

WILD MERCY

*Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom
of the Women Mystics*

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INTRODUCTION

opening

There is a secret fiesta going on in a wildwood, and you are invited. This party has been unfolding for millennia. Its hosts are women mystics from all branches of the soul family: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and every indigenous wisdom way. Its guests include anyone whose heart has ever yearned for union with the Beloved and the alleviation of suffering for all sentient beings. Which means YOU.

The gathering is secret simply because, historically, for wise women to gather openly has been to risk death. It's not that they have been afraid to die, but rather they have known in every muscle fiber that they must protect themselves because their knowledge is needed. Their love and clarity and beauty are profoundly, urgently needed. And so they have gone about in disguise, sprinkling party invitations in the public square, waiting to receive us when we come. They wait patiently, but they are excited.

Come. Feast on the mercy of Quan Yin and the compassion of Tara, the brilliance of Sophia and the shelter of the Shekinah. Break the bread of courageous prophet Mother Mary and dip it in the spicy oils of holy daughter Fatima. Drink yourself into a swoon

with the songs of the ecstatic bhakti poet Mirabai and then sober up with the rigorous brilliance of Saint Teresa of Ávila. Dance your ass off with the fierce goddess Kali and her majestic sister Durga. Roll down into the boundless Valley of the Tao. Take refuge in the jewels of the Buddha-as-Woman, in the dharma as taught by women, in the sangha that gathers together a circle of wild and welcoming women.

You don't have to be female yourself to walk through these gates. Men are welcome here. You just don't get to boss us around or grab our breasts or solve our problems. You may sample our cooking and wash it down with our champagne. You may ask us to dance, and you may not pout if we decline. You may study our texts, ponder our most provocative questions. You may fall in our laps and weep if you feel the urge. We will soothe you, as we always have. And then we will send you back to the city with your pockets full of seeds to plant in the middle of it all.

The secret is out. The celebration is overflowing its banks. The joy is becoming too great to contain. The pain has grown too urgent to ignore. The earth is cracking open, and the women are rising from our hiding places and spilling onto the streets, lifting the suffering into our arms, demanding justice from the tyrants, pushing on the patriarchy and activating a paradigm shift such as the world has never seen.

Beyond Religion

Women do not always feel comfy inside traditional religious institutions. That's probably because the architecture of the world's organized religions and the furniture with which they are appointed have been designed largely by and for men. These structures are built to fit and uphold a male-dominated

paradigm. Such boy-shaped arrangements no longer preclude a place at the table for women who wish to sit there, however. Across the faith traditions women are being initiated, ordained, and sanctioned as rabbis and acharyas, priests and priestesses, ministers and murshidas, lamas and shamans. We are disrupting the balance of power and reorganizing the conversation. Increasing numbers of men, secure in their positions of privilege and authority, are voluntarily abdicating their power and handing it over to women, calling God “she” from the pulpit, seeding the academy with female philosophers. The alienation of the feminine is as obvious to them—and as perilous—as it is to the women who have been historically excluded from positions of leadership.

Many of us, however, are not even interested in being invited to join the fraternity. It’s not a matter of wanting to storm the gates of the male-dominated religions and take back what we consider to be rightfully ours. We have no desire to wear the mantle of the king. We’d rather take off all such coverings and go about naked. Replace the crown of jewels with a crown of daisies. Praise one another’s beauty and wisdom and build fires to keep one another warm. We would much rather be undefined than ordained in traditions that don’t fit our curves.

This does not mean that we see religion as a waste of time. Far from it! What we see is that the world’s great wisdom traditions are like a giant garden of the spirit, every flower and weed, each tree and species of blooming grass a unique and glorious example of the Beloved’s beauty. Like bees, we draw nectar from them all. We cross-pollinate, helping to propagate and support a more robust and resilient ecosphere. And, like bees, we are fully capable of discerning between life-giving nectar and noxious dreck. We know better than to drink the poison. Teachings of love and compassion: nectar. Messages that otherize and extol violence: toxic. We gather what is best and take it back to the Queen Bee, the Source, who transforms it into

honey, a sweet and golden substance with which we nourish ourselves and feed the world.

