

# **Unearthing the Feminine: Honoring the Individual and Collective Experience in Education and Beyond**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores ways in which symbolic language, particularly the feminine archetype, may offer ways to bridge the gap between our inner and outer worlds. The quality of the feminine is briefly described, and it is suggested that the recovery of this quality is essential in moving towards education that values sustainability. The individual experience of the sacred is discussed, through the lens of valuing subjectivity, and reclaiming sensing and feeling as a way of knowing in education. The collective experience is also considered, exploring the idea of personal responsibility, and encountering differences as opportunities for growth. A brief synopsis of how the rational and spiritual became separated is offered, as well as ways that the feminine principle can be recovered in educational systems. These include creating space for critical reflection and experience of the sacred, as well as our ability as educators to navigate chaos. More and more it seems we are invited to go with the flow of internal wisdom, rather than force our actions out of brokenness and disconnection. This paper offers ways that not only educate others in sustainable ways of living, but ways that we as educators, just might become the teaching.

## **The Power of Symbolic Language: Reflections on the Feminine**

Sustainable education requires a return to deeper meaning in our lives. How do we open this dialogue when ‘deeper meaning’ is an intimate, unique, and individually experienced phenomena? What is the language that we use in this conversation on the sacred? Richard Rohr, Franciscan Friar, author and founder of the *Center for Action and Contemplation* says, “Symbolism always reconnects what we have thrown apart.” (Rohr, 1998, p.40) Symbolic language leads to wholeness in that it offers us a “different kind of cognition from rational thought”; one that is meant to be experienced, not rationalized. (Lindenfield, 2006, p. 7) Archetypes are universal expressions of the human and collective psyche according to Swiss psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung, and provide us with a symbolic language that speaks universally both to the inner life, and the deeper life of the collective. (Lindenfield, 2006, p. 7) Dr. Marion Woodman, Jungian analyst and author of *Conscious Femininity*, writes prolifically about the archetype of the feminine and how it is a bridge between the inner and outer life. Woodman describes the feminine as “an awareness of the harmony of all things...The intuition, the attunement of the body is concentrated and alive. The capacity to be open and to receive is an alert state. You feel the harmony of the whole universe in the marrow of your bones.” (Woodman, 1993, p. 83) The feminine name is a quality that is universal to the human experience, and manifests itself in those who trust the process of life. People who allow themselves to be vulnerable, and are not afraid to make mistakes, know this quality intimately. As a culture vulnerability is unfamiliar territory, but simply because it is unknown, does not mean the feminine does not exist. In his book, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* author David Suzuki says, “the world we have created is an extraordinary, unprecedented achievement, constructed out of the awesome power of our abstracting, pattern-making brain. But it has lacked the ingredient we discover we depend on to thrive- the idea of wholeness and connection we call spirit.” (Suzuki, 1997, p. 200) We know the feminine when we have a sense of interconnectedness to all living things. Woodman, writes that in Western culture, “the feminine soul would move with the majestic rhythms of nature into creative, whole living, [but]

is considered slow, stupid and irrational...The feminine is rumbling with rage and grief...We have to discover the magnificent consciousness in matter, in our own bodies. We are capable of seeing the light in a rose bush, of feeling the energy in a tree. We are born to live in the love that permeates all life.” (Woodman, 1993, p. 74-75) This Love is universal with many different names. Woodman and Jung describe this interconnectedness as the feminine.

Education that fosters connection to the feminine leads to sustainable action. In Jungian thought, the quality of the Feminine is about being, and receiving, where the masculine is about action and service. We fill up with the Love (feminine) and let it spill out naturally (masculine.) They are both necessary and complementary to one another; wholeness comes from living the tension between these opposites. Stephen Glazer, author of *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education* speaks to this feminine quality: “Spirituality in education begins with openness: opening up to ourselves, feeling our experience and exploring the inner landscape of our lives. (Glazer, 1999, p. 247) When rules are in place for mechanistic purposes, we lack connection to our inner lives. But when form and structure provide the container for curiosity and creativity, we help to facilitate connection to the Feminine. When I see children in straight lines and sitting in rows facing the teacher, without many opportunities to move, I am not looking at a structure that supports and encourages interconnectedness and creativity. When they are given the structure to experience intimacy with one another, they have the opportunity to navigate the diversity inherent within the lived experience. In Stephen Sterling’s book, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*, Sterling calls for a shift from *information education* to *wisdom education* and says that we must summon “all of our existing wisdom to choose and enact this change.” (Sterling, 2001, p. 88) The Greek word for wisdom is *Sophia*, the feminine. I wonder if this wisdom Sterling speaks of could possibly be the wisdom of the feminine? In education, we learn to equate our worth with what we do, which we can see in excessive standardized testing and a lack of creativity in our schools. When we equate our worth with anything other than Love, we disconnect from the Feminine. Sustainable education equates our worth with a quality that runs deeper than our actions. This new paradigm values both the individual, and collective experience as expressions of a deeper quality; one that Jung and Woodman refer to as the feminine.

