

## God/dess

by

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He awakened the way he usually did, gently. Richard, one of his three marmalade cats, was on the pillow beside him, running his right front paw through his hair. That meant that Richard wanted him to put his hands out from under the covers so that the cat could lick them. He was constantly amazed at the sensuousness of the cat's tongue on his hands. There were five cats living with him now. They were all strays, usually dumped off by people from the city who didn't want them any more. He stretched and smiled. He thanked Goddess for the gift of the day and immediately prayed for Bride that she might savour eternal life. He could never think of her as at eternal rest. She had been too dynamic for that.

Bride. Today it was exactly ten years and nine months since her death. He had always thought of it as her change of life. He had even had that inscribed on her memorial card. All that energy, all that dynamism, snuffed out so soon, too soon. That energy had to go on in some way. He wondered if there would ever be a day in his life when he didn't think of her. But he had decided long ago that he never really wanted to stop thinking of her. Why would he want to forget that unique, significant, unrepeatable gift that she had been to him?

He wondered what time it was. He put his eyes out from under the covers. The grow-light over the plants in the hallway outside the bedroom door had not gone on yet so it wasn't 4:30 a.m. It was probably closer to 4. He remembered how he had begun keeping these monastery-like hours which people in monasteries probably didn't even keep any more. It was the year after Bride's death when he had had a grueling timetable that kept him going from 8 a.m. when he usually arrived at the school where he taught, until 2:10 p.m. when his last class was finished. He used to head to the library then, to his friend Mark. He'd check out audio-visual resources, sometimes help with things that were physical, because his mind was so tired. It was an all boys' school and he thought momentarily of how many of those young men had come to him that year and for several after until he was transferred. They had come with all kinds of pain, all kinds of grief, and often all kinds of joys. He remembered lunch hours, preparation periods given over to them, in sometimes wearying, sometimes joyful, informal kinds of counseling sessions.

That was when he got into the habit of going to bed early and getting up with the sun the next day to mark papers, make lesson plans, think, do some reading for himself, sometimes watch something he had taped. He remembered how grateful he was when the VCR had become available. Then he prayed for those whom he loved most who were still in the flesh and for all with whom he would be associated that day. He asked Goddess to help him to want what She wanted, and that She might want what he wanted. He prayed that together they might make it happen and that in the process he would be as intelligent and loving as She was.

He began to ease himself out of bed and then he remembered. Today was the day he had the interview with the parish priestess. It was at 4:00 p.m., after her nap, of course. He had been putting it off for too long. He really didn't want to do it now. But all those nights, before his marriage to Bride, during it, since her death, all those nights of waking up after four or five hours of sleep and feeling that somehow Goddess was asking him to keep vigil with Her. Increasingly, he had come to feel that his impending retirement from teaching was providing him with the opportunity to be Her priestess, that that was what She wanted. But how was the ecclesiastical matriarchy going to handle that? How was the parish priestess going to handle that? She was 32, a priestess for eight years, and now in charge of the parish. He was 56, finishing a Ph.D. in religious studies, and bringing to an end a reasonably successful secondary school teaching career. It was his second career. His working in business before the teaching seemed very, very long ago. Here he was thinking of a third career.

As he made his coffee he mused that perhaps he knew too much. He knew enough church history, for example, to know that the Popessa Gelesia in the fifth century was the one who had finally and firmly prohibited the ordination of men to be deaconesses or priestesses. A scholar had recently uncovered a letter of hers telling the bishops in the south of Italy to stop ordaining men. He was sure that he would be told by the parish priestess that since Jesusina had ordained only women there could be no question of ordaining men to be priestesses. And what's more, the present Holy Mother had recently once again explicitly prohibited even the discussion of male ordination. He knew that the real question that had to be faced eventually was if Jesusina had ordained anybody! "How long, O Lady, how long?" he found himself praying while the water boiled. Some of his best friends were women, but how could a female celibate hierarchy represent well all who were members of the Roman Catholic Church? About 99.5% of the laity were married and half of them were men. He thought, too, about the priestesses, some of the brightest and the best, who had left after Vatican Council II and had married and would be happy to serve the Catholic Church as married priestesses. Would there ever be priests? It could happen,

surely, but it wasn't happening.

He took his coffee outside to drink on the road side deck, which was 300 feet from the main entrance. He thought about how the house really didn't have a front or a back so he and Bride had agreed to refer to the road side and the bush side of the house. It was a sweet summer day. The sky in the east was starting to redden. There was the smell of jasmine everywhere. It couldn't be jasmine but he smelled it every summer. It was his summer holiday now. One of his colleagues had a sign over his desk at school that read "The two best reasons for being a teacher are July and August." He knew he wasn't that cynical but it did help to have this extended holiday.

