



## Introduction

# HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

## **Herald of the Divine Feminine, Green Prophet, Church Reformer**

I heard a voice speaking to me: ‘The young woman whom you see is Love. She has her tent in eternity... It was love which was the source of this creation in the beginning when God said: ‘Let it be!’ And it was. As though in the blinking of an eye, the whole creation was formed through love. The young woman is radiant in such a clear, lightning-like brilliance of countenance that you can’t fully look at her... She holds the sun and moon in her right hand and embraces them tenderly... The whole of creation calls this maiden ‘Lady.’ For it was from her that all of creation proceeded, since Love was the first. She made everything... Love was in eternity and brought forth, in the beginning of all holiness, all creatures without any admixture of evil. Adam and Eve, as well were produced by love from the pure nature of the Earth.

–Hildegard<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest honors a person can receive in the Roman Catholic Church is to be declared not only a saint, but also a Doctor of the Church. The Canonization of Hildegard of Bingen in October, 2012, by Pope Benedict XVI, is a landmark in more ways than one. Not only is she only the fourth woman in history to be declared a Doctor of the Church—joining the names of Catherine of Siena, St Teresa of Avila, and St Therese of Lisieux—but her recognition in this way seems ironic for many reasons.

The rules of canonization were radically altered under the papacy of John Paul II, when the role of the “devil’s advocate” was removed from the canonization process. This opened the door to the possibility that practically anyone could qualify for canonization if they had the financial backing and inside connections to see it through.

Nevertheless, canonization and the title of “Doctor of the Church” do carry still some archetypal power. Hildegard’s canonization and elevation as a Doctor of the Church comes at a significant moment in the history of both our planet and the church. While canonization may not be worth as much in itself these days, Hildegard’s is fundamentally different. She is what we expect a saint to be: a mover and a shaker, a force to be dealt with not only in her day but also in ours, a bold and courageous human being to be listened to and emulated.

Hildegard’s message is remarkably on target for our era—over eight centuries after her passing! In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, when time is running out for our species unless we make drastic changes to how we function on this planet, Hildegard’s voice is sorely needed, for she speaks to the core issues that are ushering us down the path to oblivion.

In the first place, Hildegard calls for a marriage of science and spirituality. For religion and the secular sciences to be sundered as they currently are is a blunder of immense proportions on the part of our species—and with potentially dire consequences. Hildegard calls upon us to employ our intellect, which she names “our greatest treasure,” as well as our mystical intuition. She calls for a move from a mere quest for knowledge, with the power it bestows, to a revival of wisdom. She calls for an awakening of

the kind of creativity she refers to as “greening power,” leading to an honoring of Mother Earth and the return of the Green Man to replace the destruction of the environment that’s occurring apace in our technologically and industrially-oriented era. The term “Green Man” refers to an archetype that underscores the deep relationship between the human and the plant world, the human and the natural world.

At a time when traditionally the most loyal followers of Catholicism—the sisters of the church—are being chastised by the Vatican for their involvement in issues of social justice, the environment, the assertion of the feminine voice and viewpoint, and the freedom to make one’s own choices of conscience before God rather than mindlessly bowing to the will of an all-male ecclesia, Hildegard calls for the emergence of the Divine Feminine to balance a healthy Sacred Masculine.

When those who seek nothing more than to *be the church*, recognizing that the church isn’t only the Vatican, the princes of the church, and the bishops, but *every* member of the church—a truth articulated by the Second Vatican Council—Hildegard calls upon us to find the “strength” that spiritual warriors all require. The Second Vatican Council was a worldwide gathering of bishops and theologians called by Pope John XXIII in 1962 to “open the windows” of the Catholic Church and bring about a religious reform and awakening by rehabilitating some of its most progressive thinkers who had been sidelined for decades by too much legalism in the church. One of its declarations was that the church is “the people of God,” not just the hierarchy. It is in the spirit of Vatican II that Hildegard stresses that it isn’t only the leadership, but the rank and file who are called to be the church. Being the warrior that she is, Hildegard stands up to corruption and patriarchy wherever she sees it—in religion, in government, in all places of power—and she invites us to do the same. She is a woman for our time, a teacher for our time, a Doctor and a saint for our time.

