

The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom¹

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration of the potential for as yet ‘unseen’ political spaces for wo/men. It acknowledges the reality of a system in the West that at a foundational level has deemed the public realm to be the preserve of the masculine, and required wo/men to negotiate themselves into it in order to inhabit it and function within it. The paper draws on fairy tales, myths, stories, and writers who work with them, as alternative imaginary resources of wisdom and inspiration that find resonance with Sophia Wisdom traditions. In particular, it explores a story called The Voices of the Wells or The Well-Maidens, finding connection with biblical narratives that connect wo/men to the wells and generate fresh perspectives about our relationship to the earth. The aim of this work is not to challenge existing structures in order that they allow greater entry and fairer allocation of resources to wo/men. Instead, it problematises the precepts of the system itself and, in doing so, attempts to open up potential for a different way of being, one that celebrates power with rather than power over and seeks the flourishing of all people, the earth and the creatures living on it.

Unmarked or unseen wo/men’s political spaces

The search for the potential of ‘unseen’ or ‘unmarked’² wo/men’s³ political spaces is a search for a different order, one that acknowledges an alternative way of being that is energised by love and rooted in an embodied, practical wisdom and gives expression to the feminine and the realm of the soul.

In particular, this search centres on finding and upholding balance in relation to an interrelated complex system of masculine and feminine energies, male/female relationships, to the earth and the unseen realms

¹ Elisabeth Schlusser Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 7.

² See Wayne Brekhus, “A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus,” *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998), 34-51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00041> in which he argues for developing a stronger tradition in a sociology of the unmarked that explicitly foregrounds “politically unnoticed” and taken-for-granted elements of social reality.

³ See Fiorenza, 57-58 for her explanation of the use of the expression “wo/men’ which been adopted in order, as she argues, to be inclusive towards men, inviting them to engage in “a spiritual-intellectual exercise that reverses the usual linguistic practice” by which in a grammatically male-determined language system such as English, wo/men have to think twice about if they are included when the word ‘man’ is used. The use of wo/man and wo/men opens up the possibility of a human category that men can ‘think into’ while it also highlights the differences between wo/men, that they are not a unitary group.

of spirit and soul. It is not intended as critique of the system in the service of reform, rather to define how we might 'leave the father's house'⁴ and find our way to alternative imaginary resources for ourselves, our communities and the earth - imaginaries energised by what Roger Haydon Mitchell describes as "a different kind of power altogether to the exertion of will, be it individual or corporate. It is not based on the assertion of autonomy or sovereignty, but rather on the desire for the wellbeing of another."⁵

In the context of the West, the work to discover the means by which these interrelated realms, energies and ways of being "hold together" is shaped by the fact of the destructive repression that took place at the Enlightenment and by religious institutions' adoption of values that have been of service to both the powerful and to capitalism.⁶ Uncovering alternative ways of being requires active imagination as we work with the scraps of history and stories that deviate from the mainstream dominant narratives. The search for possible creative spaces that open up in relation to both the potential and the impotential⁷ of wo/manhood in relation to public space, is in part reliant on the exploration of negative histories that show how wo/men's participation has been shut down. Alternative imaginaries that focus on wo/men's agency and potential are also crucial in the creative work of developing spaces that seek to uphold balance within a complex ecosystem of which humanity forms only a part.

In this, fairy tales, myths and stories are important, as Clarissa Pinkola Estes points out in her book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*.⁸ This is because they are "embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life"⁹ creating "markers along the path" to assist [us] toward [our] own natural-won freedom, [our] caring for self, animals, children, sisters, lovers and men".¹⁰ This paper also draws on the work of Sharon Blackie¹¹ that sets out to explore the Celtic myths and stories that are part of what she describes as

⁴ See Marion Woodman, *Leaving My Father's House: A Journey to Conscious Femininity* (Shambly, 1992).

⁵ Roger Haydon Mitchell, "What Are the Politics of Love?" *Global Discourse*. Accessed May 23, 2020. https://www.academia.edu/38059560/What_are_the_Politics_of_Love.

