

SageWoman

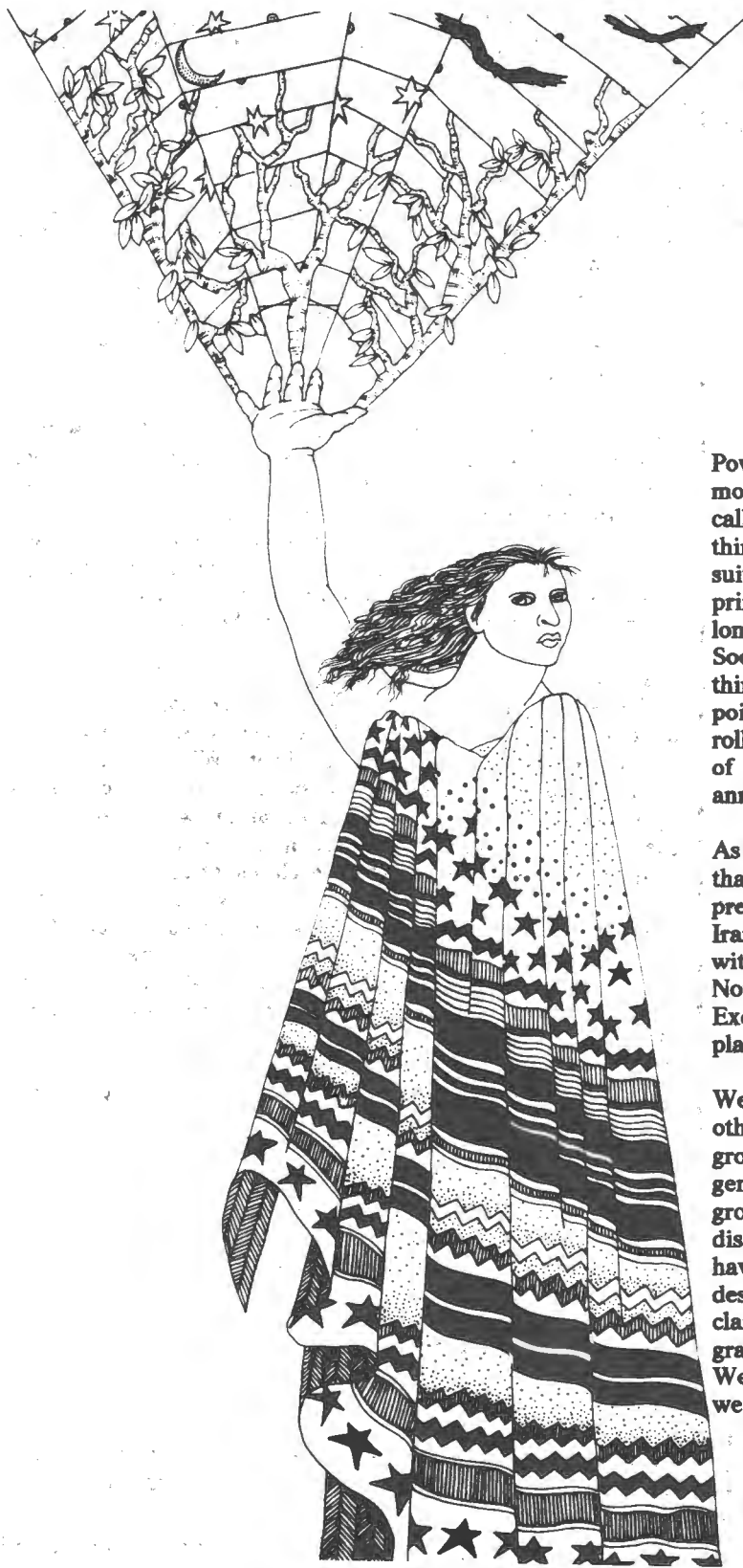
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Theme: "Power"

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Power

By Joanna Macy

from a talk given at

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Power -- that's what I want to reflect upon with you this morning. The power that is in us is not what folks "out there" call power. It is not what society is telling us power is. People think they know what power looks like: big offices, executive suites, high up, air conditioned, banks of secretaries, computer printouts. They think it's top level meetings and limousines as long as a block and photos flashing and top secret documents. Society thinks power is classified reports, and secrecy. They think power is huge factories belching smoke and belching poisons, cranking out the missiles and the rockets -- rockets rolling through Red Square and missiles through the cornfields of Kansas. Missiles cruising under the Arctic ice ready to annihilate the world in a minute -- they think that's power.