Is it not remarkable that, at this moment when the Vatican seeks to silence the nuns and the theologians who want only to fulfill the work given to them by Vatican II, a woman whom the church has been largely

silent about all these centuries is now brought to the fore as an example of sainthood—a woman whose teaching and preaching (yes, she was allowed to preach!) is a virtual earthquake to the establishment today, as it was in her own time?

Even today, despite all our progress, denial of the feminine is so pervasive that anthropologist Glenn Hughes says a male terror of women is woven into every institution. It's this denial of the feminine that's destroying the ecosphere. Mother Earth, like her human daughters, has become an object to be used. Such patriarchal excess is found in all fundamentalism, whether the Vatican, the Taliban, or Pat Robertson.

In our time the Divine Feminine is returning in the awakening of women the world over to their rights, as well as to their common suffering and abuse, no less than in the many experiences believers and non-believers alike are undergoing with visitations from the Black Madonna, for example. Or the return of Sophia, Wisdom, and the role of the Brown Madonna—the Lady of Guadalupe—and other archetypes of the Divine Feminine that are also coming alive in appeals to defend Gaia, our Earth Mother, after centuries of rape and plunder.

Hildegard understood the importance of the restoration of women's deeply buried, culturally obscured feminine wisdom. She recognized that when women come into their own, there will be an end to the power-over dynamics that have blighted the planet. Only the integration of a healthy Sacred Masculine and a resurrected Divine Feminine can save us from our destructive ways.

In line with this insight, Hildegard asks us to love our bodies—indeed, to *love life itself*, which she equates with God. Her theology is built on experience of the divine, which is to say on mysticism. The experience she most espouses is that of God in creation—in other words the Cosmic Christ, which is the God-presence in every being in the universe—and/or “Lady Wisdom.” She calls for an expansion of consciousness that a renewed cosmology can bring and asks that we look not just at human agendas but also at the universe itself for delight, warmth, and rules to live by.

In short, Hildegard is a timely *herald* of good news to the tired souls of the earth, resurrected from obscurity against all odds in light of the patriarchal crackdown of the present Vatican—surely testimony to the work of the Spirit deep in the unconscious of humankind. Is it not a miracle that, when her voice is so needed, Hildegard speaks to us afresh despite almost nine centuries of virtual obscurity?

I want to emphasize Hildegard's role as a "herald." Webster's dictionary defines the work of "heralding" as "to give notice of," "to announce," or "to greet with enthusiasm." I believe Hildegard does all this as a herald of the Divine Feminine. She gives notice, announces, and greets with enthusiasm. In so doing, she points the way to an alternative to the fundamentalism that's raging the world over—from the Christian Bible belt to the fundamentalism in the Vatican, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and wherever patriarchy feels threatened.

The late and great Christian monk Father Bede Griffiths, who directed an ashram in southern India that honored both Hindu and Christian ways for over fifty years, wrote that "the disastrous effects of Western industrialism, physical, social and psychological, polluting the world and threatening to destroy it are only too evident." But the cause is "due to a fundamental defect in Western man," which is the excessive rationalism and masculine "dominating power of the mind" that needs to be balanced by the feminine, intuitive, receptive power of the mind.<sup>2</sup>

Father Griffiths believed that the East has much to teach the West about regaining a balance of masculine-feminine, yang-yin energies. "The suppression of women in the Church is but one of the many signs of this masculine domination... Reason has to be 'married' to intuition; it has to learn to surrender itself for the deeper intuitions of the spirit. These intuitions come, as we have seen, from the presence of the Spirit in the depths of the soul."<sup>3</sup> Hildegard takes us to these depths. She takes us beyond the domination of the rational masculine, even while she praises the use of rationality and intellect. In short, she takes us to a place where the Divine Feminine is welcomed once again.

The purpose of this book is to make Hildegard's message available,

and to do so employing her words as much as possible—for nothing touches so deeply as Hildegard in her own words. In the course of writing this book, something quite unexpected happened to me (surprises often happen when I’m writing a book, which means that one reason for my writing is to learn something new and be surprised). I realized how eager Hildegard was to “mix,” a postmodern thing to do, and dialog with contemporary thinkers such as Mary Oliver, Albert Einstein, Howard Thurman, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Dorothee Soelle, and other voices of wisdom—including, of course, Jesus and the Buddha. I’m happy to introduce Hildegard to these people. Her powerful work deserves to be integrated with other movers and shakers whose work affects us all.