⁶ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013) for his thesis on how the spirit of capitalism achieved dominance by overriding the "traditional" in human nature, trapping individuals in an "iron cage" in order to maximise productivity.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, trans. Adam Kotsko. *Creation and Anarchy* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2019), 16-19: an exploration of the concept of creation through Aristotle's thesis on potential (which he calls *hexis*, the possession of a capacity or an ability). "The one who possesses - or has the habit of - a potential can both put it into action and not put it into action. Aristotle's brilliant, even if apparently obvious, thesis is that potential is essentially defined by the possibility of its non-exercise. The architect is potent insofar as he is capable of not building: potential is the suspension of the act."

⁸ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman* (London: Rider, 2008).

⁹ Estés, 14.

¹⁰ Estés, 15.

¹¹ Sharon Blackie. *If Women Rose Rooted: A Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* (September Publishing, 2019), 13.

“a highly distinctive pan-Celtic culture that is rooted in intense feelings of belonging to place”.¹² These stories, Blackie argues, can help us, “change the stories we tell about who we are”.¹³ They are a source, of not only personal inspiration, but also give instruction as to wo/men’s exercise of power and particular areas of responsibility. This includes their relationship to the land and place, and to a growing focus on “a new and strongly felt desire to actively re-root ourselves in the land and in our communities, to take responsibility for shaping the future, to bring back awareness and respect for deep feminine values in a world dominated by the masculine.” All of which she describes as a “revolution of belonging” that “goes far beyond simple environmentalism”.¹⁴ These stories emphasising wo/men’s connection and responsibility for the earth position the search for new imaginaries of political space within the demands of the welfare of the earth.

Sophia Wisdom

There are many myths and stories about wo/men that suggest a different way of being in the world, one more connected to the rhythms of nature, more instinctual, more enchanted. Working with these stories also opens up the possibility for bringing fresh understanding to biblical texts that have been lost in androcentric translation. This weaving of narratives has been helped greatly by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical feminist rhetorical model, which uses historical and literary critical methods and creative practices to generate a “different” imagination.¹⁵ Her approach to feminist interpretation as a complex process of reading and reconstruction, and as a cultural-theological practice of resistance and transformation, provides a framework in which to address the question of “how to read the silences and gaps” in texts and historical records.¹⁶ Cultural stories that offer teaching to wo/men about life, ritual and initiation seem removed from biblical texts, which, read in an androcentric way, may appear to ignore wo/men, deny their voice and agency. Yet in her reading of the story of the Syro-Phoenician wo/man,¹⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza positions the wo/man who interrupts Jesus and disrupts the established order for the sake of her daughter as a biblical-theological voice that has since been excluded, repressed or marginalised.

Readings of the text that insist on Jesus seemingly having the last word obscure the powerful, disruptive impact of the wo/man’s questions, and thus the wo/man’s role as a teacher. A religious and cultural outsider, the wo/man enters into theological argument, turns Jesus’ position against itself in order to achieve the wellbeing of her daughter. In challenging Jesus’ ethnocentrism, Schüssler Fiorenza argues, she becomes

¹² Blackie, 13.

¹³ Blackie, 13.

¹⁴ Blackie, 19.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Schlusser Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 40.

¹⁶ Fiorenza, 40.

¹⁷ Mark 7:24-29 and Matthew 15:21-28.

a paradigm for wo/men who transgress intellectual and religious boundaries¹⁸. Further, the wo/man's reference to bread would have been understood by those familiar with the Jewish and early Christian Sophia traditions as allusions to Divine Wisdom. This tradition was cut off in both Jewish and Christian theology, and many Christians today have not heard of Sophia. Yet, Schüssler Fiorenza argues, early believers would have understood Jesus first as Divine Wisdom's messenger and prophet and later as Sophia-teacher incarnate. Traces of her theology, or sophiaology, have survived and so, Sophia's offer of "bread" of well-being, beauty and knowledge presents rich possibilities for the future of biblical interpretation of a different order.

