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# Introduction

## 🌀 The Divine Demand 🌀

**S**peak and write!” the voice from Heaven commanded.

But Hildegard of Bingen, medieval visionary nun, remained silent.

Hildegard was forty-three years old when her visions finally became so insistent that she could no longer contain the secret she had harbored since early childhood: the Holy One, identifying itself as “the Living Light,” spoke to her. It spoke to her regularly, its voice emerging from a swirl of spiraling light. It taught her the mysteries of the universe in stunning detail and with absolute clarity.

“Oh mortal, who receives these things not in the turbulence of deception but in the purity of simplicity for making plain the things that are hidden,” the Holy One said that day in 1141, “write what you see and hear.”

It was not doubt that held her back, Hildegard assures us. The voice carried such authority that she was convinced its origin was divine. It was not a case of low self-esteem either, she says, nor a matter of worrying what other people might think. It was, she tells us, simple humility. Who was she, an uneducated woman, to proclaim God's message to humanity?

But her refusal to cooperate with the divine demand almost killed her. Hildegard reports that she "fell onto a bed of sickness." The more she resisted, the more seriously ill she became. "Until at last," she writes in her introduction to the *Scivias*, the first chronicle of her visions, "compelled by many infirmities . . . I set my hand to writing . . . and rose from my sickness with renewed strength."

## Speaking Our Truth



What is the secret wisdom we each hold hidden in our hearts? What would happen if we rose up and shook off the limitations of our circumstances and spoke in the divine voice that has been whispering to us as long as we can remember? What if we allowed ourselves to become still enough to really hear the inner wisdom that is our birthright? What if we simply gave ourselves permission to listen?

Maybe in small ways the heavens would open up and reveal their secrets. Maybe light would pour through the cracks in our fragmented selves and we would become whole again, capable of bringing others into wholeness. Maybe we would remember what we came to this earth knowing and then forgot again, the perennial wisdom that, carried by the natural rhythms of our humanness, we have forgotten and remembered over and over.

Maybe by now life has brought us to our knees and we realize we have nothing left to lose by speaking the truth.

We are not all prophets. It may not be our job to challenge authority and expose corruption. We may not be the ones to penetrate the code of sacred scriptures and feed the spiritually hungry. It may be up to others to sound the clarion call of impending doom, calling on humanity to change its ways.

Ours may be a modest awakening. We may simply refuse to participate for another moment in a life against which our hearts have been crying out for years.

It could be time to observe some version of the commandment to “keep the Sabbath holy” and begin to cultivate a daily contemplative practice. It could become imperative to curtail a pattern of overconsumption and make a concrete commitment to voluntary simplicity. It could be a matter of identifying the subtle and insidious ways in which we participate in a culture of war and take a vow of

nonviolence in everything we do, in every relationship we forge and maintain.

Nearly a millennium after her death, Hildegard of Bingen teaches us to proclaim in the world what we see and hear in our innermost beings. If not, she warns, we will die. Our refusal to speak our inner truth may not cause physical illness, but it deadens the spirit. It is a rejection of grace. It is not only a waste, but a spiritual crime.

Have we longed to paint or sculpt the beauty that swirls behind our closed eyes but have been waiting for the last child to graduate from college before we allow ourselves to create art? Do we only make a joyful noise unto the Lord while singing along with the radio in the car, hiding our unique sound from the rest of humanity?


Are we pretending that we are not as beautiful or as wise, as powerful or as loving as we have always suspected we might be for fear of threatening the egos of the people around us? Can we afford one more family gathering in which a patriarch

blithely justifies “collateral damage” and we opt not to rock the boat by speaking out against imperialism?

Speak out, Hildegard says. And when you do, when you recognize that inner voice as the voice of God and say what it has taught you, the sickness in your heart will melt away. The fatigue you have lived with for so long that you did not even notice how weary you were will lift. Your voice will ring out with such clarity and beauty that you will not be able to stop singing. To speak your truth, Hildegard teaches us, is to praise God.

Praise God with all your heart.