As we get a little closer to that kind of power, we begin to see that no one is in control. This whole concept of power is predicated on control, but who's in charge? Look at the Iran/Contra hearings -- the best excuse they could come up with is that nobody knew what anybody was doing. Oliver North must have felt he was very powerful, sitting there in the Executive Office Building, pulling strings and spinning secret plans.

We think we've got a nation so powerful that we can control other countries, that we can indebt them to us. Instead of growing food for themselves, the way they have for generations and centuries, we can get them off their land to grow commodities for us. Why do you think the rainforest is disappearing in the Amazon? It's because peasants and laborers have been pushed off their land and they're going in desperation to the rainforest, slashing and burning to make a claim. Our corporations are in there, too, cutting trees to graze cattle to make our burgers. And we think that's power. We flex our muscles. But unless that stops within a generation, we simply won't have oxygen left to breathe.

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We think that we're so powerful that we can dump on Third World countries the pesticides we've found are too dangerous for us. So we ship the poisons off to the same countries that we get to grow our food. And what do we drink for breakfast? Coffee and juice, with the very chemicals circling back to us. That's karma for you!

We think we're so powerful that we can just get rid of what we don't want, so we dump 60,000 tons of plutonium waste off the Farallone Islands. And then find the surf is radioactive down to Baja California. We put 3000 tons of garbage on a barge to take somewhere else. But nobody else wants it, and after 6 weeks at sea it comes back home to New Jersey. We think we're so powerful with our nuclear warheads, we can threaten our enemies with instant incineration. And then we find that it's our own children who are terrified, who have lost the simple assurance of a future. The rates of drug abuse and suicide among teenagers and even children show us whom we're really threatening when we use that kind of power.

So, when we get close to that notion of power, we feel like Dorothy when she walked into the hall of the great Wizard of Oz. She walked over and pulled a curtain, and there was this little guy pulling levers and talking into a mouthpiece. She discovered that it's an illusion. That kind of power is an illusion. The illusion is that you can be separate. The illusion is that you can control from the top down. The illusion is that you can constrict the area of your interest to just what you can control, and banish what you don't want to deal with. The illusion is that it's a win/lose game: that some can win if others lose. The illusion is that there is a private salvation. That you can take care of yourself without taking care of the others. The illusion is that you can poison or threaten or kill others without devastating yourself.

It is our wonderful destiny to be alive at a time when this kind of illusory power is being unmasked. There is an extraordinary revolution occurring in our understanding of what power is. I think that's the major cognitive revolution of our time. We need to understand it, because some people, seeing the abuses of the old kind of power, conclude that power in itself is bad; they don't want to have anything to do with power. But that's because they don't understand what power really is.

So, what is real power? Who is going to tell us what real power is? Who can show us a power that doesn't try to separate, that doesn't try to intimidate, that doesn't try to win, that doesn't try to control?

Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna...

And that means that the one who can tell us what real power is, is in us, too. Her names are manifold. Let us look at the names that She wears and the powers that She teaches...

First is the power to see. The power to look at what is going on. Now, that takes a lot of spunk and determination, because our society is geared to keep us from seeing what is going on. It glues us to the diversions of television, it provides us with politicians that tell us everything is okay. What do you think elected Ronald Reagan? His reassurance that Big Daddy's there and things aren't as bad as somehow we may think, that we don't need to look upon or open our hearts to the suffering and devastation of our world, because Big Daddy's going to take care of that. But it's getting harder to close our eyes to what is

happening, and so the efforts to persuade us that things are okay become more desperate. Whole industries are devoted to persuading us that we are happy, or just about to be happy, if only we buy that toothpaste or that underarm deodorant or that politician. It is not in the interest of the state or the multinational corporations, or the media which serve them, for us to see the devastation of our world and the suffering of our brothers and sisters. Enormous resources are being devoted to the numbing of the American psyche. So, to see...simply to see...is very powerful. And when we do that, who is looking?

