for inspiration. These Goddesses were not my Goddesses and I couldn't turn to them for inspiration.

I find that the notion of the warrior Goddess is very popular in certain parts of the women's spirituality movement. Kali, Athena, the Amazons, other warrior women are invoked with a great deal of enthusiasm. Do you see any benefit in this for women, or do you see this as counterproductive?

This is one of the most controversial parts of my book. I say that if we're not happy with the warrior God, we should not be any happier with the warrior Goddess. Yet, many women find in the warrior Goddess an image of strength.

They feel she affirms their righteous anger and fierce compassion, or that she affirms the violent feelings we have as women, based on our own feelings of being oppressed by patriarchy. Some also find the image of the warrior Goddess to be an affirmation of the intertwining of life and death.

We do need to affirm our anger and to acknowledge we all have the capacity for violence within us. And we need to acknowledge the death aspect of the Goddess. But an image of a warrior God or Goddess is not what we need for planetary survival. When so many people have been killed or maimed by war, I just don't see war or any images that are derived from war as being...
helpful or healing. Here I agree with Gordon Kaufmann, who was on the panel about my work at the American Academy of Religion. He was president-elect of the AAR when the Women's Caucus proposed a resolution that the next year the whole conference should dedicate itself to exploring the relationship between religion and warfare and the roles religious symbolism plays in relation to the threat of nuclear war.

Kaufmann said that if our inherited religious images are not conducive to planetary healing and the survival of all forms of life on the planet, we should be prepared to discard them. He argued that the warrior God was one such image. As theologians we must evaluate religious traditions in terms of whether they are going to provide healing or harm.

This raises a difficult and profound theological question: whether the deity is all that is, both the negative and positive experiences of life, or whether the deity is all-good. To put it another way: Do you think the deity includes experiences of violence, suffering, the malice of humanity and the indifference of the universe, or is the deity all-good, all-knowing, all-loving?

If you take a strictly rational and philosophical point of view, the idea that there is no deity — or if there is a deity, the deity is equally evil as well as good — makes perfect sense. Equally acceptable is a pantheistic view in which all is deity, including violence and war and hatred — these are just the other faces of love and compassion. There is at least one strain in the Goddess tradition that holds that all things are the deity. From a rational perspective, the Hindu image of Kali with swords and skulls is viewed as an affirmation of what we find in the world, which is certainly a great deal of bloodshed and violence as well as a great deal of love and kindness.

Judith Plaskow believes the deity is an amoral, all-powerful force that is both good and evil, or indifferent. She understands the Jewish tradition to offer the choice to choose good, but she doesn’t think that God is a moral agent. He offers this choice to humanity. As a philosophical position, this is a logical explanation for the existence of good and evil. But I wanted to maintain the moral tension within my theology in a different way. My solution to this problem is to speak of the Goddess as intelligent, embodied love but to understand the Goddess’ power as limited.

In my envisioning of process theology, the Goddess is fully embodied within the world. The earth is her body. Our bodies have parts that often function apart from our consciousness. We don’t tell white blood cells to fight infection or tell red blood cells to bring oxygen to our brain. They do this independently of our conscious control. Analogously, we are a part of the body of the Goddess, independent actors as humans within the body of the Goddess. The Goddess is the organizing principle that makes the whole more than the sum of its parts. And so just as I have my own spirit or personality that unites my body, so the Goddess is the spirit or consciousness that unites the world body.

When you understand the Goddess to be fully embodied in the world, you cannot understand her to have the power to end war by intervening in history. The Goddess is always on the side of intelligent, embodied love. And she will inspire and encourage us to acknowledge our deep connection with all beings in the web of life, to recognize that love is the ground of all being. In The Color Purple, this is what Alice Walker says, that everything wants to be loved. I think it is not a pathetic fallacy, nor simply a metaphor, but a true statement about the nature of reality.

This belief in the Goddess as embodied — emphasized in the women’s spirituality movement and in your work — is what prevents one from simply accepting suffering, pain, cruelty and warfare. If one is embodied spiritually, then how could one accept the neutral view that pain and suffering are equal to pleasure and joy?