While many of us feel suspicious of religious hierarchy and alienated by religious dogma, we are deeply drawn to the essence of the world's wisdom ways, and we find tastes of that elixir in the teachings of the mystics—especially the women mystics—of every spiritual tradition. If you are a woman who has been turned off by the established religious institutions but light up in the face of the ecstatic poetry of Mechthild of Magdeburg or Rabia of Basra, if you feel moved to nurture a personal relationship with Quan Yin or Kali, this book may be for you. If your heart is as likely to open at the feet of White Buffalo Calf Woman as at those of Our Lady of Guadalupe and you find wisdom in the teachings of the Qur'an as well as the Tao Te Ching, this journey in the footsteps of the women mystics across (and beyond) the landscape of the world's spiritual traditions is likely your journey.

My Surprise

I should probably tell you how I got this way. How I came to bow at the altars of so many different holy houses—all of them, really—and how it is I came to write this book.

First I will tell you what didn't happen. I didn't start off safely ensconced in a single religion from which I was eventually compelled to make my getaway. I am not a refugee from my ancestral Judaism, nor am I a recovering Catholic. My family was not evangelical, and I did not fall into the clutches of a cult. I was never ever taught to believe that one religion had all the answers and that the others were wrong (or worse, evil). No one ever told me I'd burn in hell for practicing yoga or chanting the Ninety-nine Names of Allah.

Rather, I was raised in the counterculture of the 1970s in a community that appreciated the wisdom of multiple spiritual paths, even as it rejected the divisive dogmas obscuring these

treasures. I grew up exposed to all of the major branches of Buddhism, from the windswept emptiness of Japanese Zen to the lush layers of Vajrayana, Buddhism's tantric path. In our family we honored Jesus as a great rabbi and consulted the I Ching, the Chinese book of divination, when we had to make important decisions. At any given time there might be a sadhu, a wandering holy man, from India at our kitchen table, sitting beside an indigenous elder from the Taos Pueblo of New Mexico. This was normal.

I was drawn to every single flavor of spirit food. Curiosity developed into passion and was seasoned with study. I encountered, embraced, and assimilated many of the world's great religions and found that I could comfortably accommodate them without them crashing into one another and waging war inside of me. I was shocked to discover when I set out into the world that not everybody was one of each. My adult life has been a matter of coming to grips with this troubling fact and doing what I can to mitigate it.

Men Are Not the Bad Guys

Because the balance of masculine and feminine has been so terribly out of whack in human history, it may be tempting for women to blame everything from sexual exploitation in the workplace to the looming climate catastrophe on men and to project our rage onto all members of the male half of the species. I am endeavoring to avoid this snare. Indigenous wisdom, modern psychology, and the lived experience of most humans have demonstrated that we all contain both feminine and masculine elements in our psyches, and they vary in degree at different phases of our lives and in response to changing conditions.

I see gender much the same way as I view religion. As humanity evolves, many of us locate ourselves on an ever-flowing gender spectrum—as women who lead with certain masculine impulses, for instance, and men whose feminine sensibilities are

pronounced. The contemporary interspiritual movement, too, is a natural response to a range of human expressions of the sacred. Confining ourselves to a binary gender identity (individuals who claim to be either male or female) or an exclusive religious tribe (Christianity, Buddhism, Wicca) no longer feels valid to many of us.

And yet there are jewels in each of the world's great spiritual traditions that are worthy of safekeeping. Similarly, there is a healing elixir in the feminine experience that has been historically relegated to the fringes and that I believe the human family is ready to reclaim at last. With its emphasis on the value of relationships, feelings, and mutual empowerment over individual success and empirical argument, I believe in the healing energy of the feminine as a fire that can melt the frozen heart of the world, the artistry that will mend the tattered web of interconnection.