Something happens when you read Hildegard. I know this because I’ve been living with her for over thirty years and teaching her for more than twenty-eight years. Something also happens when you listen to Hildegard’s music—and even more so if you sing her music. Further, something happens when you meditate on her visions, her mandalas, her paintings. I know because I’ve been touched deeply by her words, her music, her paintings, and her story.

Recently I conducted a retreat based on Hildegard’s work, and the energy released by those who came in contact with her was both beautiful and powerful. Over the years of sharing her wisdom, I’ve listened to many stories of individuals who have been touched and awakened by Hildegard entering their life. There’s an uncanny power in the beauty and strength—even the urgency—of her language and her teachings.

This book intends to explore some of those teachings that seem most pertinent and pressing for our time—an era, as we are all aware, of challenge and peril for Mother Earth and her creatures, and for the human race and its efforts in such areas of culture as religion, economics, education, and politics.

It’s my conviction that behind the canonization of Hildegard and the declaration that she is now a “Doctor of the Church” lies a deep and demanding truth—*that if we dare honor her, we ought also to listen to her with*

*open hearts and minds.* For she calls us today to deep reform of church corruption and spiritual “lukewarmness,” to use her word. She also awakens us to the perils generated by a culture still dominated by patriarchal structures and values—values that put profit and power for a few ahead of the needs of all for healthy bodies, minds, spirits, communities, and the planet itself. Structures that put dominance ahead of partnership.

Hildegard’s main theme is that we should “wake up.” This is every true spiritual teacher’s main theme. For instance, Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is among you,” which implies we better wake up and experience it. Buddha means “the awakened one,” and he invited everyone to be a “light unto yourself.” Waking up is the opposite of denial. Hildegard dares us to move beyond denial.

I just took a walk along the water’s edge, and the jasmine trees were pouring forth their amazing scent, the birds were singing their memorable songs, the waters were glistening, and the ducks were coming out for the evening ritual of sunset. My awareness of nature’s aliveness and greening power was increased by spending time with Hildegard, for she sensitizes one’s senses, awakening them—just like the “Word” that she writes so convincingly and intimately about.

In a similar manner, on a Sunday morning, in the wee hours while darkness still lay over all, I awoke to a single bird singing a unique song outside my window. I had never heard such a song from a bird before. I listened intently to understand this birdsong. After a while the singing stopped and all was quiet as night once again. The song, I swear, was this: “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.” It sounded on and on. Hours later, when the sun was rising, other birds started up their own more familiar melodies.

What was this? Was it Hildegard visiting me once again? Was it her Rhineland mystic companions—Eckhart, Aquinas, Julian, and Mechtild—also serenading me as I write about them too? I would like to think so. Yes, I would. I have never thought this thought before—that maybe this work pleases them (if not so many of my contemporaries,

and *especially* not those running patriarchal religious establishments!). Perhaps they are thanking me, just as I try through my work to thank them and to bring them into our time when they are so *needed*.

Hildegard wrote in a letter composed late in her life to her Benedictine sisters, “I want to be useful.” Well, you *are* useful Hildegard. You are *very* useful today.

That is the point of this book—to render Hildegard useful. To take her off library shelves and out of academic paper contests into the hearts and souls of people and their dying, mordant, dry, and ungreen institutions, whether school, church, economics, politics, or the media. To give her the wings to challenge Wall Street, the Vatican, and the self-serving political machines of patriarchal plutocracy that are destroying the planet in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, just as she exposed religious hypocrisy and unjust social structures in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, warning of the dark results of greed and self-serving actions, including the despoiling of the earth.

I want to say, “You were a prophet then, Hildegard, and you are a prophet today. Come and bring some of your feminist dynamism alive again in our tired, cynical, military-ridden, self-pitying world—a world that patriarchy built. Yes, help us to allow the Divine Feminine to flow again—and with it a healthy, not perverse, Sacred Masculine.” As Sister Joan Chittister, a direct descendant of Hildegard in the Benedictine tradition, says, the issue today is not “radical feminism,” which the Vatican accuses Catholic sisters in America of, but “radical patriarchy.” I couldn’t agree more. Recovering a healthy Sacred Masculine is so important if we are to deconstruct the reptilian brain and the testosterone-induced, patriarchal, dominator consciousness that’s a danger for women, men, and the planet itself.