When we are fully in our bodies and are in touch with all of our senses, the sight or knowledge of someone else’s suffering is intolerable. It harms our souls. And this is the deepest meaning of embodiment, that knowledge really does come to us through our bodies. We can’t be fully happy when we are conscious that other people are not happy. So the ethical vision of Goddess religion stems from our deep feelings of interconnectedness, our knowledge that we are all part of the same whole. The suffering of others is our own.

Given your understanding of the Goddess as embodied love, how do you address the problem of evil?

First we have to talk about what we mean by evil because in the traditional understanding there are two forms of evil. One is called natural evil, the other is called human evil. In the traditional view, natural evil is death, and disease, and finitude while human evil stems from human will. But in Goddess theology, finitude and death are not evil; they are simply conditions of life. We cannot escape them. They are not punishment.

The Genesis story is interpreted to say death enters the world because of sin. But in the Goddess tradition, death is in the world because that is the way the world is. Goddess religion affirms that life and death are intertwined. It tells us no one has the right to live forever. It was a great mistake to believe we should be on the earth forever, that we should not suffer from our finitude. These are just the conditions of human life.

I have been thinking about this for a long time, because my brother died
The Genesis story is interpreted to say death enters the world because of sin.

But in the Goddess tradition, death is in the world because that is the way the world is.

when I was a teen-ager and I didn’t understand why children should suffer and die. I had to acknowledge that death is part of life and we must expect it at any time. There was no meaning in my brother’s death. It simply was. We are taught that you learn from that suffering, that maybe you will get a great understanding of suffering when someone dies. Maybe you do, but that doesn’t justify my brother’s death or the pain my mother and I suffered because of his death. It was an irretrievable loss.

What do you think of the saying we hear so often that wisdom comes from suffering?

A certain amount of wisdom can come from suffering, in that when we suffer we can learn what life is about, and that it includes suffering and death. But as far as the way some people believe there is an ultimate or transcendent meaning to suffering — no! The idea that we chose suffering or that you lost your child because you had a lesson to learn to make you a better person, and that this in some way justifies the loss we suffered — no! It may make you a better person and it might not. We just don’t know who will have the strength to bear suffering and who will not. And if it does make you a better person, that still doesn’t justify the suffering of others.

Does this challenge one of the doctrines of the Christian church — that suffering can be redemptive, particularly as it appears in the story of Christ’s crucifixion?

The model of Goddess theology is much more truthful. It says that life, death, and regeneration are intertwined. The power of Christianity is that in some sense it participates in a theological model much older than Christianity. The focus on suffering, as Mary Daly says, is linked to a very sick and masochistic cultural pattern that focuses on the suffering of Christ as redemptive of sin. You could say the Christians stopped the cyclical movement of life at the point of suffering. They do have resurrection but, then again, resurrection is portrayed as eternal life and that ends the cycle.

So birth, death and regeneration exist within all the passages of life. And when someone is suffering what we should say to them is not, “What is the meaning in this suffering?” but, “This is terrible. It shouldn’t happen to you. We are here for you and will try to help you. We are sorry you are suffering.”

The thing that helped me most in understanding my own suffering as a child, with a father who could not express his love very well, was having someone finally say, “This is bad. No one should have to feel unloved.” I then accepted that what happened to me, what happens to a lot of people, is an irretrievable loss. There is no meaning in that. The meaning is in the people who love you no matter how terrible you feel.

And so for you it is not suffering but love that is redemptive. I was touched by what you wrote about your mother’s dying. While for most people this is a time of suffering and loss and grief, for you it was a mystical experience that transformed your life.

At the time that my brother died, my mother’s father and my father’s mother had died — all in the same year. My father’s mother died at a young age, in her early 60s, of cancer. She was in the hospital for a long time, hooked up to a machine and suffering greatly. And my mother said that if she ever got that sick she was not going to the hospital to die this way. So when she was diagnosed with cancer, in her early 70s, she went for treatment but she told my brother that if it ever became clear to her that she was going to die, she would die quickly, not in the hospital, suffering. That’s exactly what she did. She died within four months of when she was diagnosed. When it became clear the treatment wasn’t working and the cancer was spreading, she died a week or so after that. She could have lived another several months but she had decided, as she put it, “My time is up.”

It was hard for me because I was in Greece and although I had come when she was diagnosed, she had sent me home. When I was back in Greece one of my friends said, “You are denying your feelings for your mother. You should write to her about your feelings, that you would like to be with her.” When I was writing that letter, I realized my mother was the greatest love of my life, that I had never loved anyone more than her and that there was nothing more important to me than being with her as she was dying.