## 🌀 The Living Light 🌀

 In September 17, 1179, two streams of light crossed in the sky over the cell where Hildegard of Bingen lay dying. She was eighty years old and had spent the second half of her life obeying the divine voice that issued forth from what she

came to know as the Living Light. Obedience to this voice had extracted a terrible price at times, but it had also brought great bounty to the table of humanity.

Through Hildegard, the Living Light revealed the intricate order of the cosmos, delineated the laws by which it operates, and charged humanity with the task of tending all creation with loving care.

The Living Light issued warnings to humankind. Be merciful, it admonished world rulers. Be kind to all living creatures, it reminded ordinary people, God's chosen stewards. Honor your husbands and wives, encourage your children to play, pay attention to the cycles of all things green and growing. Cultivate life and it will sustain you.

The Living Light taught Hildegard the healing properties of minerals and crystals. She learned how certain herbs are toxic when ingested raw but purify the blood when eaten as boiled greens. She cataloged the details of her knowledge in precise compendia and applied the fruits of her



experiments in a clinic continuously filled with the ill and the broken. She treated nightmares and cancer, poor memory and rotten teeth. She eased the pain of menstrual cramps and resolved the complications of difficult births.

Hildegard heard celestial songs emanating from the Living Light and she understood that, just as God brings together the majesty of the soul and the pleasures of the body through sexual intimacy, he also gives us music as a way of experiencing the grace of his glory inside the vessel of our physical beings.

She recorded the sacred sounds she heard, notating each strand, specifying the particular ways in which they overlapped and melded. She taught these divine compositions to her sisters and brothers, who taught them to subsequent generations, so that we are still singing the songs Hildegard learned from the Living Light.

Hildegard documented every encounter she had with the Living Light in elaborate

illuminations, from the first vision that broke through her prophetic resistance to the cosmic wheel she saw in one of her final encounters. Each color had metaphysical meaning. The number of wings on an angelic form described its special function. The balance of male and female; the position of certain animals; the proportions of light and dark, of density and empty space; all of these were illuminated.

Prophet, scientist, healer, social critic, playwright, theologian, cosmologist, psychotherapist, composer, artist, reformer, and preacher, Hildegard of Bingen was a living instrument of the Living Light, manifesting the divine name in every facet of the human experience.

## ❧ The Tithes ❧

Summer, 1098.  
*And the tenth child of ten children shall be the gift you offer back to the One who has given so abundantly to you.*

Everyone knew the ancient Rhineland custom, yet Mechthilde, Hildegard's noble mother, wished she didn't. Still, Hildegard was not a child you could hold onto. It didn't take long for her to show signs that she was not designed for an ordinary life.

Sometimes pain would wash through the little girl's brain and obliterate all but a vivid picture of events to come. When she recovered, Hildegard would rush to report the information she had received to the adults in her household. The fear on their faces confused her at first, then quickly taught her to keep her experiences to herself.

When she was eight years old, Hildegard was sent to live with the anchoress Jutta, a distant cousin who lived as a holy hermit. Jutta, too, came from a noble lineage, but had renounced the world, embracing a life of simplicity and contemplation. Although women were barred from formal education, the anchoress knew enough Latin to teach her protégé how to read holy books and chant the divine hours.

Hildegard tipped the cup of the religious life to her lips and drank as if she had been dying of thirst. She quickly surpassed her teacher in her ability to read and write Latin and she studied every text she could find. She learned to play music, spin cloth, and cultivate crops. She memorized Biblical history, liturgical prayers, and the Rule of St. Benedict. When she was eighteen, she took the habit. No one protested. It was destiny.

Meanwhile, Jutta was developing a reputation for sanctity. Pilgrims began to make their way to her remote hermitage, seeking spiritual guidance. Eventually, Jutta found herself at the head of a small circle of sisters that had sprung up like a flower in the garden of the enclosed monastery of Disibodenberg. In 1136, Jutta died, leaving her most beloved student in charge.

True to the prophetic lineage, Hildegard tried for decades to build a fortress against the divine message she was receiving. As with Moses and Daniel, Deborah and Judith, God had to call her name three times before