To this end I wrote a book a few years ago called *The Hidden Spirituality of Men: Ten Metaphors for Awakening the Sacred Masculine*. In addition to dealing with ten healthy male archetypes, I ended it with two chapters on the “sacred marriage” of the Divine Feminine and Sacred Masculine.<sup>4</sup> I’ve come to realize that in many ways the present book is a continuation of that book. For this present book, thanks to Hildegard’s



life and work, takes us all deeper into a healthy Divine Feminine, not at the expense of the Sacred Masculine but in consort with it.

Two responses to my “men’s book” seem relevant here. The first response I received was from a woman who said, “I have over 200 books on the goddess in my personal library and not one book on the Sacred Masculine. Yet I have three boys! I have been so busy coming into my spiritual womanhood that I had no idea what men have suffered under Patriarchy until I read your book.”

A second response came from an elegantly dressed Native American elder with long silver hair, who approached me after a talk at a conference in Santa Fe. “I have been working in prisons for twelve years,” he said, “and I have never had the results with a book like I have had with your book. Prisoners are invariably projecting onto others, but your book is the first I have ever employed that *gets men in touch with their own nobility*.” Isn’t this what all spirituality is meant to do? Isn’t it what Hildegard is telling us in the beautiful vision with which I opened this introduction? The balance of a healthy feminine and a healthy masculine within both men and women—for we all carry both within us—is essential for the survival of our species. And Hildegard leads the way.

In this book, I want to emphasize *experience*, for Hildegard emphasizes experience—and experience is what’s so often lacking in narcissistic religion and overly institutionalized “churchiness.” Experience is what distinguishes spirituality from religion. Spirituality is about experience—and it’s those poets of experience, the mystics, who can and must revitalize religion for us.

Hildegard is such a person. Just reading her words can trigger experiences in one’s soul that awaken, refresh, and empower. So this book is hopefully a chalice by which Hildegard’s words can shower down upon us, refreshing us and enlivening us, and above all *putting us in touch with our experience of the divine*.

Divinity isn’t something to be argued about or defined in our pretty little boxes of denominationalism. Neither is it something to accept or reject, let alone to go to war over. Divinity is beyond all names, as

Meister Eckhart put it, a “supersensual darkness that has no name and will never be given a name.”

We could say that divinity is our *experience of the depths of life*, such as are laid out in the four paths of creation spirituality, which we will come to in chapter 6. “Taste and see that God is good,” says the psalmist. Hildegard is one who tasted, and tasted deeply. That’s the basis of wisdom—a tasting. Indeed, the words for wisdom in both Hebrew and Latin come from the word “to taste.”

One of Hildegard’s special teachings is that we are all born in “original wisdom,” to quote her words. But we are tiny babes in our mother’s womb, and wisdom comes as a folded tent inside us. Life’s journey consists of setting up this tent. Hildegard draws pictures of this, and the journey isn’t easy. Our souls traverse valleys and mountains, ford rivers, and meet opposition all along the route. But Hildegard pictures the tent of wisdom eventually set up and angels warding off the dark forces that attack us still.

Hildegard derives her inspiration for this teaching from the Hebrew Bible, where we are told that Wisdom wandered the earth seeking where to set up her tent. John’s Gospel tells us Wisdom set up her tent in Christ. “Set it up here,” says Hildegard, “in each and every soul, each and everyone’s life journey.” We are born in wisdom, but it’s our life’s task to develop this wisdom and practice and put it to work.

In this book we’ll explore the richness of Hildegard’s writings by examining favorite concepts and categories in her thought. We’ll also examine her lineage, the creation spiritual tradition that she was both heir to and also leader of in her own unique right—and for which reason I call her the “grandmother” of the Rhineland mystic movement.

Thomas Aquinas instructs us that for teaching spirituality, experience isn’t sufficient—though it’s essential. One also needs concepts. Thus we will explore the basic concepts that hold and nourish Hildegard’s teachings and visions—concepts that shed light on own journeys. An Appendix presents spiritual practices we can undertake in the spirit of Hildegard to strengthen our courage and steadfastness on the journey.