In the Buddhist tradition, she is called Tara. She sees so well - she has an eye in her forehead, she has an eye in the palm of each hand, and eye in each foot. She sees, she sees...Instead of sitting there with both legs tucked up, in the lotus posture, one leg is down already: she's ready to act, she's ready to move. To be able to see is subversive, like the little boy who saw the emperor going by in his new clothes. It's very subversive, to let the scales fall from your eyes and look around.

Next there is the power to go down, to descend. Now, several thousand years of the patriarchy have told us that what we need to do is climb, up Jacob's ladder, up to the Olympian heights, up to the realms of spirituality and sanctity. Up above body, up above nature. But, we know what healing requires. There can be no healing without contact. No healing until one can go down and touch. That means going where you don't want to go sometimes. Down into the dark, into the bowels.

Inanna knew that. She so loved life -- the first Sumerian tablets sang of her love for Damuzi, her consort. Such songs of love and relish for life, and yet she knew she had to go down. She didn't even try to explain it. With her crown and her robe and her scepter, she went down. She went down alone - you can only go down alone. You can know your sisters are there supporting you, but a part of the scariness is that the shape of the dark is different for each one of us. You've got to go down to reclaim that. Inanna went down, and at each gate she had to relinquish that which gave her a sense of herself and of her security. One after another, she surrendered her crown, her robe, her royal slippers, until at the last, totally naked, stripped, she faced her dark sister, Erishkegal. And her sister took her body and hung it up on a hook.

I said we had to do it alone -- that's wrong, actually. Inanna goes with us.

(Rashani leads the group in song:)

I am the daughter of the ancient Mother,
I am the child of the Mother of the World.
I am your daughter, O ancient Mother,
I am your child, O Mother of the World.
O Inanna, O Inanna, O Inanna,
It is you who teaches us,
To die, be reborn, and rise again,
Die, be reborn, and rise.

When you go down, that's Inanna that you're being. Her courage in each one of us, there for us to claim and use.

People say, "Don't talk to me about the arms race or about acid rain -- because there's nothing I can do about it. Those of you who have done any organizing, any canvassing or phoning on nuclear, environmental, or social justice issues, know this common response. "Oh, I don't think about it because there is nothing I can do about it." It's very interesting -- see the

double self-victimization: I'm so powerless, not only can't I act, I'm so powerless I can't even think about it. "Don't ask me to think about it -- don't ask me to take it in, what we're doing to our world. If I were to experience that, if I were to allow myself to feel, I wouldn't be able to get up in the morning. Look, I've got a job I've got to maintain, I've got a family to support! I've got to know which shoe to put on which foot when I get up in the morning! If I were to let myself really take in what is happening to our world, I'd fall apart. I might disintegrate."

And the Goddess, in her form as **Kali**, says, It's all right to fall apart. We see her in her wild dance with the skulls around her neck and her fangs dripping blood, a wild dance of rage and life recycling, a wild dance of dismemberment. Because, as the system scientists tell us, all open systems have to let go of old forms in order to reorganize. That's how power works, through the dismembering of old forms, so they can reintegrate at a higher level. Kali knows that in her dance, and the Goddess in us says, Don't be afraid of falling apart. That is the power of positive disintegration.

With the notion of power that we've had in our culture people thought that to be powerful, to be successful, we must be in possession of ourselves. Be cool, poised, contained, composed. Ah, but the earth inhabits our bodies. If we are alive, truly alive, in this time, there boils up from within a rage - and it is the rage of **Demeter**. It is the rage of Demeter when she saw that Persephone, her daughter, the fruit of her womb and the womb of the future, had been raped and abducted. And it was NOT all right with her. The hell with being contained and composed and aloof! Demeter tore her hair and bellowed, and she walked in demented terrible fury across this earth, crying out, calling, calling for the lost one, the lost daughter -- Kore! Kore! Kore!