## **Honoring the Individual Experience**

*Every creature is a word of God. Meister Eckhart*

*The Value of Subjectivity*

Honoring the individual experience is the first step as we try to facilitate a paradigm shift towards sustainable education. In his book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, philosopher John O’Donohue says, “each person is the custodian of a completely private, intimate world.” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 40) The inner life is so deeply personal and intimate. No other person on the planet will ever experience life exactly the way we do, and it is detrimental to ignore this rich inner life. Parker Palmer, a pioneer in recovering the heart of education, warns us that “if we don’t start getting as concerned about educating that heart, that human inwardness from where work of every sort flows, we are missing the point. We are not educating people for the healing work that the world needs.” (Palmer, 2007) Experiencing the sacred is subjective, and sometimes we fear subjectivity, and we rely on our thinking minds to find a bottom line for the

sacred. When my son was in kindergarten, he colored the sky in yellow. His teacher explained to him that the sky is blue and he needed to redraw his picture to depict that fact. My heart sunk as I realized the separation from the imaginative inner life had already begun. He was five. Ken Wilber, father of *Integral Theory* says, “Global consciousness is not an objective belief that can be taught to anybody...[it is] a subjective transformation in the interior structures...” (Wilber, 2000, p. 541) Therefore, subjectivity needs to be valued, not diminished.

How do we value the subjective human experience in a system that sacrifices it for the rational? Sir Ken Robinson, in his book *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* makes a distinction between the rational, and natural individualism. (Robinson, 2001, p. 157) He says that the philosophy behind rationalism makes two basic assumptions, that “logico-deductive reasoning is the principal way of acquiring knowledge” and that true objective knowledge can be found separate from human emotion and value systems. (Robinson, 2001, p. 157) Robinson says that natural individualism makes entirely different assumptions about the individual which include: educating the whole person, affirming that self knowledge is as important as that from the outside world, and it values the drawing out of a person so that they may become aware of their own unique personality. (Robinson, 2001, p. 160) Education, to be sustainable, must acknowledge the individual’s experience; no matter how uncomfortable that might be for the educator. We might want to find a bottom line of truth and knowledge separate from personal experience, but in order to facilitate creativity in a world that needs it, we must honor the subjective experience of one’s inner life. Robinson affirms this saying, “Each child has inborn, distinctive qualities. Education should provide experiences that will draw out these qualities rather than suppress them with values and ideas of the adult world.” (Robinson, 2001, p. 158) I recently attended a field trip for first graders to an apple orchard. I sat next to Lydia, a six year old, and as we bumped along the dirt road, she looked up at me and said, “My mom was deployed this week.” As I looked into her worried eyes, I wondered if this part of her is being honored in the educational system. I wondered if her grieving heart is being tended to like learning her math and writing skills. I am going to go out on a limb and say, probably not. I decided in that moment to let it begin with me, and I reached out to hold her hands. I asked her if we could close our eyes and breathe love into our hearts and send it to her mom in Bosnia. Her eyes widened with excitement at the possibility of connecting with her mom. The next morning, as I dropped my daughter off at school, who came running up to me in the hallway and wrapped her little arms around my waist? Lydia. We cannot leave her inner life out of her education, as it so deeply informs her life already.

### *Sensation as a Way of Knowing*

Sustainable education honors the sacred by serving the whole person-body, mind, heart and soul. St. Irenaeus tells us, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” (O’Donohue, 2007, p. 124) When we bring the body back into the equation, we recover the human experience. The feminine (or the inner life) is experienced in the body. Before the rational mind, we are sensing beings, taking in the world through our sensing bodies. Dr. Christine Caldwell, somatic therapist and author of *Getting Our Bodies Back*, affirms this saying “Our experience of an event must come through the sensory systems permeating our flesh- through a pulsing networks of nerves-in order to register into the mind.” (Caldwell, 1996, p.13) When we value sensation, we reclaim the validity of the human experience and begin to know what it means to be fully alive. We begin to trust our inner life experience (feminine) as relevant knowledge that can deeply

inform our actions (masculine) in the world. Suzuki suggests that we can celebrate the sacred by “reentering the body” and by including the “human experience as a source of truth.” (Suzuki, 1997, p. 195) He warns us that culturally “we assert an ‘objective reality’, made of abstract universal principles, which is more correct, more accurate than the messy sensory world we experience daily.” (Suzuki, 1997, p. 195) When we reject the body, we reject the body of the Earth. We cannot know the feminine without the body, as it is the vehicle to *experiencing* the inner and outer life. Woodman tells us, “The natural feminine way to feminine maturity is through the body.” (Woodman, 1993, p.19) The body is the doorway back to the sacred, because it is the pathway back to experiencing the moment. When we are in the moment, not in the past or in the future, we reside in sacred interconnectedness with all life.

