

OVERCOMING THE MYTH

by Sandra Walston

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being . . . the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.

– Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949



THE COURAGEOUS GODDESS

The stories that are told about women influence our understanding about ourselves and provide us either with boundaries or inspiration for achieving great feats. Early history was passed on through the oral tradition. The stories about men and women were told around the fires at night or were imparted to the young during rites of initiation. However, as history began to be written, men were the ones who wrote down the important events of the community because women were not taught how to read or write. These scribes preserved history from their perspective and determined which events should be remembered. Those scribes – both ancient and modern – have placed the events of history in a context that has shaped the destiny of generations of women. As we understand the changing context of history, we can begin to rewrite our own stories and emphasize the history of women who are courageous in extraordinary and ordinary times.

In the days when history was recounted around the family fires, people worshiped a supreme female creator. Beginning with the Neolithic period around 7000 BCE, women, revered as wise, valiant, powerful, just, and immortal, were honored. They were called by many names, including the Great Goddess, Divine Ancestress, Mother Goddess, Creatress of Life, Mistress of Heaven, Our Lady, and High Priestess. The female's ability to produce a child made her the object of the male's worship; women were the magical birth-givers and breast-feeders who nurtured the young.

About the time agricultural communities began to develop (women were the food gatherers and generally accepted as being responsible for the development of agriculture), the male role in conception was recognized as a biological one. Childbirth was no longer seen as magical. This awareness decreased female worship.

As men moved forward, women stepped back into the shadows. Men, bolstered by their superior strength

and their misunderstanding of biology, grew to believe that it was the man – the father – who was solely responsible for conceiving a child. The mother was now a mere vessel who accepted the man's seed and carried the child to term.

Simplistically speaking, the notion that men were solely responsible for conception formed the core belief that justified patriarchy. Women were considered the husband's "property." Over time, the idea that men were destined to be in charge was accepted as the way things are and always have been. Not until the scientific advances of the nineteenth century, when biologists demonstrated that both male and female shared equally in conceiving a child, was the concept of parity between men and women seriously considered. Women began, in baby steps, the move toward equality.

But women have always held places of honor in ancient history (or herstory, as you might call it). Ancient legends describe the Goddess as a powerful, courageous leader in battle, and an intelligent, wise counselor. The classical Greeks worshiped Athena, a bold and beautiful warrior, and the huntress Artemis lived in fierce purity without men. The Greeks also believed in the existence of Amazons, a band of savage females who fought valiantly on the battlefield. And because goddesses were honored for their skills at battle and in counsel, women of those times yearned to be like them.

Merlin Stone states in her book *When God Was a Woman* that the female divinity was "revered as warrior

or hunter, courageous soldier, or agile markswoman who was sometimes described as possessing the most ‘curiously masculine’ attributes, the implication being that her strength and valor made her something of a freak or physiological abnormality” as compared to male warriors. Some myths state that the Amazons had a physiological abnormality – they cut off one breast to be better archers.

THE REVERED WOMAN

What was life like for women in a society that worshiped a brave and wise female deity? They emulated her. Women held positions of respect and status. Intuitive and in touch with both their intellect and their emotions, they counseled others at shrines. Women owned businesses. Laws allowed possessions and real estate to be passed to daughters. Some laws allowed women to have two husbands and other laws permitted a man to be executed if he raped a woman.

However, as communities embraced monotheism, matriarchies declined. Women’s rights and their shrines became less sacred. The Great Goddess became the subservient consort of the invaders’ male gods, who usurped her power. Patriarchy – along with worshipping a supreme male deity – gradually suppressed and destroyed the ancient Goddess religions and women’s status. As a result, laws concerning women changed and a woman’s right to engage in economic activities diminished. New laws dictated what women could inherit and what could be passed on to children. These laws also strictly governed abortion, rape, virginity, and infidelity. Eventually, women were completely devalued.

Over the centuries, it became the norm for property to pass only through the father’s line of succession. Patriarchal systems of religion and law led to misogyny, the hatred of women and all that women represented. Indeed, as Merlin Stone so cleverly observes, “We may find ourselves wondering to what degree the suppression of women’s rites has actually been the suppression of women’s rights.”

OH, WHERE DID ALL THE GODDESSES GO?

What caused the disappearance of goddesses from the ancient Western world? In a word, patriarchy. But the loss of the concept of goddess symbolized greater losses.

In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, Leonard Shlain, M.D., states, “I was struck by the thought that the demise of the Goddess, the plunge in women’s status, and the advent of

harsh patriarchy and misogyny occurred around the time that people were learning how to read and write.”