Wisdom in biblical texts such as Proverbs is characterised as a feminine, public-facing figure, one who inhabits the streets, the public squares, and places of gathering and 'cries out' in the social and political spaces of community, urging that her words be listened to. The earliest Sophia-traditions decipherable "in the margins of early Christian works"¹⁹ combine Jewish prophetic Wisdom and *basilea* (the political realm of God or God's vision of transformed creation and world) traditions. There is, a political, open ended, and cosmopolitan religious dimension to Biblical wisdom/ Wisdom spirituality, writes, Schüssler Fiorenza:

Wisdom "is a cosmic figure delighting in the dance of creation, a 'master' craftswoman and teacher of justice. She is the leader of Her people and accompanies them on their way through history...she raises her voice in public places, and calls everyone who will hear her. She transgresses boundaries, celebrates life and nourishes those who will become her friends. Her cosmic house is without walls and her table is set for all."²⁰ Thus, we see the possibility of a spirituality "of roads and journeys, public places and open borders, nourishment and celebration" that "seeks for sustenance in the struggles for justice and cultivates creation and life in fullness".²¹

Sapient, or wisdom, tradition is therefore understood as related to a kind of folk wisdom articulated by and for wo/men that provides teaching by which order can be brought to life's myriad experiences. "Wisdom teaching is an orientation to proper action, to knowing what to do. It means engaging in value judgements that urge a certain course of action. Wisdom holds out the possibility for the good life; it is a search for justice and order in the world that can be discerned by experience. Wisdom teaching does not keep faith and

¹⁸ Fiorenza, 28.

¹⁹ Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 28.

²⁰ Fiorenza, 27.

²¹ Fiorenza, 27.

knowledge apart; it does not divide the world into religious and secular, but provides a model for living a “mysticism of everyday things”.²²

This then is an attempt, to approach the bible, as Schüssler Fiorenza suggests, through the paradigm of “the open cosmopolitan house and spiralling dance of Divine Wisdom”.²³ Adopting a dialogic approach, Schüssler Fiorenza’s work opens up the possibility of interaction with stories, myths and legends, as well as biblical texts in order to discover feminine wisdom that is rooted in life, and in the wellbeing of both the land and the community. Such a dance requires us to challenge and question some of the established thinking about what is ‘right’. Taking on Roger Haydon Mitchell’s argument that the “radical Christianity of the gospel testimony” was subverted, resulting in the development of “ecclesiastical structures and theologies that have colluded with empire”,²⁴ it seeks to discover the possibility of new connections with the Jesus-Sophia traditions, which may in the past, have been deemed off limits. In seeking to engage with the ideas of there being a connection between the land and the feminine, it is necessary to question traditions that have sanctioned and approved their disconnection. This work problematizes the unbalanced system that has emerged in the West precisely because its response to the feminine, to earth-based religions and the unseen realms of the soul has been to crush and eradicate it or seek to assimilate it. Rather than attempt to instate wo/men into the status quo, this idea takes on board the idea, as articulated by Mitchell that “the first and second century narratives of Jesus of Nazareth and the apostle Paul’s configuration of a new humanity are recognised primary sources for the politics of love”.²⁵

The belief that there is a rational, objective way of seeing expressed in Enlightenment thinking, (along with its historical legitimation by the Church) has long been held up as “common sense” while other ways of seeing the world have been denigrated. This paper resists such an ego-driven system based on control and domination, which has exploited the earth’s resources for its own ends and has little regard for the sacred, mysterious, the unseen or magical. It attempts to interject the “But”²⁶ to a system that, from the early days of capitalism, through the Enlightenment to the industrial revolution and the development of scientific thinking, has become increasingly unbalanced.

Voices of the Wells

²² Fiorenza, 28.

²³ Fiorenza, 28.

²⁴ Roger Haydon Mitchell, *Church, Gospel, and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), xiii.

²⁵ Roger Haydon Mitchell, “What Are the Politics of Love,” *Global Discourse*, accessed May 23, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/38059560/What_are_the_Politics_of_Love.

²⁶ Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 11-12.

