

The Healing Power of Feminine Apparitions

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Lourdes and other apparition places

In 1858, the 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous had seen a feminine apparition in a grotto near Lourdes, France, on a number of occasions. After the story of these apparitions, in which the Virgin Mary was recognized, spread across Europe and beyond, pilgrims soon traveled to this place. And that flow has continued to this day. Millions of people visit Lourdes every year.

It is known that in recent centuries Mary has also appeared in other places in Europe – such as at La Salette in France, at Fatima in Portugal and at Beauraing in Belgium. And sometimes also outside Europe – like at Guadalupe in Mexico. These are all countries where the Catholic faith was once spread among the population. The apparitions always occurred unexpectedly, often through children and usually in a remote place in nature – outside towns or urbanized environments, as well as outside church buildings and the influence of church authorities.

Not only does the apparition sites appear to have a strong *attraction*, but through the apparitions the pilgrims also come into contact with the *healing power* of the place itself. If we delve a little deeper into the broad cultural context in which the female apparitions once began to manifest themselves and the relationship they have had – and still have – with the surrounding natural world, we also gain more insight into our own relationship with nature and into the nature of the healing power that has been evoked by the apparitions in that particular place.

The survival of older heritage

Not only have the Marian apparitions usually taken place in a place in nature. Similar, mysterious feminine figures appear in mythological and

folkloric stories from various cultures: in the stories about *witte wieven* in the Netherlands, about *white ladies* and *fairies* from Celtic England and Ireland, about *elves* from the Germanic areas, and about the *nymphs* from ancient Greece. These feminine figures have always been strongly connected to certain places in nature: at a spring, a tree, a river, a mountain or a hill, a forest, or a cave.

It has been pointed out by many researchers that through the veneration of the Virgin Mary, who had been officially given the title ‘Mother of God’ by the First Council of Ephesus in 431, elements of the much older Goddess heritage have been able to survive in Christianity. In the phenomenon of Marian apparitions, this survival of a older, pre-Christian heritage also plays an important role. As far as the apparitions at Lourdes are concerned, for example, there are some clear indications of this.

First of all, caves in France and Spain played a central role in the spiritual experience of our distant ancestors as early as Paleolithic times. There is much to suggest that for them they were ritual spaces that were considered the womb of Mother Earth. This is indicated not only by the well-known cave paintings of the time, but also by the so-called *Venus figurines* that are sometimes found near or in the caves. For example, the famous *Venus of Lespugue* was found in 1922 in a cave not very far from Lourdes. Of course, it is no longer possible to determine whether these feminine figures – which have been considered by a number of researchers to be early representations of the Goddess heritage – also appeared to our ancestors in those places earlier. But it is nevertheless quite conceivable that such experiences also have taken place at that time.

In addition, as far as the apparition in Lourdes is concerned, there is also a more direct indication that an older heritage has been able survive here. According to the American historian Ruth Harris, it was part of a local tradition of pre-Christian folklore. Bernadette’s description of the apparition as ‘young’ and ‘small’ turned out to bear little resemblance to the orthodox image of Mary. The similarities with mythical creatures of Pyrenean folklore turned out to be much clearer. The caves and forests in the region

had been inhabited by fairies before, including the cave of Massabielle, the apparition site. But because the apparition had a golden rosary and wore a blue sash, she also appeared to be different from these fairies.

Bernadette never confirmed that it was Mary who had appeared to her. The apparition had only called itself ‘the Immaculate Conception’. And the image that others had created of her appearance, and that they had had in mind from the beginning, according to her did not really resemble what she had seen. Apart from the rosary and the blue sash, the ‘official’ image of the apparition – which is still shown to the public in Lourdes to this day and is also reproduced in all the souvenirs – is still determined by the image of those others. We will never know what kind of apparition Bernadette really saw. And this actually applies to the other reported feminine appearances as well.

Exercise of external power and the experience of inner power

As most people know, church authorities have always been reluctant to acknowledge the authenticity of these female apparitions. If authenticity was recognized, it almost always took place much later. It was not until 1851 that the church recognized the authenticity of an apparition for the first time. But in the centuries before, several Marian apparitions had already been reported, such as in 1061 in Walsingham in England.

In my opinion, this reluctance to acknowledge authenticity has to do with the tension between the *external power* of the church and the *inner power* of the surrounding natural world that manifested itself in the apparitions. The spiritual *experiences*, in which people were directly touched by this inner power through the apparitions, have always been diametrically opposed to religious *faith*, for which the exercise of external power by the church authorities was essential.

Being connected to the natural world

From the beginning, institutional Christianity has been primarily an *indoor religion*: contact with the sacred dimension of existence, with God, took place within the walls of the Church, through the Church authorities.

Among the indigenous pre-Christian peoples of Europe, including, of course, the Celts, the sacred dimension was experienced pre-eminently in the outer world, in the surrounding natural world. In doing so, they practiced a form of *outdoor spirituality*, in which the direct experience of animated nature was central. Those indigenous peoples were still without writing and, as the American cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram has pointed out, they really lived *in* the natural world, according to him, an ‘ancient interiority that was once our common birthright.’ As a result, people developed a deep sense of connection to nature – a sense of belonging to the surrounding land, of being an inseparable part of it. There was also a principle of reciprocity in this: if they took good care of the land, the land also took good care of them.