## **Honoring the Collective Experience**

*This new century might yet be the age of relation. Stephen Sterling*

### *Personal Responsibility and Wholeness*

Knowing wholeness within allows us to take responsibility for our stories of pain and joy, and we can begin to look upon the world through eyes of acceptance. O’Donohue says, “When you decide to practice inner hospitality, the self-torment ceases. The abandoned, neglected, and negative selves come into seamless unity. The soul is wise and subtle; it recognizes that unity fosters belonging.” (O’Donohue, 1997, p.118) When we judge others and fear their difference, we project what we cannot welcome within our own selves. When we compare ourselves to others we do not trust the gifts we have been given. O’Donohue says, “The shape of each soul is different. There is a secret destiny for each person. When you endeavor to repeat what others have done or force yourself into a preset mold, you betray your individuality. We need to return to the solitude within [then]...our clay shape gradually learns to walk beautifully on this magnificent earth.” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 125) Everything around us is a mirror, reflecting back to us what we know is beautiful, or what we think is not. The key to understanding this, and taking responsibility for our wounds, is to keep it conscious. We need systems that create space for the *exploration* of difference rather than systems that create competition out of it. Stephen Sterling says in his book *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*, “Most education daily reinforces unsustainable values and practices in society. We are educated by and large to ‘compete and consume’ rather than to ‘care and conserve.” (Sterling, 2001, p.21) When we learn to accept our own diversity, welcome in what we have disowned, we are better able to do this with each other. We do this by owning the darkness within, and creating spaces to reflect upon that darkness collectively. When we take responsibility, we end up finding our brilliance lurking in the shadows, and sometimes that brilliance is even harder to accept than the darkness.

Joan Halifax, author and anthropologist who is largely informed by Buddhism and the study of indigenous cultures, tells us: “Rites of passage...are opportunities for us to engender extensive subjectivity and active participation in the happenings of our families, relationships, communities, environment- even our own bodies. Separating ourselves from the familiar and habitual is important. Exposing habits, recognizing social and cultural conditioning, and the habitual patterns of our minds and bodies is crucial- regardless of whether our culture is indigenous, ancient or post-modern. Extensive subjectivity allows us to step outside of ourselves into a larger space and view of the world, a view that reveals fundamental interconnectedness.”

(Glazer, 1999, p.176) We are subjects experiencing a larger world, therefore sustainable education requires collective reflection.

### *Encountering Difference as an Opportunity to Grow*

Through a committed process of self inquiry, we begin to witness the world through a lens of wholeness, and are better resourced to navigate the differences around us. The Feminine is the archetypal web that weaves us together, and because of the rich diversity of life, it is easy to forget our interconnectedness. Suzuki says, “Biologists have learned that the most powerful survival principle of life is *diversity*; there is no single right way that works- there will be hundreds or thousands.” (Suzuki, 1997, p.7) Recovering the Feminine means learning how to live with diversity; both in oneself and the context of one’s world. Philosopher of Goethean Science, Margaret Colquhoun, describes this acceptance as *being at one with* where “we commune with the unbroken wholeness of the phenomenon, realizing that each worldly thing is a manifestation of a single immanent loving creative energy.” (Harding, 2006, p. 35) The natural world embodies this acceptance, in fact its very survival depends on it, and I believe our survival depends on it too. Stephen Harding, author of *animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia* writes the “human organism is inherently predisposed to seeing nature as alive and full of soul, and that we repress this fundamental mode of perception at the expense of our own health, and that of the natural world.” (Harding, 2006, p.21) Sustainable education holds us responsible for our own lives. It offers a forum to explore the sacred in oneself, while respecting the rich diversity of the collective experience. Sustainable education values the whole person and at the same time, values the whole of the collective. If one relates to the soul only in the rational mind, it lacks the roots of the body and what could have been creative action, has the potential to become at the worst dangerous, and at the least uninspired. When we separate body and soul, heart and head, we engage in black and white, dualistic thinking. Wholeness is the language of the Feminine.