Shortly after I arrived my mother received the news that the cancer was spreading. She died the following week. While she was dying my father was holding her hand and I was sitting in another chair and I just felt the presence of a great power of love. I wish other people could have an experience like this. Through that I learned neither life nor death can separate us from the love that is the power of all being. This was a very profound experience because I had grown up feeling unloved as a child and often felt no one would ever love me. I felt a deep sense of worthlessness and vulnerability. Because I felt such a power of love when my mother died, I was finally able to accept my father’s inability to express his love. Since that time, my life has been transformed.

Are there other ways this experience has transformed your life?

It sounds dramatic but it’s really true that for the first time I could see clearly. I could feel love when it was being expressed. I could feel indifference. I could feel
My view is not that we can live without harming anything but we need to understand that cruelty to others — and warfare — are not inevitable.

that people who were involved with their own problems were not really expressing much love to others. Before that, I was confused because I had been told my father loved me but he didn’t know how to show it. So I got involved with the wrong people, always telling myself they loved me but didn’t know how to show it. Of course, that was a losing game. Now I can see and feel love and I can feel the lack of love and I don’t get confused about which is which. I don’t get involved with the wrong people. I have experienced love so much more deeply than before because I am not looking for love where it isn’t but feeling it where it is.

What happened for me in that moment with my mother was that I realized there is enough love in the universe for me and for all people. Then I was able to reinterpret my childhood, understanding that my mother’s and my grandmothers’ love had been the power of being that sustained me.

This also gave me the insight I had been lacking, enabling me to write Rebirth of the Goddess. My mother’s death gave me clarity about my relationships and it gave me the power to define the Goddess as intelligent embodied love. When I wrote the first draft of the theology, I wasn’t sure if the Goddess was love, if good and evil were equally balanced or if the Goddess was a personal power who cares about the world.

So it was shortly after you came to see the Goddess as intelligent, embodied love that you were able to write your next two books, Odyssey with the Goddess and Rebirth of the Goddess?

Odyssey with the Goddess was part of the process of working out the implications of this revelation I had. First I had to write in narrative form to tell what was happening to me, in my body and in my relationships with other people and with the earth. Through narrative writing I became clearer about my theology, and this is why I incorporate narrative voice in Rebirth of the Goddess.

How do you see this theology serving to solve the problems of humanity caused evil, like warfare, or man’s inhumanity to man or human cruelty to other species?

I understand that human evil is humanly created. We may never know the origin of evil or the true reason for human evil but one explanation that makes sense is that evil comes from lack of love — not privation of love in an abstract sense but in a very concrete sense. If you were not loved as a child, it is hard for you to express love in your relationships.

Alice Miller has written about Hitler’s childhood and she says that what led Hitler to do what he did was an unloving childhood; he was an abused child. The dynamics that enabled him to attempt to destroy an entire people stemmed from what she calls a poisonous pedagogy of control which German children and many other children have been raised with. “If you spare the rod, you’ll spoil the child.” “Children have to be controlled; children have to be told what to do.” “Don’t laugh too much, don’t cry too much, don’t make any noise.” She says even when a child is not physically abused, the child’s innate spontaneity is being depressed. That spontaneity is the child’s link to life. When a child is not loved, it will not love life. Our capacity for doing evil begins in a feeling of being unloved, unlovable.

So, it’s important to distinguish between human-created evil and natural evil. Natural evil we must simply accept. Natural events that cause us harm will happen. They don’t happen to every one of us, but chances are they will — whether that be disease, or a flood or a forest fire. These are part of nature and part of life. But the suffering that we inflict on each other as lack of love, that can be changed.

People always say you can’t love everything because if an ant crawls across the kitchen table you have to kill it. Life always involves the taking of other lives. If there is one ant in my home, I would put it outside; but if there are hundreds of them, I might kill them. In order to eat, we must kill plants or animals. To live, we must take the lives of other beings. My view is not that we can live without harming anything but we need to understand that cruelty to others — and warfare — are not inevitable. We can live differently.

How do you see the Goddess relating to human suffering?