This is a short book and deliberately so. Even so, I hope you'll find it neither superficial nor without inspiration. It's meant for ordinary people, busy people, people on the go who seek some timeless wisdom from a past that yearns to speak to us today in the midst of our personal, cultural, and planetary turbulence—wisdom that gives perspective to our existence.

Hildegard was a woman of profundity and of intense inspiration. In poet Mary Oliver's language, she didn't just "pass through" her time on earth. On the contrary, her 81 years vibrated with so much creativity and expansion of consciousness that she calls to us still, over 800 years later, to "rise from our sleep" and "live with passion and blood," in order that we might contribute to "making the cosmic wheel go around."

Journey with me in these pages as Hildegard speaks to us from her deep wisdom, large heart, and genius intelligence. Let us hear her voice from the renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as she calls to the current void of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Out of the void, a rebirth of spirituality can come—indeed, a new and global renaissance that's so needed. Out of the *emergency* in which we find ourselves as a species, there can *emerge* an intelligent, ecumenical, justice-oriented, scientifically respectful, creative, green spirituality.

This is my third book on Hildegard, and in the years since I first began traveling with her, much in culture and spirituality has evolved. In my most recent book, *The Pope's War*, I lay out the case for recognizing how the Vatican itself has been in schism for forty years because it has betrayed the principles of the Second Vatican Council. Hildegard railed against popes, bishops, abbots, and priests of her day who were silent in the face of schism or were partners in the corruption of the church. What would she say to the pedophile horrors and cover-ups of our time? What would she say to the attacks on theologians and the heretical teaching that the magisterium of the church is the Vatican alone? What would she say to the five Roman Catholic supreme court judges who declared that corporations are people, and thus opened the floodgates for billionaires and corporations to dominate what was once a democracy? What would

she do to arouse people out of denial and into action? As you will read below, Hildegard didn't mince her words when justice and injustice were involved. She spoke with the authority of the Spirit at work through her. She spoke in words as vivid today as they were in her time.

Prophets like Hildegard return from time to time to assist us. She is a Bodhisattva in our midst. Listen to her as she speaks your name.

Matthew Fox

Friends of Creation Spirituality and Academy of the Love of Learning  
September, 2012

## Chapter 1

# WHO IS HILDEGARD?

Who is this woman who sang that “all of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation”?

Who is this woman who got herself and her entire abbey interdicted—a kind of group excommunication—by the archbishop for a full year when she was eighty years old?

Who is this woman who saw in a vision that a young and beautiful woman is responsible for all of creation, and her name is Love—and that all creation is based on Love and is therefore an Original Blessing?

Who is this woman who preached of the “web of life” that all creation shares, but who warned that “the earth must not be injured, the earth must not be destroyed”—and that if humans misuse creation, “God will permit creation to punish humanity”?

Who is this woman who calls Christ a “green man” in the century in which the Green Man entered Western culture riding on the coattails of the returning goddess?

Who is this woman who calls us all “co-creators” with God?

Who is this woman whom scholars recognize as “the only known female systematic exegete of the Middle Ages”?<sup>5</sup>

Who is this woman who developed a theology of the Holy Spirit, who reaches all of our lives through creativity and greening power, and “fills all things with interconnectivity and interrelationship,” more than eight centuries before postmodern scientists began to say the same?

Who is this woman who developed in depth a theology of the Cosmic Christ eight centuries before Teilhard de Chardin?

Who is this woman who said that “all science is a gift from God” and that “your greatest treasure is your regal intellect,” in the face of anti-intellectual fundamentalists of her day and ours?

Who is this woman whose teachings on healing and medicine are so useful even today that a clinic in Germany has employed them for over thirty years with considerable success?

Who is this woman who taught how we should all “search out the house of wisdom” in our hearts before all else?

Who is this woman who talked about an “original wisdom” that we are all born into, in the midst of a pessimistic theological tradition that had been preaching “original sin” for the previous 800 years—an idea proposed in the fourth century by St Augustine?

Who is this woman who celebrated the union of creativity and wisdom when she declared that “wisdom is found in all creative works,” thereby giving us a model by which to reinvent education itself?