### **Losing Our Way**

*Few of us have lost our minds, but most of us have long ago lost our bodies. Ken Wilber*

How did we travel so far from the Feminine; from the creative life within and around us? Suzuki says in his book *The Sacred Balance* says, “...movement away from the natural world was made possible by a quite remarkable train of thought- the ideas that shaped our civilization. Today we take those ideas so much for granted that we see them not as ideas (which can be rethought, revised, discarded) but as reality. Many thinkers trace the origins of our...exile from the garden, back to Plato and Aristotle, who began a powerful process of separating the world-as-abstract-principle from the world-as-experience- dividing mind, that is from body, and human beings from the world they inhabit. (Suzuki, 1997, p. 191) Harding suggests that the separation between head and heart originated with the birth of agriculture, when farmers began to fear the wild because it impinged on their crops. (Harding, 1993, p.22) The wild was deeply connected to the spirit world, therefore the gods and goddesses were also feared. The Feminine is wild, constantly moving and changing. Ironically, it was religion that began driving this wild inner life underground, and science followed thereafter. They buried the feminine by negating animism, ignoring nature as sacred, as well as the very bodies that we live in. The Industrial Revolution did not help, as it rejected the value of the body because it was not machine-like and had its limitations. Plato, though not entirely devoid of an appreciation for animism, contributed

to a form of dualistic thinking which the church later expounded upon. The human mind moved to the top of the social hierarchy, and what could be sensed and felt, fell to the bottom. It was in the context of the Protestant revolution, which declared humans as fallen from the grace of God, that the scientific revolution was born. (Harding, 1993, p.23) Philosophers such as Galileo, and Descartes, further affirmed that humans were separate from nature and Suzuki suggests that Descartes' *I think therefore I am* "completes a new myth about our relationship to the world: human beings are the things that think..and the rest of the world is made up of things that can be measured...from this duality came the ideas we live by..." (Suzuki, 1997, p. 192)

The consequence of this need to control nature is living in a society that upholds patriarchal values. We value objectivity vs subjectivity, we educate heads not hearts and we focus our attention in higher education almost entirely on vocational and technical skills. (Abowitz, 2006, p. 17) When we overvalue the rational mind, we spend too much time there, and due to the lack of attention, the body and soul become mute. The feminine quality, the inner life then cries out. "With the celebration of technology, the power dynamics of control and competition have escalated, cutting us off from feeling, from soul, and ultimately, the earth itself..." (Woodman, 1993, p. 91) When we are not fully resourced within, we are not equipped sufficiently to accept the differences around us. When we return to the feminine, the wild life within us, we return to the Magnificent that has been buried over centuries. We have become comfortable living in the shadows. This journey back to the Feminine is taken not by avoiding, or bypassing the shadow within, but by stepping right into it.

### **Reclaiming the Feminine**

*"It seems to me there is something buried here, buried alive...struggling for expression." James Baldwin*

How do we recover the feminine, and in the famous words of Gandhi, be the change we want to see in the world? Larry Dossey MD, pioneer in the field of prayer and medicine and author of *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* suggests that, "The Earth is together. It is we who are fragmented .... we must recover our lost unity. If we want to be around to witness the outcome of our current dilemmas, our efforts towards healing best be directed inward to ourselves, instead of only outward, as generally is the case today. This means discovering the right way to *be*." (Shapiro, E. & D., 1992, p. 135) We are an action-oriented culture and tie our worth to what we do. Recovering the feminine means valuing, and taking time, for reflection; time to just be. We overwork our children in schools, not to mention the teachers, because we have forgotten their (and our own) inherent sacredness. We must be brave and bring the feminine back by inviting creativity into the classroom, even if it means encountering great resistance.

### *Critical Spiritual Education: The Freedom to Think Critically*

This is a story from Ken Robinson's talk at the 2007 Ted Conference: *An elementary school teacher was giving a drawing class to a group of six-year old children. At the back of the classroom sat a little girl who normally didn't pay attention in school. In the drawing class she did. For more than twenty minutes, the girl sat with her arms curled around her paper, totally*

*absorbed in what she was doing. The teacher found this fascinating. Eventually, she asked the girl what she was drawing. Without looking up the girl said, "I'm drawing a picture of God."*

*Surprised, the teacher said, "But nobody knows what God looks like." The girl said, "They will in a minute."* (Robinson, 2007) The teacher in the story above assumes that nobody knows what God looks like and even assumes that God looks like anything. How large of a space can we create for young, and old, to explore the animating force that lives within them? We cannot whittle this all encompassing force into a one-size-fits-all term. But, what if educators created space for each person to use their imagination, and share how the sacred manifests in their lives? Sustainable education offers venues for the collective to sense, and experience, the quality of the feminine. When we turn inward and then reflect as a collective, we recover our relationship with wholeness.