Tapestry

Here's how I have built this book: Each chapter of *Wild Mercy* is a tapestry of my favorite teachings from women of wisdom of the past and present, interwoven with my own reflections and personal stories and ending with a suggested practice—often, but not always, a writing prompt—so that you can integrate the topic at hand with your own experience. Because of my love for haiku, I open each chapter with a three-line poem, crafted in the traditional five-seven-five-syllable structure, to serve as a distilled essence of that theme. Each chapter focuses on a particular station of the women's wisdom journey, such as navigating heartbreak or walking the path of creative self-expression. To illumine each topic, I have selected certain mystics, goddesses, contemporary teachers, and seekers from a vast array of possible exemplars. I could easily have included dozens of others and have allowed my particular intimacy with each one to guide many of my choices.

It is my hope that you, like I, will find yourself shining from the luminous mirror of these wisdom beings. That you will identify with their struggles and be encouraged by their breakthroughs. That you will forge living relationships with them as your ancestors and guides, draw on their power, embody their essential qualities. It is my prayer that together we will welcome the wisdom of women back into the collective field, where it may help to transform the human family and heal the ravaged earth.

This book is more than a book. It is an invitation. We are making a flying carpet here to carry us through our lives as contemporary mystics masquerading as ordinary people—people who hear the call both to turn inward and to step up, to cultivate a contemplative life and to offer the fruits in service. Thanks to an array of wise and wild women and a few goddesses, the way is flooded in light, even—perhaps especially—when our eyes perceive it as dark.

Enter the garden
Where walls melt and trees blossom
Vibrant quietude





TURNING INWARD

Cultivating Contemplative Life

opening

Contemplative life flows in a circular pattern: awe provokes introspection, which invokes awe.

Maybe you're making dinner and you step outside to snip chives from the kitchen garden just as the harvest moon is rising over the eastern slopes. She is full and golden, like one of those pregnant women who radiate from within. Suddenly you cannot bear the beauty. Scissors suspended in your hand, tears pooling at the corners of your eyes, you nearly quit breathing. Your gaze softens, and the edges of your individual identity fade. You are absorbed into the heart of the moon. It feels natural, and there is no other place you'd rather be. But the onions are burning, and so you turn away and cut your herbs and go back inside. You resume stirring the sauce and setting the table.

This is not the first time you have disappeared into something beautiful. You have experienced the unfettering of the subject-object distinction while holding your daughter's hand as she labored to give birth to your grandson; when you curled up in bed

with your dying friend and sang her Haskiveinu, the Hebrew prayer for a peaceful sleep; while yielding to your lover's lips. You have lost yourself in heartbreak, then lost the desire to ever regain yourself, then lost your fear of death. You long ago relinquished your need for cosmic order and personal control. You welcome unknowingness.

Which is why seemingly ordinary moments like moonrises and lovemaking undo you. The veil has been pulled back. Everything feels inexhaustibly holy. This is not what they taught you in the church of your childhood. Your soul has been formed in the forge of life's losses, galvanized in the crucible of community, fertilized by the rain of relationship, blessed by your intimacy with Mother Earth. You have glimpsed the face of the Divine where you least expected it.

And this is why you cultivate contemplative practice. The more you intentionally turn inward, the more available the sacred becomes. When you sit in silence and turn your gaze toward the Holy Mystery you once called God, the Mystery follows you back out into the world. When you walk with a purposeful focus on breath and birdsong, your breathing and the twitter of the chickadee reveal themselves as a miracle. When you eat your burrito mindfully, gratitude for every step that led to the perfect combination of beans and cheese and tortilla—from grain and sunlight to rain and migrant labor—fills your heart and renders you even more inclined to be grateful.

So you sit down to meditate not only because it helps you to find rest in the arms of the formless Beloved but also because it increases your chances of being stunned by beauty when you get back up. Encounters with the sacred that radiate from the core of the ordinary embolden you to cultivate stillness