Who is this woman who built her theology on Lady Wisdom, Sophia, the Divine Feminine, and who declared that Mary is “the ground of all being,” just like the goddesses of old?

Who is this woman who called the serpent “the wisest of all creatures,” when the serpent is the ancient symbol of the goddess, whose story took an abusive direction when patriarchy destroyed the goddess civilizations?

Who is this woman who declared that redemption occurs through the *incarnation*, not pinning it entirely on the crucifixion?

Who is this woman who painted Adam as a red man?

Who is this woman who paints Christ as coming *from below* the earth, from under the earth—and from the lower chakras, not the head chakras?

Who is this woman who painted Christ as a blue man, “the man in sapphire blue,” who is the healing presence inside all of us and whose primary work is compassion?

Who is this woman who celebrated eros and proposed that Adam’s fall was a failure of eros—a failure to take delight in the beauty and grace of creation, and that we can fall in the same way?

Who is this woman who tells us God and creation are related like husband to wife, and like lovers to one another—and that an erotic “kiss” binds them together?

Who is this woman who stated that “holy people draw to themselves all that is earthy”?

Who is this woman whom the 20<sup>th</sup> century eco-prophet Thomas Berry says offered a “third model” of human relationship with the natural world—one based on a model of the earth “as a region of delight,” indeed “a pagan delight,” who “sees the creation-maker in the ancient manner of the fertility cults... Because of this ‘erotic’ bond the earth becomes luxuriant in its every aspect?”<sup>6</sup>

Who is this woman who had visions from the time she was five years old, and as an adult painted thirty-six of her visions, many in mandala form, and commented on them?

Who is this German woman who includes Hopi corn mothers in her paintings?

Who is this woman who invented the first “full-fledged morality play”?

Who is this woman who heard angels singing and put the sounds to music?

Who is this woman who wrote the first opera of the West, 300 years before any other?

Who is this woman who composed music that anticipated Mozart and Haydn by 600 years, since she deployed thematic development and themes that move in and out of her songs?

Who is this woman whose music takes one to ever deeper and loftier realms of divine experience?

Who is this woman who brings alive again the person and teachings of Jesus—and does so with music, poetry, theology, opera, medicine, letters, paintings, and yoga-like ecstatic experiences of soul and body that occur while singing her demanding music?

Who is this woman who taught that the only sin is “drying up,” and wrote abbots and bishops telling them to abandon their dryness, get out

of their buildings, and do whatever it took to get “wet and green and moist and juicy”?

Who is this woman who, ironically, is being declared a “saint” and a “Doctor of the Church” by a papacy that denounces women’s rights and

◆  
“You, O Rome, are like one in the throes of death. You will be so shaken that the strength of your feet, the feet on which you now stand, will disappear. For you don’t love the King’s daughter, Justice”

◆  
makes war on Catholic sisters—and even girl scouts—in America, and on thinking theologians on five continents?

Who is this woman who called Rome “evil” 400 years before Luther and the Protestant Reformers, and 900 years before the schismatic papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI abandoned the reforms and principles of the Second Vatican

◆  
Council to persecute the base communities of Latin America and condemn theologians for doing their job, which is to think?<sup>7</sup>

Who is this woman who wrote popes telling them that they “silently tolerated corrupt men,” and thus threw “the whole world in confusion” 900 years before the truth came out about Pope John Paul II allowing sexual predators to occupy the priesthood and oversee religious orders while abusing seminarians? And with Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope, as head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, saying such a man—Father Maciel—mustn’t be ejected because he had “done so much good for the church”?

Who is this woman who constantly calls the papacy back to doing justice and admonishes the pope, “You, O Rome, are like one in the throes of death. You will be so shaken that the strength of your feet, the feet on which you now stand, will disappear. For you don’t love the King’s daughter, Justice”?

Who is this woman who wrote the pope that he was surrounded by men “who bark like dogs and make stupid sounds like chickens, which sometimes begin to cackle in the middle of the night,” and who “are



hypocrites” who “inside their hearts grind their teeth like a dog who... bites with its sharp teeth,” and who “are like hens who make noise during the night and terrify themselves”?

Who is this woman who warns, “People who act like this aren’t rooted in goodness”? They weren’t then, and they aren’t today.

Who is this woman who wrote to abbots telling them they were “grumbling like bears” and “in many ways bungling as well”?