Celtic story traditions are a rich source of wisdom regarding wo/men, often framing them as keepers of the feminine energetic, upholders of right relationship to the land and water and of balance, particularly in relationship to earth, and between masculine and feminine. They are also often presented as keepers of the threshold and therefore mediators between the inner and outer, the seen and unseen realms, the physical and the Otherworld, the realm of the spirit and the *mundus imaginalis*. Stories from this tradition, as Blackie demonstrates, position wo/men within the context of community and in relation to the earth, providing us with “guidance on how to live more authentically, in balance and harmony with the planet on which we depend”.²⁷

In *The Loss of the Voices of the Wells*, Blackie retells an early Celtic story that later appeared in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, which he wrote in Old French in the late 12th century. Containing rich symbolism, it connects human action to the flourishing of land, a flourishing that was contingent on maintaining and revering sovereignty, which in Celtic traditions, was often personified as a wo/man and was responsible for upholding the land and maintaining its wellbeing. It is a difficult story that begins with a land in a state of balance, a right ordering of things that holds the Voices of the Wells, the land and unseen realms in sacred relationship with those charged with leadership. The violence and shocking nature of the story sits it in story-telling traditions that use these elements to arrest our attention. In this case the story of rape, theft and the subsequent devastation of the land has a visceral impact. As Pinkes writes, dark tales of this kind, or what she calls “shiver stories”, are intended to draw us up short, to cause listeners to experience a shiver of awareness that leads to thoughtfulness, contemplation and action.²⁸ As stories that engage with our emotions, they force us to grapple with uncomfortable feelings, to sift through our responses, of shock, horror, grief, and anger that arise from hearing of the culture of rape that was unleashed, the break with the connection of the Otherworld and, ultimately the destruction of the land. Stories of this kind are not to be read as historical texts, but instead require us to ask questions. In this case, they are about the actions of the King and his followers, the impact of their transgression of a sacred trust and connection with the feminine and the Otherworld.

The story of the Voices of the Wells reflects the old Celtic traditions that ascribed a different kind of authority to wo/men, one that exercised “a moderating influence”²⁹ over the power of men. “Celtic mythology,” she writes, “depicts a society in which women - almost exclusively - held a form of moral and spiritual au-

²⁷ See Blackie, 18.

²⁸ Pinkes, 392.

²⁹ Blackie, 58.

thority, which not only arose directly out of the land itself, but which carried all the weight of the Otherworld. ”³⁰ As keepers of the threshold the Voices of the Wells are mediators between the inner and outer, the seen and unseen realms, the physical and the Otherworld, the realm of the spirit and the *mundus imaginalis*. This realm of the mythic imagination, considered as real as the physical world, runs alongside our own and is distinct from fantasy or the unreal. A realm of the soul, it communicates through symbols and archetypal patterns, myth and stories and can be reached by the act of imagining.

The suggestion of a sacred balance that wo/men play a key role in upholding is present within other traditions.³¹ More than a simply physical connection, the role of the Voices of the Wells as intermediaries is akin to the traditional tribal shaman, described by David Abram³² as an individual who “...acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth.” The Voices of the Wells in Celtic traditions are also, Blackie writes, “manifestations of Sovereignty”,³³ a feminine guardian and protector of the land, a spirit of the Earth itself and a deeply ecological force. This kind of Sovereignty eschewed domination, conferring power on earthly leaders, entrusting them with a drink from the cup, or grail - a vessel representative of connection to the Otherworld that promised renewal and inspiration to those who committed to the wellbeing of the land. The loss of Sovereignty and the process by which the “powerful complicated divine women who carried with them the authority of the Otherworld, and the fertile and creative power of land in all its ambiguity were reinvented as saints”.³⁴

The story of the Voices of the Wells suggests a complex interrelationship between the land and the people, between the seen and unseen realms, the physical and the soul realms. It provides a framework for exploring the balance of masculine and feminine energies, of living in good relationship with the earth and inspires us to think of potential spaces dedicated to maintaining that balance. As well as providing insight into the nature of that balance, we also learn that flouting it leads to the withdrawal of the Voices of the Wells and the Otherworld, and to fertile land being laid waste. By raping the well-maiden, the King unleashed a culture of sexualised violence and domination, while the grail and its gifts became commodified, cut off from relational and reciprocal representation. This story therefore problematises a state of being

³⁰ Blackie, 58.