In my understanding of the Goddess, she is fully involved in the world, in her body, so that when we are suffering, she is suffering. The traditional view that comes down to us from Plato and has been adopted widely throughout western theology, philosophy and religion, is that the perfection of God is that he is not involved in change and that God does not suffer. Plato says the highest form of beauty is that which is unchanging and is not affected by the flux of life, of coming into being and passing out of being. But in process theology, and in my theology, it is quite the opposite: the Goddess is fully involved in everything that is happening. She rejoices with our joy and she suffers with our suffering. When there is a war or starvation, she suffers, and when people come together to end suffering, she rejoices. Her power is a limited power. She cannot stop these things by waving a magic wand or by some type of intervention from the outside, but only by working from the inside. But she is always offering us that love, which is the ground of being, and she offers the inspiration that we can work with her to lessen or end humanity caused suffering.
Toward the end of Rebirth of the Goddess, you talk about the ethos and ethics of Goddess theology, Goddess spirituality. What is the basis for the ethical principles you propose?

When I first got interested in the Goddess movement, my Christian and Jewish friends said there can be no ethics in a religion based in nature. If we look at what it is, they said, we just see life and death, and we don’t have any reason to choose between them — violence and love — no reason to choose between them. That’s one of the reasons I found process theology more helpful than, let’s say, pantheism, because it does see that divine power is fully embodied within the world and as being something more than the sum of the parts — which is a consciousness that is inspiring us toward greater beauty, greater love, greater harmony.

You recommend nine touchstones of ethical living to guide our daily lives. Would you speak to the first one, nurture life?

We tend to think of the nurturing of life as a feminine value, something mothers do when they take care of small children and pets and small plants. Carol Gilligan talks about the “ethic of care” as being a particularly female mode of ethical action. But I am proposing that the nurturing of life should become the measure of each thing that we do, whether we are male or female. To nurture life by protecting our children is very important but equally important is taking care of the dying; equally important is taking care of the homeless or helping women to speak out about the violence that is done to them in their lives.

One of the reasons for the great outpouring of love for Princess Diana is that she expressed this principle of nurturing life. She began with her own children and the children she was caring for as she grew up. But she also spoke out against the prejudice people have toward people suffering from AIDS; she spoke out for the homeless. And at the end of her life she came up against the military-industrial complex and the British state and spoke out against land mines — because land mines were harming life. Nurturing is not just a feminine virtue, but if we really made it the basis of everything that we do, it would ultimately transform the military-industrial system, the nation state, the social welfare system and the whole economic system!

Many in the women’s spirituality movement are looking back to the deep roots of their ancestry, into Old Europe, where the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas has unearthed evidence for what she refers to as a “Goddess Civilization.” They are drawing inspiration from those earliest Europeans and their peaceful way of life, their egalitarian way of life, and their centering — spiritually and socially — around the symbols of a Goddess religion. When you think back to your ancestry and roots of inspiration, are you too inspired by this early civilization?

Yes. One of the greatest inspirations for the Goddess movement are the images of the Goddess that come down from the distant past. I’ve been deeply moved by looking at images like the Goddess of Willendorf, a small image that could have been held in the palm of the hand. She is a full-figured woman with soft, large breasts and soft, large belly, heavy buttocks and portrayed naked. This image is very different from the anorexic beauty queens and Barbie dolls of our culture and yet it’s an image of great female beauty. Looking at it, it gives us permission to love our own bodies in whatever shape or form they come — as you know, not many of us look like Barbie! These Goddesses remind me of my grandmother’s body, her soft lap, and her soft breasts we used to nestle against when she held us when we were little. So in Rebirth of the Goddess, I called the Goddess of Willendorf, “Grandmother. Nana. Mother of all the living.”

When I read Merlin Stone’s book, I felt chills up and down my spine when I read the words, “In the beginning, God was a woman. Do you remember?” Christine Downing has pointed out that remembering is not just a mental act, but also a coming back into the members of our body, a remembering of the body.

You write thoughtfully about the work of Gimbutas and about the resistance to her theories, which seem to be attracting a lot of attention, often negative. How do you assess the work of Gimbutas and her theory about the numerous Old European figurines which are obviously female figurines? How does she make the inference that these female figures were considered Goddesses?

Many scholars say images like the one from Willendorf are not images of the Mother Goddess, or the Greatness of Life, but are simply dolls children played with; or perhaps concubines of the dead man put into his grave to serve him in the other world; or fertility images in the limited sense that they were meant to make the crops grow or to bring children. All theories about the past are hypothetical.