While the death of the Goddess diminished the status of all mortal women, “more critical was the destruction of those symbolic, political, familial, and religious sources of power traditionally associated with women,” writes Mary Condren in *The Serpent and the Goddess*. “This would be the precondition for the new society to take root, a society where women would take it upon themselves to give birth; where women would be firmly under control; and where kings, warriors, and priests would develop elite forms of power, effectively abolishing or superseding the power structure of the clan systems.” The last temple celebrating the Goddess was destroyed around 500 A.D.

LET’S BLAME EVE

Since the fall of women from divine worship, most religions have taught that God is male. In the Western world, the Torah and the Bible feature few stories that favorably depict women. In fact, the Bible begins with the story of Adam betrayed by the temptress Eve. This myth, perpetuated through the ages, blames woman for the “fall of man,” and offers it as a convenient excuse for the ills of mankind. Even today, people keep women in subservient roles via a subtle belief system that female sin led – and leads – men astray. Such a position is further justified by the Bible, which quotes the obvious punishment – the pain of childbirth. Genesis 3:16 reads, “in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.”

This myth, Stone reminds us, was propagated to provide divine sanction for male superiority. She offered personal examples from her own childhood to show how parents and religious authorities misuse scripture. “Instead of receiving compassion and sympathy or admiring respect of courage,” Stone writes, “I was to experience this pain as guilt, the sin of my wrongdoing laid heavily upon me as punishment for simply being a woman, a daughter of Eve.”

The male’s divine right to dominate his wife also has survived for centuries. According to Stone, “Once the economic security of women became undermined by male-dominated power in society, women were forced to accept one stable male provider as the one who ruled the roost.”

Many myths continue to hold enormous power by focusing on earlier restrictions. Riane Eisler writes in *Sacred Pleasure*, “We will certainly be amazed that our most famous story of human origins, the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, has absolutely nothing good to say about sex, love, or pleasure, that it presents the human

quest for higher consciousness as a curse rather than a blessing, and that it does not even touch on the awe and wonder we humans experience when we behold or touch someone we love.”

TODAY'S HEROINES WEAR LEATHER BRASSIERES

Myths offer ideas that guide us when we are young and easily influenced. In 1998, *Xena: Warrior Princess* was television's highest-rated first-run drama. Xena appealed to millions of viewers as a “don't-mess-with-me,” brains-and-beauty warrior dressed in leather. She is good, and she is strong, albeit shadowed by a questionable past in which she made mistakes she cannot change. Lucy Lawless, the New Zealand actress who starred as Xena, noted that this courageous warrior princess is portrayed as “a woman with the devil on her shoulder, constantly fighting the darker side of her own nature.” With her sidekick Gabrielle representing the tender side of a warrior, they “kick butt” as role models for young girls today.

Ironically, this strong woman concept reflects the limits of progress for women in the twenty-first century. Rather than seeing strength and courage as part of the gentle fabric and soul of any woman, such images depict courage as unusual and atypical, and usually with a masculine bravado. Though Xena exemplifies the tenet that, despite the past, women can find their courage and fight for their dreams, the “kick butt” attitude fails to teach young women how to build strength of character and inner resources to overcome adversity in everyday life and to do it in a way that is more complimentary to their feminine natures. Indeed, we will know that we have achieved equality when women are noted and praised for their unique brand of steadfast courage. Only then will we, as a society, mend the frayed fabric of modern life.

CULTURAL SANDS DO SHIFT

Women who exhibit the traditional characteristics, i.e., masculine characteristics of courage, are seen as aggressive, overbearing, and unladylike – traits heavily discouraged. Even today, certain cultural and religious beliefs forbid women from displaying this type of courage. In some societies, women must worry about their very presence causing discord among peers, family members, or religious leaders. The prohibitions against speaking up are so strong that some feel uncomfortable when speaking out woman-to-woman against injustice.

Given the common understanding that men are more inclined to be courageous and women are more likely to be docile, many women remain reluctant to expose their own potent individual courage. The courageous acts of women like Joan of Arc, who was burned at the stake in the fifteenth

century for her beliefs and her zeal, seem extraordinary. Every culture subtly teaches women to make choices consistent with the norms of the day, and most contemporary cultures extol silence and passivity as feminine virtues. As for Joan of Arc, the lesson her story teaches, if we do not dive below the surface, is that strong women get burned.

Challenging the long-held myths of the past is the first step to shifting cultural norms. To courageously question such myths is to crack the silence that has kept women in denial of their finest strengths. Women everywhere are rising up as they see these myths for what they are. In time, society will recognize women's collective courageous acts and banish the unwritten rules that keep women from realizing their personal courage. But changes in myths and realities go hand in hand with behavioral changes in our lives. That is why it is so important to refashion our own scripts and the images that clutter our minds. By doing that, we can courageously reclaim the female creative power.

The challenges of today do not require a metal shield like the one used by Xena, Warrior Princess. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we have always had our own courage. Nurtured within, that personal strength becomes an invisible shield for the heart and spirit of every woman.

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