³¹ Blackie, 13-14.

³² David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, Penguin Random House, 2017). 7.

³³ Blackie, 58-59.

³⁴ Blackie, 59.

that might otherwise be deemed natural or 'common sense' and positions us as "the sons and daughters of the well-maidens" who were "destined to wander through the dispirited land in search of healing".³⁵

The Potential Story of the Biblical Wells

Thought to predate Christianity, the story of the Voices of the Wells is a potent story for the Western world where much of our connection to land has been lost in the 500 -600 years of capitalism and colonialism. Core to these projects has been the evolution of what ecotheologian Mark I Wallace argues in *When God Was A Bird* of a "sky-God tradition"³⁶ that has obscured many of the feminine and land based traditions. Yet glimpses can be seen, Wallace shows, in the early Christian churches that were built close to "holy wells" or "sacred springs". In Britain, where there was a pre-Christian tradition of water veneration, Winchester Cathedral, St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and Glasgow Cathedral are among those built on sites of underground springs. In Nazareth, the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation was established at "Mary's Well" the still surviving watering hole where the Angel Gabriel is said to have announced to the young wo/man that she would give birth to God's son. Over time, however, much of the power and wonder ascribed to these water sources, their connection to the liminal and to the numinous powers in traditional mythology has been lost.

In the search for further parallels in biblical texts, I have turned to stories that connect wo/men to the wells. Some work is needed however, in order to uncover the potential of the stories and allow some of the living expression to flow. The positioning of Mary at a well in the Gospel of James³⁷ may be a small thread that allows us to explore Jesus' engagement with the rich symbolism of the wells. Representing far more than a valuable water source, wells are also present in earlier texts, including the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. We don't know much about Miriam's role as a keeper of the well, apart from a reference³⁸ that tells us that following her death the well dried up so that the Israelites complained about the lack of water at Meribah. In Exodus³⁹ we read that Moses was told to strike the rock, while in Numbers 20 we are told that Moses was told that if he spoke to the rock it would "pour out" its water: "You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink." Despite this, Moses struck the rock

³⁵Mary E. Gomez and Allen D Kanner, "The Rape of the Well Maidens, Feminist Psychology and the Environmental Crisis" in Theodore Roszac, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D Kanner, *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 121.

³⁶ Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 154.

³⁷ See "The Protoevangelium of James," CHURCH FATHERS: Protoevangelium of James, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm>. 11. "And she took the pitcher, and went out to fill it with water. And, behold, a voice saying: Hail, you who hast received grace; the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

³⁸ Numbers 20:1-13.

³⁹ Exodus 17:5-6.

twice with his staff, and as a result was told he would not lead the community into the land. Within a Western paradigm, striking a rock may not be seen as problematic, yet Moses' decision to use force instead of a more relational, word-based approach impacted his life significantly. We also know from the Numbers⁴⁰ that for Miriam words and how she used them were important - after she and her brother Aaron spoke against Moses, she contracted leprosy and had to go outside the camp for a period of time. Seen in this light, Miriam's voice becomes representative of a different, non-dominant, generative order responsible for teaching Moses how to draw forth the water. When the people demanded water, however, there was a rupture, and the abandonment of Miriam's way.

These approaches are identifiable in Mark Wallace's helpful exploration of Martin Heidegger's work on nature and technology in which he identifies "two dispositional orientations" to the natural order and our interactions with it, one being a coercive setting upon, the other "participatory bringing forth".⁴¹ Heidegger contrasts the German term *hervorbringen* that describes everyday creative events with *poiesis*, the Greek word meaning 'to make' that is at the root of the English word for poetry. All forms of making, says Heidegger, whether natural or human directed, are exercises in poetic creativity. The problem he says is not the technology itself, but the attitudinal disposition that we bring to the process. We can be thoughtfully attendant to the emergent patterns that naturally reoccur in the process of *poiesis* or bringing forth, or make technological interventions into nature's emerging process that are a violent "setting upon" that pays little if any attention to the destructive impacts on the more-than-human-world.