Who is this woman who preached in monasteries and churches throughout Germany and Switzerland, denouncing corruption among the clergy and calling the church to repentance and to wake up?

Who is this woman who puts *justice* as the deciding ethical norm in ecclesial and cultural life, instead of blind obedience and christofascism?

Who is this woman who even wrote King Konrad III and told him to “get hold of himself” and put justice first?

Who is this woman who took on the Emperor Barbarosa, comparing him to an infant and a madman, and threatened that God’s sword would smite him?

Who is this woman who painted pictures of church and society covered in human excrement because of patriarchal corruption?

Who is this woman who speaks of Christ and the “Word” as head of the church, not the pope and his curia?

Who is this woman who challenges a church today that has succumbed to advanced patriarchy and papalolatry, and is being run aground by a curia that is nothing more than a boys’ club practicing power games and involved in a gross theological schism?

Who is this woman and Trojan horse whose theology of justice and compassion is in complete opposition to the right wing agenda of the last forty-two years of the papacy, which has supported dictators such as Pinochet and fascist movements like Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation, and Legion of Christ, while emasculating justice-oriented movements such as liberation theology and creation spirituality?

Who is this woman who compares her experiences to those of the apostles at Pentecost and paints a picture about it—and who compares

her work of speaking the truth to people in power to that of the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel?

Who is this woman who dares to call herself a prophet, comparing herself to David who slew Goliath and Judith who slew Holofernes?

Who is this woman who insisted that not only she, but all Christians need to be “strong warriors” in taking on the demonic powers of one’s time?

Who is this woman who speaks to women everywhere—and to all men who are brave enough to explore both the Divine Feminine *and* the Sacred Masculine in themselves and society?



The facts of Hildegard’s life are straightforward enough. She was born in 1098 at Bermersheim near Mainz, Germany, the youngest of ten children. Her parents, Mechthild and Hildeberts, were ranked in the lower free nobility. Around eight years of age, she was entrusted to the care of a holy woman named Jutta, daughter of the Count of Sponheim, who had connections to Hildegard’s father. Together Jutta and Hildegard entered the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenburg on November 1, 1112, All Saints Day. Jutta became superior to a small community of women that developed at the monastery. Hildegard remained under Jutta’s tutelage for thirty years. When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard became the magistra, or teacher and leader at the age of 38.

Hildegard and her sisters left Disibodenberg to found a monastery called Rupertsberg in 1150. Fifteen years later, Hildegard founded another monastery in Eibingen. Hildegard received three visions that urged her to write: one in 1141, the second in 1163, and the third in 1167. To “speak and write” what she heard and saw were the instructions that accompanied the first vision. The result was her first book, *Scivias*, (“Know the Ways”), which took her ten years to write and which includes many paintings and ends with an opera! Her second major work, *Liber vitae meritorum* (“Book of the Rewards of Life”), focuses on morality and psychology, vices, and virtues to overcome them. This book

took her five years to write. Her third visionary book, *Liber divinatorum operum* (“Book of Divine Works”), was undertaken over a seven-year period and was completed in 1174. In it she presents ten visions devoted to creation and salvation, including an exegesis of John 1 and the Book of Revelation.

Among Hildegard’s other expositions were books on medicine such as *Causae et cure* (“Causes and cures”) and *Physica* (which draws on elements of nature, including stones, trees, fish, and more, for cures to ailments), the lives of Saints Disibod and Rupert, commentaries on the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Athanasian Creed, and a Commentary on the gospels (*Expositiones evangeliorum*), along with over 300 letters. She also wrote a book in which she invented her own language.

At the age of eighty, Hildegard was interdicted by the archbishop for a full year, which is akin to excommunication for her and all her sisters—an interdiction that was lifted only six months before she died. The point of contention was that the archbishop wanted her to remove the body of a revolutionary young man who was buried on her property, and she refused. Ultimately she won the argument, and the body is still there to this day.<sup>8</sup>

In this book we will go much deeper than mere facts, to where Hildegard wants to take us: deep places in our own hearts and souls, the “cave of our hearts” as Bede Griffiths put it, the “house of wisdom” that Hildegard teaches dwells in us all. We intend to travel into meditation and contemplation, into places of union and communion that ultimately lead to *appreciation*.

