

CHANNING MEMORIAL CHURCH

June 21, 2009

Reflections before the Service:

“Be not lax in celebrating. Be not lazy in the festive service of God. Be ablaze with enthusiasm. Let us be an alive, burning offering before the altar of God.”

“There is the Music of Heaven in all things and we have forgotten how to hear it until we sing”.

—Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

REFLECTION

Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen

Rev. Amy Freedman

This morning’s service was inspired by Hildegard of Bingen, a Christian mystic of the Middle Ages. She was born in Germany to a noble family, the youngest daughter of ten children. Her birth order was significant. We have spoken here about the practice of tithing, giving one tenth of your income to support your religious community. Well, Hildegard was born into an observant Catholic household and so as the tenth child, she became their tithe, a gift to the church as an expression of devotion and gratitude.

Hildegard was also known to have spiritual gifts and frail health from a young age. However, Hildegard was not just given to a convent to be raised as a nun. The eight year old girl was given in to the keeping of an anchoress named Jutta. As a child, she was brought to a Benedictine monastery to be enclosed apparently for life in a cell with the anchoress who would instruct her in the ways of prayer and purity. Thus Hildegard’s life was a divine offering. For thirty years, she only knew only the companionship of Jutta who taught her to read, to recite the psalter (the daily round of prayers), and other arts. Simple meals were passed through a specially designed window and their wastes routinely taken away.

When the anchoress died in 1136, Hildegard’s life changed significantly. About a dozen women had joined the Benedictine community and they unanimously chose Hildegard to head the women’s order.

Since the age of three, Hildegard had experienced visions. At the age of forty-two, a divine voice told her to share them. At first she resisted this call, paralyzed by self-doubt, crippled with headaches that made her so sick that she could not get out of bed. It was not until she shared with her mentor and confessor, a monk named Volmar that her illness lifted and with him serving as her secretary over the course of ten years, she wrote her first book outlining twenty-six visions with thirty-five illustrated miniatures. The volume is entitled *Scivias* or *Know the Ways of God*.

So this is not a typical story told from this pulpit. As Unitarian Universalists, we uphold quite a different Trinity than the Benedictine order of the Middle Ages. Our

Unitarian ancestor Earl Morse Wilbur pointed to Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance as the three pillars of our liberal religious faith. Here is a woman whose freedom was denied from an early age. Whose faith came through divine inspiration instead of intellectual exploration. Does our tolerance for this traditional religious life extend this far?

As I read the accounts of her entering the enclosed cell and the corresponding rituals described like a funeral where her worldly life was ended for eternal devotion to God, I bristled with indignation. With my background in psychology I also wondered about the traumatic effects of being abandoned by her parents at such a young age. I feel claustrophobic thinking about being enclosed in a cell for thirty years especially with the anchoress who sometimes practiced self-flagellation as a form of penance. Some scholars point to Hildegard's migraines and time confined to bed as evidence that she had a mental illness or some sort of physical disorder.

However, even if there is some truth to those modern theories Hildegard of Bingen was not a poor soul. She became not only the leader of her convent but also the founder of two new convents on either bank of the Rhine River. At a time when women were not commonly viewed as sources of wisdom and inspiration, she was examined by a council and her theological teachings approved by the Pope. Emperors, kings, nobility, and religious leaders sought her counsel and spiritual direction. Not only did she exchange letters, people came to her for healing and she traveled across Germany to preach and teach. Hildegard of Bingen wrote not only theological works but also books about Natural History and the Healing Arts that are still considered worthy of study today. She composed liturgical music. Seventy-seven of her vocal works survive including her "*Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*" and a sung morality play. The music was not meant for performance but as a form of prayer, a spiritual tool to attune to our original nature.

This is why I am inspired by Hildegard of Bingen. This visionary mystic calls us to see a greater wholeness. Long before the Green Movement, Hildegard writes of "greenness". Before the word "ecology" was common, she created her own word: "viriditas" for the green energy of agape love pulsing through the universe. Her visions proclaim that humankind is living out of balance with nature causing pollution in the air, waters, and earth while also contaminating ourselves.

Hildegard's visions proclaim the vitality of God, the Holy Spirit and the goodness and love of Christ charging the whole world with "greenness" that is life, beauty, and renewal. Even Naturalists who are not Christian or may not believe in God can appreciate her mystical insight long before atoms were discovered, that there is a divine energy animating every person, creature, and plant. Hildegard calls us to see the creative force pervading the universe from the tiniest twig to the most distant star.

Hildegard's visions are of the universe as a unified whole. Only, much is out of joint. In order for each person to find salvation, we must recover the creative life-affirming holiness experienced in the Garden of Eden.