Just as the King in the story of the Voices of the Wells, abandoned the relational 'drawing forth' of the water, Moses transgressed a disposition towards the earth reflected in Genesis⁴² which suggests that human beings have an intrinsic role to play in activating the earth's potential. Moses' 'setting upon' is perhaps then, suggestive of the final of three stages of the "turn from the earth"⁴³ that Mary Grey suggests has developed alongside economic and political domination in the West.⁴⁴ The turn from what may variously be termed 'indigenous' or feminine, representing a way of being that holds as sacred the relationship between humans and the earth began "when Greek humanism combined with the biblical tradition to create a pervasive anthropocentric view of the universe" that appeared to justify human greed and domination.⁴⁵ The

⁴⁰ Numbers 12: 1-15.

⁴¹ See Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird*, 54 -60 for a full analysis of Heidegger's Root Metaphors and the hope for a new 'orientation towards the world, one that is an "incantatory gesture" towards the natural order.

⁴² Genesis 2: 5 "there were no plants on the earth and no seeds had sprouted, because he had not sent any rain, and there was no one to cultivate the land."

⁴³ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 2000). Quoted in Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalisation* (London: SCM, 2003), 11.

⁴⁴ Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 11.

⁴⁵ Grey, 12.

second stage took place, according to Grey, during the years of the Black Death of 1347- 49 when people assumed that God was punishing them for their wickedness. This assumption generated a pessimism towards the earth and redirected faith towards redemption out of this world, thereby diminishing embodied relationships with people and earth's creatures. Such pessimism became dangerous when it combined with the development of scientific thought during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the third and decisive stage, the ascendancy of the scientific rational mind was frequently characterised as the domination of nature by man. Francis Bacon, considered one of the founding fathers of modern science, sought to break away from what he considered hitherto to be a weak, impotent and feminine science. In words that could well have come from the mouth of the King in the story, in *The Masculine Birth of Time*, Bacon made explicit the link between the domination of nature and the feminine, using the language of torture for discovering nature's secrets, language reminiscent of the inquisition and the witch-hunt. "For you have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterwards to the same place again... Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object."⁴⁶

In the story of the Voices of the Wells, in which the king unleashes a culture of rape across the land, we also see illustrated this connection between "the despoiling of the Earth and the subjugation of women".⁴⁷ In the West, the violent rupture of our connection to land during the time of enclosure and the demands of early capitalism unleashed a world in which mystery, the belief in a soul realm, the magical Otherworld and the sacred feminine were lost. Schüssler Fiorenza's term kyriarchy⁴⁸ is extremely useful in giving shape to the complex system that has developed in the wake of this turn from the earth. A system driven entirely by the vision of the earth as a resource to be extracted for the primary benefit of a privileged few, it has seemed incapable of halting or moderating its relentless 'setting upon' even when the future of the planet is at risk. We are at a time when, to a degree, that system has been forced to pause globally in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. We might remember the story of Jesus, who, shaped by hundreds of years' tradition, seemed to uphold the continuity of a closed system until the Syro-Phoenician outsider dared to confront him and all that he represented at that point with the word 'But'.

Recovering the Voices of the Wells

⁴⁶ Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 15.

⁴⁷ Mary E. Gomez and Allen D Kanner, in *Ecopsychology*, 112.

⁴⁸ Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 211. A neologism coined by the author and "derived from the Greek word for "lord" or "master" (*kyrios*) and "to rule or dominate" (*archein*) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative, intersecting structures of domination.