But the more I live with Gimbutas’ theories, the more they make sense of the evidence. I visit the Heraklion Museum several times a year; I have led nine or 10 groups of women on Goddess tours to Crete. The more I apply Gimbutas’ hypotheses about the language of the Goddess to the images we see, the more the images come alive. The patterns begin to make sense. Women on the tours can begin to apply these hypotheses themselves and they find they give meaning to what they are seeing. If a hypothesis makes more sense of the evidence and helps it come together and become coherent, we ought to give serious consideration to that hypothesis.
For example, on the pottery from Crete, there are many triangles, dots, spirals and zigzag lines. Gimbutas did the painstaking research to catalogue these and see how they reappear and in what contexts they reappear and has proposed theories as to their meaning. The female triangle is accentuated on the Goddess of Willendorf and it appears on early images from Crete. So she asks herself, when you just see a triangle on a pot, could that be the sacred female triangle? It makes sense to me that it is. Similarly, we know the rituals in the agricultural societies of both Neolithic and Minoan Crete had something to do with planting and harvesting. We see, in Minoan Crete, people carrying fruits and wines in procession toward a priestess or a Goddess or a woman playing some sort of sacred role in the community. Then you see lots of dots on vessels, sometimes embedded in triangles. And you ask, could the dots be seeds offered to the Goddess whose sacred triangle is the source of life? This is a pleasing hypothesis, and it makes sense. The alternative, which the scholarly world is offering, is that these are just decoration and have no meaning or, if they have meaning, we could never know what it is. This explains nothing.

If you find the evidence and the interpretation that Gimbutas presents compelling, why do you think there is so much casual criticism and rejection of her work by academics?

The worldview that Gimbutas projects for Old Europe is very different from the worldview found in European culture from the Greeks and Plato up to the present time. She states this herself, that the culture we are living in is born of the conflict of two different worldviews — one of which she calls the Old European worldview and the other which she calls the Indo-European worldview. From the Indo-European worldview, it’s very hard to understand what came before. The Indo-Europeans tended to suppress all knowledge from the cultures that came before them. They certainly devalued the cultures that came before them. The Indo-Europeans — as, for example, in Plato’s theory of forms — tell us the good is transcendent and unchanging. We find this view repeated in the work of 20th century historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, who defines the sacred as standing in opposition to what he calls “the dangerous and chaotic flux of things.” Now, if the sacred has nothing to do with the flux of things, then it can have nothing to do with the female body, because it is the embodiment of flux. Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, sex, menopause — all of these things are about change and flux. So if you say the sacred is about everything that isn’t in flux, then you are saying this little female figurine could not be a Goddess, because she is about flux.

Unless we challenge archaeologists and convince them to transform their assumptions that condition their interpretive frameworks, they will not be able to see that this figurine probably represents the Goddess. My point in the chapter on “Resistance to Goddess History” is that we should not be at all surprised that the scholarly establishment continues to deny the work of Marija Gimbutas. Until scholars become self-consciously critical of their own framework, they will not be able understand her work and the world of Old Europe. Of course, one of the problems feminists and others have been pointing out for a long time is that we acknowledge our standpoint and thus are called partisan, while the establishment never acknowledges it has a standpoint but insists that it is presenting objective truth.

What do you say to the people who argue that feminists are simply imagining a golden age that never existed, that it is a projection or wishful thinking?

First of all, Gimbutas never said there was a golden age. But let’s grant that feminists are projecting a golden age. What are the characteristics of this golden age? Let’s just take one: there was no widespread organized warfare. Why should it be considered naive to talk about that? Has warfare always existed? Is this what the opposition is claiming, that there could never have been a time without warfare? We know there are many cultures that didn’t have warfare on the scale we have known it in Europe in the last 3,000 to 6,000 years. Any age, any time, any place, that did not have widespread warfare, I would define as a golden age. So I don’t mind the idea that we are talking about a golden age although others use that term as a pejorative. Why is the idea of a golden age threatening? Because most modern people, scholars included, are wedded to the idea that we are living in the best society that ever existed and that we in 20th century represent the highest and best development of humankind. The idea that something that went before could actually have been better is profoundly challenging to this worldview.