Although this connection to the natural world initially was certainly not part of Christian doctrine, the need for it had always existed among the European population. Through the worship of Mary, which had been given an official place in Christianity from 431 onwards, increasingly some space was offered for the satisfaction of that need. And, as is well known, in this context in the late Middle Ages, many cathedrals were dedicated to Our Lady. The annual processions in which the Saint was carried through the town or the country, and the pilgrimages to places that were important to the faithful, had ensured that the experience of religion was moved more to the outer world. But despite this, Christianity remained primarily an indoor religion.

The power of the apparition place

Through the feminine apparitions, this connection with the surrounding land, and its sacred dimension, was revived. Although the church authorities feared a relapse into the ‘pagan’ practices they had fought against for centuries, they saw that people were deeply moved by a visit to an apparition site. Especially if the worship and pilgrimage had already started without them, they had to take action to be able to place it within the framework of the Catholic faith. The process of approval was therefore also directly dominated by linking the apparition to church attendance and the profession of the Catholic faith. Therefore, it wasn’t long before a church

building was built at an approved location. The rituals and processions in the outer world were still allowed, and sometimes even new rituals were added. As a result, the connection with the surrounding natural world, and its inner power, was also kept alive.

Not only the person who has observed the feminine apparitions, but also the apparitions themselves, have always played an important role as an intermediary. They once manifested themselves in an anthropomorphic way in the form of feminine characters, in order to build a bridge between the inner power of the animated landscape and that of the animated human being. And those apparitions, as indicated above, began long before the advent of Christianity.

Although the pilgrims' attention has come to be focused on the apparition itself, on those who have observed the apparition and on the visiting pilgrims in search of healing from their illness or disability, their minds are also opened to the power of the place itself. Through the apparition, they come into contact with the healing power of the animated landscape. In this context, it is significant, for example, that in Lourdes everyone, when visiting the grotto where the apparition took place, makes brief physical contact with the cave wall. And through the many taps near the grotto, everyone also fills bottles with the water from the spring, which Bernadette is said to have uncovered there on the instructions of the apparition.

A message for everyone

The intimate connection between ourselves and the surrounding landscape is beautifully expressed by the American writer Valerie Andrews: 'The land is truly the larger body that contains us. It is our second skin.' Perhaps it is even better, and more realistic, to say that the (animated) land is our first skin, and that we, with a second skin, are fully included in it. Through the feminine apparitions, a reciprocal exchange took place – and still takes place – between the inner power of the large animated body of the landscape and of the small animated body of the pilgrims.

Interest in the phenomenon of feminine apparitions should not be limited to the Christian world. They have a message for all of us: they tell us that the surrounding landscape is much more like a lump of matter that we can exploit for ourselves without limits, but that the landscape – as a local manifestation of Mother Earth, the larger body in which we are included – is really alive and also animated. The associated reciprocity principle of our indigenous ancestors was still understood by the ‘Native Americans’. As early as the nineteenth century, Chief Seattle warned us that what we do to the surrounding natural world, we also do to ourselves.

Contemporary feminine apparitions

That the feminine apparitions have a message for everyone, is shown by apparitions that have taken place recently. Feminine apparitions not only appear to belong to the past: they live on to the present day, but at the same time they also reach back to a past that is much older than Christianity. On June 16, 2011, in the town of Woodstock near New York, the former Buddhist Clark Strand was confronted with a mysterious feminine apparition, which has since been called *Our Lady of Woodstock*. To honor her, a small group of people meet regularly at a spot in the woods near Woodstock, which is marked by a statue of her.

Each month, she also communicates a message through Clark Strand, which is distributed through the website dedicated to her appearance (<https://wayoftherose.org>). More and more people, including myself, feel inspired by Her monthly messages. It is placed in a context that goes far back to prehistoric times, suggesting that all feminine apparitions – including Marian apparitions – belong to a tradition that existed long before the rise of Christianity.

Others, too, have reported in our present time on experiences with feminine apparitions outside the Christian context. In the book *Merchants of Light*, for example, the American researcher Betty Kovacs tells that during a shamanic ceremony at the Intihuatana in South America in which she participated, an apparition of a beautiful woman came into the sacred space, who walked by smiling and observed the ceremony. The shamans later told

her that she was a manifestation of Pachamama, the Great Mother, and that sometimes she appeared as a beautiful young woman, but other times as the Old Woman of the Sacred Mountain, Huayna Picchu.

A little closer to home, the Dutch philosopher and spiritual therapist Pamela Kribbe has indicated – in her book *De Aarde spreekt* ('Earth speaks'), in which she has included channeled messages from the Earth – that the Earth sometimes appears to her in feminine form: 'In speaking to her, the image of a young woman in a light dress sometimes appears who, fresh as spring, dances in the wind. In her transparent eyes I see images of nature light up (...). Images that help me to tangibly experience the presence of the soul of the Earth.' Contemporary feminine apparitions continue to play the role of intermediary to the surrounding, animated landscape.

Healing ourselves and the world

The importance of the female apparitions, then, lies not so much in the apparitions themselves, but in the fact that they open our minds to the reciprocal exchange that is constantly taking place between the inner power of the animated nature around us and our own. This can have a healing effect that goes far beyond physically curing an illness or disability. The American physician, healer and writer Lissa Rankin, who also visited Lourdes, has pointed out in this context that curing and healing should not be confused with each other: according to her, you can be cured without being healed, and you can be healed without being cured.

We can be prompted by the visit to an apparition site to look differently at ourselves, at who we are, and at our relationship with the surrounding natural world. It can help us to heal our sense of separation from the natural world and restore the original sense of deep connection with it that we were all born with. That is something we all desperately need in today's society. And it's also good for the planet.

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