The story of Jesus's encounter with the wo/man at the well⁴⁹ is often approached as one that demonstrates his willingness to cross social and cultural boundaries. In approaching the wo/man of Samaria while she was at the well and asking her for a drink, Jesus was possibly also acknowledging the authority of wo/men in relation to the land and as mediator of the liminal space between earth and the unseen realms. Seen in this light, Jesus can be seen as deferring to the need for her affirmation of his earthly authority by a feminine representative of Sophia, in an act that has resonance with his submission to baptism by John at the beginning of his ministry. In seeking such affirmation, he would have been expressing his commitment to upholding the wellbeing of creation, the spiritual, unseen realms, as well as the human community. Jesus' conversation with the wo/man could then be seen as a reaching into her potential (as expressed in her impotential) to hold the balance between masculine and feminine energies, and the relationship between the realms of nature, the spirit and the soul. The wo/man's surprise that he would "ask a drink" of her was perhaps the beginning of a journey of realisation of her potential as a Voice of the Well. Such recognition of wo/men's positioning in relation to liminal space, energises the promise of "living water" as generating healing of the land. In his conversation with the wo/man, Jesus was revealing a new life-giving order that had impact on the wo/man's personal life and that of the collective, positioning her as a seer and an intermediary between Jesus, his alternative reality and her community. Jesus, reaching into a deep reality as represented by a wo/man at a well, was redeeming those interwoven relationships, going on through his death and resurrection, to open up space for a new humanity to live in right relationship to creation. If true Sovereignty, then, is the ability to hold all things in balance and not allow one to dominate, what potential spaces open for a new expression of the feminine, activated as a mediator of the 'unseen' with a specific role in relation to the earth, to the imaginal and soul realms?

As Gerda Lerner shows,⁵⁰ the development of patriarchy took place over thousands of years, and history therefore "...has been recorded only by men and told in their words. Their attention has been mostly on men. Not surprisingly, they have not noticed all the actions women have taken."⁵¹ The search for a framework that acknowledges the potential and impotential of wo/men⁵² cannot rely on a "compensatory history" that focuses on searching out "for women who did what men did"⁵³ however. Instead, we must reimagine social and political space that would allow exploration as to how "all things hold together" in a non-dominant system that seeks power with rather than power over. In reconnecting to the land, to the realm of the soul, the *mundus imaginalis*, we can begin to recover the wisdom that teaches the good life in

⁴⁹ John 4:4–26.

⁵⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁵¹ Lerner, 13.

⁵² Lerner, 13.

⁵³ Lerner, 13.

relation to the earth and its resources. Such spaces could draw inspiration and rich resource from Jesus, the one in whom “all things hold together”⁵⁴ and Mary, who with the words “May it be done to me according to your word”⁵⁵ gave herself to a power dynamic that defied patriarchal values and drew her into a new order. The potential of the Jesus narrative is also evident in stories in which he destabilises “bodily margins” using spittle and mud to heal a man’s blindness,⁵⁶ as well as in his engagement with wo/men as embodied subjects, who prepare food, care for the sick, and draw water. Yet, while this suggests an awareness of the rhythms of being at the heart of wisdom traditions, Jesus also imbued these acts of social reproduction with immanence, centring a disposition more in keeping with ‘drawing forth’ and therefore challenging division of the domestic sphere from the private and the political realms.

At this time of social isolation and COVID 19, there is awareness of the potential of a different way of being, of the need for Deep Adaptation alongside recognition of the tenacity of the capitalist system, the drive for a ‘return to normal’ that includes domination, extraction, accumulation and the possibility of growing barbarism. The recovery of the Voices of the Wells has the potential to open up the realms of the *mundus imaginalis*, or the Otherworld, to see reinstated the balance between the masculine and feminine, and the ways of knowing represented by the mind and the soul in order to recover balance.

An Ekklesia of Wo/men

In a move towards identifying potential spaces in which this could take place, I have drawn on Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, which imagines an ekklesia of wo/men as an alternative to kyriarchy, a radical democratic space that “invites debate, risk, vision, empowerment and transformation”.⁵⁷ An ekklesia of wo/men opens up the potential for a wider and systemic expression of the capacity for the soul work of hearing, receiving, holding and bringing forth. A vital strand that needs to be woven into the ekklesia of wo/men is the wellbeing of the earth and its complex ecosystem. Explorations of the interdependence between wo/men, the feminine and wisdom in relation to land may not sit easily with traditional Christian thought. Yet reviewing the story of the woman at the well, acknowledging the tradition of Miriam as a keeper of the well and seeing Moses’ striking of the rock as a rupture in the way of being towards the earth, could position an ekklesia of wo/men as part of a collective journey towards a restored relationship to the land. An ekklesia of

⁵⁴ Colossians 1:17.