As Rabbi Heschel teaches, humanity will be saved not by more information, but by more appreciation. It is gratitude and its sister praise that we seek. Not praise of Hildegard as such—though she deserves a ton of it—but praise for existence itself. Praise for our glorious Planet Earth, our Mother. Praise for our powers of co-creation and creativity that are capable of moving us from the stuck places we find ourselves in as a species—our stuck religions, stuck education, stuck economics, and stuck politics—to a place more worthy of our noble origin in “original

wisdom.” Praise that joins in with the praise from the whole of nature, “the blowing wind, the mild, moist air, the exquisite greening of trees and grasses—in their beginning, in their ending, they give God their praise.”<sup>9</sup> This is the praise we want to participate in.

Is this possible? With Hildegard as a guide, anything seems possible. I have seen her do her magic on all kinds of people, young and old, male and female, believer and non-believer.

Hildegard tells us things about herself that are anything but thoughts of a scared and passive woman. At the end of her first book *Scivias*, she hears God say to her and about her, “I will confuse all of these with a little and very tiny one, just as I cast Goliath down with a boy, and as I conquered Holofernes with Judith. Whoever will have rejected the mystical words of this book, I will stretch my bow above that person, and I will pierce that person with the arrows of my quiver. I will cast the crown from his or her head, and I will make that person like those who fell at Horeb (Sinai), when they murmured against me. And whoever will bring forth evil sayings against this prophet, that curse which Isaac brought forth will come upon him or her. Let people be satisfied with the heavenly rose when they embrace it and when they hold it in their heart and when they lead it forth into the level ways (Isaiah 40:4 and Luke 3:5).”

Notice that Hildegard has here compared herself (a “very tiny one”) to David who took on Goliath and defeated him, and to Judith who beheaded Holofernes. She names herself as an author of “mystical words,” a “prophet,” a heavenly rose.

Hildegard continues with warnings from divinity about the importance of receiving the message of her first book: “Whoever has tasted the mystical words of this book and placed them in his or her memory, let this person be like a mountain of myrrh and frankincense, and all the other aromas. Let this person ascend by means of many blessings from blessing to blessing, just as Abraham did... But if any person will conceal these words of the finger of God fearfully and will lessen them through his or her own madness, or will have led them forth into a strange place

by reason of some other human sense, let this person be condemned. The finger of God will rub this one away.”<sup>10</sup> God says through her: “Receive these sermons and place them in your inner hearts (Luke 9:44). Do not refuse to listen to this warning. For I am the living and true witness of truth, and the speaking and *not-being-silent God*.”<sup>11</sup>

We too who drink in the words and images, the music and visions of Hildegard eight centuries after she composed and lived them, are invited to ascend by means of “many blessings from blessing to blessing, just as Abraham did.” The works of the Spirit are far from finished. The words of God haven’t all been spoken. God is a “not-being-silent” divinity. Not in Hildegard’s day and not in our own is Spirit finished. The Spirit, by Hildegard’s testimony, is alive and well, urging us to live before all else “not lukewarmly,” but “with passion and with blood.”

An amazing part of Hildegard’s story is that we still have so much of her work thanks to her Benedictine sisters who kept all of it for 800 years, including her writings, paintings, correspondence, and music—an amazing treasure trove of brilliance. In the year 1944, when the American bombers were coming over Germany, her sisters packed it all up to preserve it, sending it to Dresden where it was sadly firebombed. But smartly, the sisters copied everything before sending it. So what we have today is a first-generation copy of all her materials.

While Hildegard’s is an amazing story, one still has to ask: How many women through the ages didn’t have a whole nunnery to preserve their works for 800 years through wars and famines? How much of women’s wisdom has been lost to us over the centuries? What is so remarkable in Hildegard’s case is that none of her wisdom has been lost.

Hildegard is a woman who found her voice. Her God is a

◆  
“Receive these sermons and place them in your inner hearts. Do not refuse to listen to this warning. For I am the living and true witness of truth, and the speaking and *not-being-silent God*.”  
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“not-being-silent God.” Women the world over today are learning to find their voice, to be the prophets and truth tellers all adults are called to be. Hildegard leads from a silenced God to a God who speaks through a woman. The Divine Feminine is back!