There was no rest and there was no peace until she found her. And when she did, Persephone was able to come up every year in the spring, to bring fertility for the summer and harvest for the fall. And so it will be for us. There will be no peace until the fertility of our land is assured again, that it may continue, that there will be other generations. Because it is NOT all right with us that our land is raped and our children poisoned! And there will be no business-as-usual until that stops.

There is a deep wisdom in us that knows that the old notion of power was illusory, precisely because it was built on wrong perceptions of the structure of reality itself. It is built on the notion that reality is composed of separate, independent entities. Entities that you can weigh and measure, that you can pit against each other. The deeper wisdom is the wisdom of the interconnectedness of all phenomena, of the web of life itself. When we open to that wisdom, when we see the elegantly balanced relationships and dynamic flow of reality itself, when we put the concepts into words and teachings so we can ground our actions in the understanding, who is it? It is **Sophia**, Wisdom, and she is with us and in us now...

In the Buddhist tradition, arising at the same time as Sophia was being recognized in the Mediterranean basin, She took another name, **Prajnaparamita**, the Perfection of Wisdom. She arose in Asia just at the time when certain schools of Buddhist monks, in a typically patriarchal and reductionist fashion, got to analysing reality down into tiny little dharmas -- or separate empirical units. They were getting very systematic and scholastic about it, and hierarchical, too, putting nirvana

above and beyond phenomenal reality, outside the web of life, so that the goal of spiritual practice became escape from material experience. **Prajnaparamita**, the Mother of All Buddhas -- yes, that is what she is called in the texts, the Mother of All Buddhas -- turned the tables on them. With a hefty spank she reminded them, and us, that everything, all dharmas, are interdependent, interwoven, empty of separate self-existence. The texts that celebrate her also introduced a new vision of ourselves and a new model of courage and heroism: the bodhisattva. They tell us we can all be bodhisattvas, committed to the transformation inherent in all life, "coursing in the deep space of Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom."

When we stand up to nuclear reactors or Love Canals or arms shipments to the Contras, when we stand up to the petty martinets, to those parading in power, we can say no, not with just our own rage and authority but with the authority of four and a half billion years of evolving life in our planet. We are that old, for each one of us goes right back to the beginning of time. Each atom in your body was present at the first splitting and spinning of the stars. And when you know that, you are **Gaia**. It is Gaia, the Great Earth Goddess, who is knowing that through you. We can speak with her authority. We can let her power flow through us.

Why do you think you were born in this time? Did you think it was a misfortune that you were born in a time with so much suffering? When it looks like our species is preparing to incinerate itself? No, You were born to say with Gaia, Life will go on. It's going to go on through the wisdom that gave you your body. You can trust it.

In that long story, as we look back on our vast journey through time, there are many dyings, dying to old forms. In our life in this planet, we have died many times. So we know the power of surrender, letting go of what doesn't work anymore. Letting go of what we don't need anymore. We don't need to be obsessed with the cruelties of the patriarchy. That's registered -- we know it. We don't have to be caught there like a rabbit in the headlights of the excesses of this top-down, power-over system. It's time to move on, sisters.

Because the Goddess within us is a Goddess of change. She changes everything She touches, and everything She touches changes...

And she is imminent in us. She has not abandoned us. The theologians, when I went to seminary, were discovering that God is dead. Maybe the Papa God up there is dead, but **the Goddess is alive**, and She is in you and in me. Everything I've been saying, you know already, because the Goddess is saying it to the Goddess -- the Goddess is remembering. The power of the Goddess in us includes the power to recognize Herself, too...

Open your awareness to the powers of courage and compassion, the powers of wisdom and wit, of patience and endurance, of ingenuity and creativity, of anger and glee. The power in each other's power, the power that is win/win, the power that is synergy, the power that is joy in each other's joy, the power that is endless...

Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna, Sophia, Tara, Prajnaparamita... There is another name of the Goddess. Say your own name.