⁵⁵ See Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird*, 66-68, for an exploration of the miracle in John 9: 6 in which the use of spit and mud, which would have provoked disgust among onlookers, challenges assumptions about what is ‘divine’ and ‘holy’.

⁵⁶ See “Deep Adaptation – Professor Jem Bendell,” accessed May 23, 2020, <https://jembendell.com/category/deep-adaptation/> for a full explanation of the “deep adaptation” agenda that calls for resilience, relinquishment and restoration.

⁵⁷ Fiorenza, 61.

wo/men could engage in a fundamental reimagining of how we view the natural world, connecting with the learning of ecofeminism, which has been described as a 'new term for ancient wisdom'⁵⁸ and offering a vision of a society that is "benevolent towards nature, wo/men, children and men."⁵⁹ The discipline of eco psychology emphasises the importance of looking outwards and exploring our connectedness, positioning the self not as ending at the skin level but within a circle of human relationships and interwoven into the lives of trees, animals and the soil, and aligns the deepest needs of people with care for our earth.⁶⁰

As defensive walls of separation and domination start to disintegrate, we become open to a world of increasing richness, complexity and beauty. This is an energy that Jungian theorist Gareth Hill calls the "dynamic feminine".⁶¹ Systematically devalued in patriarchy "its effects are the uplifting, ecstatic inspiration that comes from the experience of transformed awareness... The dynamic feminine is perhaps more simply symbolised as a spiral, representing the disorientating and transforming experiences of new awareness."⁶² Seeing in this dynamic feminine the wisdom of Sophia, we can begin to ask if it is possible to follow her into working with degrowth, the organic and emergent, into biomimicry, unleashing the political potential of the wild, soulful feminine. Envisioning what "our human experience could encompass if liberated from the need to dominate and control"⁶³ represents a balancing of the structures and paradigms ascribed to masculinity that have dominated for centuries. This requires complex work as this system is not separate from us. The psychologist Dorothy Dinnerstein, writing in the 1970s⁶⁴ argued that it was necessary to dismantle the divide between public and private, the inner and outer, that she perceived as an "active menace" to the future of humanity. Dinnerstein's work points to the need for the destructive relationship between men and wo/men to be addressed, and to the challenging the symmetry of our social life that has for many years made male power in the public sphere seem "right" while assigning to wo/men the domestic and private realm.

The process of imagining and shaping an ekklesia of wo/men by which the wellbeing of the community, the earth and the unseen realms can be represented in political space will require us to explore "the dark, silent layers of our mental life". At the core of Dinnerstein's work, which draws on the images of the mermaid and the minotaur, is "our longstanding awareness of our uneasy, ambiguous position in the animal

⁵⁸ Maria Miles and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 13.

⁵⁹ Miles and Siva, 20.

⁶⁰ See Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, *Ecopsychology*.

⁶¹ Gareth Hill, *Masculine and Feminine: the Natural Flow of Opposites in the Psyche* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 17-20, quoted in Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, 119.

⁶² Roszak, Gomes and Kanner, 119.

⁶³ Dorothy Dinnerstein et al., *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Other Press, 2004), 118.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Dinnerstein et al.

kingdom, and a more specific awareness that until we grow strong enough to renounce the pernicious prevailing forms of collaboration between the sexes, both man and wo/man will remain semi human, monstrous.”⁶⁵ This then positions the work of dismantling of our current order and reaching for our potential as fully human in relation to one another and to the earth within us as individuals and communities. As we pursue a different politics of love and care that is prepared to look into the shadows of our selves we can then examine the part we have played in bringing about such a perilous situation on the earth.

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⁶⁵ Dinnerstein et al, 5.

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