David Orr, scholar in environmental politics reminds us that "more than any other institution in modern society, education has a moral stake in the health, beauty and integrity of the world our students will inherit. (Glazer, 1999, p. 147) Words like health, beauty and integrity point towards the deeper questions of meaning and purpose in life. Because education is a primary agent for change educators, administrators and parents have a responsibility to ask these questions. It is difficult to engage in conversation about the feminine, because it is intimate and we lack the language for it. Margaret Jablonsky, in her work in the area of spirituality and student affairs says, "We need to bring spirituality into education, not keep it separate and banished to small sectors of campus (the religious studies department, the campus ministry.) The U.S. constitution states that we may not favor one religion over another- not that we must totally erase all notions of spiritual development from public life and the academy." (Jablonsky, 2001, p. 15) What if we did not need to find the right language, thereby reducing a grand mystery into one particular form? What if we began to accept the relationship that others have, or don't have, with this inner lives? Holding a wide open space for people to explore this quality requires leadership, that is rooted in integrity.

### *Creative Leadership: Embracing the Chaos of Diversity*

As educators, what is our relationship to the Feminine, to our inner lives? Do we explore deeper questions of meaning and purpose, and if we don't, can we hold the space for others to explore the sacred in their lives? To invite this level of diversity and intimacy in a conversation is to invite chaos. Margaret Wheatley, a pioneer in the field of chaos theory and organizational leadership, says we need leaders who are willing "to let their hearts be open and to tell stories that open other people's hearts." (Wheatley, 2007, p.129) We fear the heart because we fear the chaos and creativity of subjectivity. To assist the collective with inner reflection, we need leaders who do not fear their hearts. When we begin to dig deep within, the darkness naturally creeps in. If we are not conscious of it, or afraid of it as educators, we keep our conversations with students on the surface. A spiritual teacher once told me, "You will only take someone into their inner lives, as far as you have gone." I fear the darkness less when I face my own, and as a result, my intuitive work with others runs deeper. Glazer says in his book on spirituality in education, "When faced with the uncertainty...that stimulates growth and change, people have different levels of tolerance." (Glazer, 1999, p. 212) One of the responsibilities of the educator who is interested in sustainability is to get comfortable with chaos. The rational mind does not enjoy chaos, because it sorts and organizes. The feminine or the heart, however, knows how to

navigate chaos. It is the nature of the feminine to move and change; just look at the life of a tree. The quality of the feminine goes with the flow, and trusts the process of life. In James O’Dea’s book, *Creative Stress: A path for evolving souls living through personal and planetary upheaval* he says, “Flow is about moving with the inner obedience and surrender to the truth of the higher self, whether or not that moves us into or away from the stream of activity around us. Flow, paradoxically, is that movement which is anchored in faith that any given moment has its truth which must be face.” (O’Dea, 2010, p. 168)

## **Closing Thoughts**

When we fear what is around us, we are disconnected from the flow. Some might say, of course we should be afraid, look at the suffering around us. Action rooted in fear will do this planet, and its people, no good. Rooting our actions in trust will. Sustainable education is a mutual process between society and education. We need to let the change begin with ourselves, which requires trust and patience, both born from the feminine. Sustainable education is about who the teacher is, rather than acquiring a particular technique or skill. Transformation, like Ken Wilber said earlier, happens on the inside. As educators we need to *become the teaching of sustainability* that we want to see in the world. It is impossible to authentically advocate for a change that we are not embodying ourselves.

Self-exploration must allow for subjectivity, for sensation as a way of knowing, personal responsibility for one’s inner life and opportunities to witness the gifts of diversity. When we open to these new ways of being we are more likely to create space for people to experience, and reflect critically, on what is sacred in their lives. When we trust our own hearts to navigate darkness we begin to welcome chaos as essential, and necessary, in bringing out deeper levels of change in our society. Matthew Fox, theologian and author. at the 2007 *Stanford Lecture* says “All creativity contains chaos. And if you are not at home at chaos, if our educational system is not at home with chaos, if we can’t welcome chaos then we are killing our strongest suit as a species, which is our creativity.” (Fox, 2007) The Feminine is creativity. She is life. She has not left us; we are still breathing and so is this planet. But, we have left Her and it is time we come home to her.

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