READING Hildegard's Words:

This is what happened in the 1141st year of the incarnation of Jesus, Son of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old. Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both Old and New Testaments, though I did not have the interpretation of the words of their texts or the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases or tenses. But I had sensed in myself wonderfully the power and mystery of secret and admirable visions from my childhood.¹

MEDITATION, Rev. Amy Freedman

The passage that Jamie just read has a corresponding miniature painting in which Hildegard is shown in her cell. The monk Volmar is just outside the door recording her vision. Red flames coming down from Heaven touch her forehead. This is the fiery light permeating her brain, inflaming her heart. No matter what our personal beliefs, each one of us has flashes of insight, when we see more than just with our eyes, hear more than just with our ears, feel more profoundly than is routine. Call it Divine revelation, an epiphany or simply an “Ah-Ha!” moment, a gift of greater understanding can arrive suddenly. In cartoons this is often shown as a light-bulb turning on over the character's head. Fire, light-bulbs—these symbolize illumination, enlightenment. Flames often symbolize hope, love, and truth.

Are there areas of your life where no light seems to be shining?

In a time of silent meditation, let us invite light into areas of darkness. If you so chose, you may repeat this line from 1 John 2:8, “Darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

“Darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

[Silence]

Blessed Be.

READING Hildegard's Words

I am the one whose praise echoes on high.
I adorn all the earth.
I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.
I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits.
I am led by the spirit to feed the purest streams.
I am the rain coming from the dew
that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.

I call forth tears, the aroma of holy work.
I am the yearning for good.ⁱⁱ

.....
The soul is like a wind that waves over herbs,
Is like the dew that moistens the grass
Is like the rain-soaked air that lets things grow.
In the same way you should radiate kindness
To all who are filled with longing.

Be a wind, helping those in need.
Be a dew, consoling the abandoned.
Be the rain-soaked air, giving heart to the weary.
Filling their hunger with instruction
By giving them your soul.ⁱⁱⁱ (HK 306)

Hildegard viewed music as a form of prayer. In singing we can realize our Harmony with God, nature, and one another. She wrote, "*There is the Music of Heaven in all things and we have forgotten how to hear it until we sing*". Please remain seated while singing, #352, *Find a Stillness*.

HYMN #352

Find a Stillness

REFLECTION

A Feather on the Breath of God

Rev. Amy Freedman

In one of her visions, Hildegard describes her relationship with God as follows:

Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honour. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus I am . . . *A feather on the breath of God.*^{iv}

Like you, I do not live in a Benedictine monastery where there is a daily round of practices all devoted to the service of God. I do not rise with the sound of church bells. Instead of the eight canonical hours, Sunday is my only day devoted to formal worship. As you know, I have a family and we do not live on the church grounds or in a Parsonage. My life like yours has the challenge of balancing domestic responsibilities with work. I share your concerns about the economy, the environment, and growing violence around the world and close to home.

As I was working on this sermon, my baby daughter Liza happened to roll over and bang the side of her head on a wooden toy. She cried for two hours with only moments of being consoled by my hugs or distracted by my singing. As I desperately rocked her, my thoughts spun with all the church work that I had to finish, the declining

health of my dear Aunt Alberta, and the personal struggles that church members confide in me as their minister.

In the midst of this chaos and swirl of sadness came Hildegard's vision, "I am a feather on the breath of God." I took a deep breath myself. At last Liza fell asleep and I gently laid her down.

Hildegard wrote in a letter:

Walk through the valley of humility and know peace. Lose your titanic, hard-to-satisfy ego. A greedy self-esteem is just a steep mountain you'll find dangerous to climb. It's also tricky (if not impossible) to come down from such heights, and anyhow the summit is too small for community. Focus on Love's splendid garden instead. Gather flowers of humility and simplicity of soul. Study God's patience. Keep your eyes open. Decide to seek the all-powerful God with sincerity of mind.^v

On this Summer Solstice,

Let us dedicate our days to "viriditas"

the green energy of agape love pulsing through the universe.

May our eyes awaken to the beauty of all forms of life.

May our ears hear the harmony of nature.

May our minds be enlightened.

May our hearts soften knowing we are held in Love's embrace.

May our voices speak boldly of our essential unity.

CENTERING PRAYER

Let's join together in this prayer by Hildegard, #493 in our hymnal.

Fire of the Spirit,
life of the lives of creatures,
spiral of sanctity,
bond of all natures,
glow of charity,
lights of clarity,
taste of sweetness to the fallen,
be with us and hear us.
Composer of all things,
joy in the glory,
strong honor,
be with us and hear us.

ⁱ p.52, Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Hildegard of Bingen, a spiritual reader, "Scivias"*, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007

ⁱⁱ p.31, Gabrielle Uhlein, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co, 1983.

ⁱⁱⁱHK 306, Elizabeth L. Ihle, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Medieval Mystic for the Modern Age*, HUU Sermon Archives , 2004

^{iv} *Hildegard of Bingen: A Medieval Mystic for the Modern Age*, Elizabeth L. Ihle

^v p.159, Butcher