Someone was telling me the other day about a student who was trying to complete her M.A. thesis work on the ideas of the Goddess and Old Europe. One of the professors said, “What you’re saying can’t be true. If it were true, I would have to rethink everything I’ve ever done, everything I learned, everything I’ve ever studied or taught.” Well, at least he admitted what the challenge is. That is the challenge being presented and it is profoundly threatening to the dominant culture.

It is profoundly threatening to present the idea that women have not always been subordinated to men, that this is not just the way it always has been. Many feminists want to say
...there are many other voices which are being excluded under the guise of so-called objective reason. I try to provide an alternative to that.

women have always been subordinated and it is only in the 20th century when women have actually become liberated. They too are wedded to the notion of progress and to many of the ideas their colleagues have put forward about the intrinsic value of Indo-European culture. The idea that there may have been societies where women were not subordinated to men raises the question, "What went wrong? What happened?" For many people that immediately goes to the question of blame. "Does that mean you hate men? Are men inherently evil?" Gimbutas never said men were evil but this is the kind of fear her theory provokes. So even some feminist women dismiss the whole theory because they don't want their male colleagues to feel bad or think that they hate men or that they're saying that men are evil.

Doesn't Gimbutas' theory of the origins of Europe challenge not only the idea that male dominance is a necessary structure of society, but also that class domination and warfare are necessary aspects of civilization?

In my book, I use Gimbutas' theories and put them together with other anthropological and sociological theories to argue that patriarchy and warfare arose together. I don't know what the origin of warfare is but I do think warfare and patriarchy go hand-in-hand. When you have patriarchy you also have kings and when you have kings you have armies and you have landholdings that are being protected by the army against the common people, i.e., class divisions. Women, not being in the military, are gradually excluded from social power.

You say your Rebirth of the Goddess is an experiment in intelligent embodied thinking. In our culture women are often expected to be identified with their bodies; we are far less often expected to claim fully the power of our minds.

You have somehow succeeded in doing both to an extraordinary degree. I wonder how this evolved for you in your own spiritual quest, your quest for the Goddess?

I propose embodied thinking as an alternative to objective thought, which is the dominant model for scholarship and any intellectual discourse in our culture. Objective thought is a fiction and a fantasy. Feminists know what is being presented as objective is actually white-male thought. People from non-white races have pointed out this was not just male thought but white-male thought, and that there are many other voices which are being excluded under the guise of so-called objective reason. I try to provide an alternative to that.

The criticism that always comes is, "If you are not objective, then you are merely subjective." This gets back to what you were saying in your question that, as a woman, you can have a body or you can have a mind, but you can't have them both. It is the same dualism that insists you can be objective or you can be subjective, but you can't have what Michael Novak called in Belief and Unbelief, "intelligent subjectivity." This is what I'm trying to get at with my idea of embodied thinking — the idea that we think through our bodies. There really is no thought that doesn't come to us through our bodies. Our senses and our feelings are what inspire our capacity for reflection. Our thoughts are always embedded in our bodies and in a standpoint, a community and a society.

Embodied thinking acknowledges the standpoint of the body, of who we are as women or men. We also acknowledge our history, where we come from, what communities we come from, what communities we choose to be part of and that we are always thinking from a standpoint. The fear is that this will be subjective and that if it is subjective it will be irrational. My model of embodied thinking proposes thinking must always be validated, challenged and corrected in community. This is what keeps embodied thinking from being merely subjective.

One of the things I find very freeing is that when you acknowledge that your thinking is embodied, that it is rooted in community and it is offered for dialogue within community, you don't have to get everything right. I say in my book that I hope that the readers won't agree with everything I say. But I do hope they will be stimulated to think about their own experience, and to reflect on it.

When I presented this to my writing group, someone said, "Oh, you don't really mean that, do you?" Then I had to reflect on that and I realized I did really mean it. Of course, I hope many people will care as much as I do about planetary healing and creating a society in which men and women can live with greater equality, in which all races can live with greater equality — and peace with each other and in harmony with all beings. But I don't hope they will agree with every single thing I've said. I would be terribly disappointed because it's not going to be true, and it shouldn't be true. Other people have other aspects of the puzzle, other pieces of the quilt, and only together can we create a wholistic philosophy. No one person has to do it by herself.