He loved this cedar house in the bush which he and Bride had designed and built, much of it by themselves. "Cities offer too many distractions," Bride had said. She had grown up on a small farm. He was city born and bred. He had hated it here that first five months they lived in the house, and then it began to work on him, the naturalness of the setting, feet on the earth instead of cement. Most especially, he saw the stars really for the first time. In the country, there was no dimming of them by artificial lights. Now, in the middle of August he also remembered that first Christmas they had been here and awakened to soft wet snow all over everything and he had stood at the window looking out at the snow and said, with Bride at his side, "I love, O Lady, the beauty of your house, the place where your glory dwells". He remembered reading somewhere that Thomasina Aquinas had once made a gloss of "house" and said it was better translated "universe." Until then, he thought it meant a church building. He remembered now as he had then, that he wasn't sure if the "Lady" he was blessing was Goddess or Bride. Probably it was a bit of both.

He put the coffee cup down and prayed, if that was what it was. He had gotten into the habit of putting himself into the presence of Goddess and breathing slowly. He tried to savour Her company the way he had once savored Bride's across the living room, or the kitchen table, or on the drive to work each morning. He remembered how he would look up from his reading or from watching television and just be overwhelmed with joy being in Bride's presence.

They didn't have to speak a word. He had experienced Beauty, Truth, and Goodness in Bride. He yearned to feel that Goddess was his Infinite, Infallible Associate, as he had once felt that way about Bride. Not that he had taken Goddess for granted when Bride was in the flesh. He had thanked Her profoundly every day for the gift of his loving Bride and being loved by her. He thought of the strength that was his in their loving. It was almost as if the Divine fell through that experience, became incarnate in it. Was that part of what church leaders were afraid of if they ended mandatory celibacy of priestesses, the strength and courage that comes from loving and being loved? Were they afraid of losing control? People who love and are loved are free and self-determined, uninhibited by authority or opinion. But how to deal with the loss of the one who made all other losses bearable!

A peace and quiet overtook him eventually. He relaxed. He prayed the Buddhist prayers of loving kindness at the end of his breathing as he did every morning. He prayed for the peace, prosperity, and health of body, mind, and spirit of every human being. He prayed that all human beings would live their lives as thinking lovers and loving thinkers. He prayed for the happiness of all sentient beings and for rain and snow and sun enough for Mother Earth, and that all who lived on Her might love Her. And he ended as he always did with the plea to Goddess that "If during this day, I cannot, You must. I am Yours."

After breakfast, he went out to the flowers. He liked working on them in the early morning before the heat of the day. There were all kinds of perennials. He weeded a bit, watered a bit. He had taken to growing miniature roses since Bride's death. She had preached "Small is beautiful" to him with a passion. Perhaps the roses were his way of telling her he finally understood.

He came in from the garden, showered, shaved, and dressed. Sometimes he still wondered why. He thought of C.S. Lewis's observation after his wife's death that he could find no reason to shave anymore because there was no longer anyone to stroke his cheek. He had good friends, but... There had been a few women in his life since Bride, but.... He thought lovingly of the bishopess and priestess who had been his special friends before he knew Bride, during their marriage, and since. When he began to feel his own call to be a priestess, he had confided that conviction to his friend, the priestess. She had helped him with the celebration of Bride's life which many would have called a funeral. She had urged him to go over to the Anglicans. Some of them were now ordaining men, but his roots were Roman Catholic. It was his spiritual home.

He had taken Vatican Council II seriously. He set out long ago to end two Catholicisms, that of the ecclesiastics and *literati*, and those of the men and women in the pew. Now they were calling it People's Theology. He so often had intuitions and acted on them before he had words for the reality. He wanted to be a bridge between the two Catholic solitudes, forgetting that bridges get walked on, driven over, and sometimes blown up. He wanted to find some kind of peace within Roman Catholicism. He remembered the line from one of Morris West's books: "The Church. I hate it and I cannot leave it. I love it and I cannot live in peace within it." That was just about where he was, had been, for longer than he cared to remember.

He read for a bit, background information for his dissertation. He was writing about the need for a world faith if there was ever going to be a world community, or a world civilization. He was enjoying his work and learning what his mentor was calling the "dissertation genre." He did his low impact aerobic exercises before lunch. He was trying to impede degeneration of bone and connective tissue from osteoarthritis, fibrositis, and myositis. He took some time at the end of the exercises to do some yoga stretches to enhance relaxation. After lunch he went back to the books, and then worked on revisions of his chapters of the dissertation. At 3:30 he stopped, prayed again if that was what it was.

He wondered if he would be thinking differently about being a priestess if he and Bride had had biological children of their own. Before they met, they had already committed themselves to the children of others, she at the university level, and he in secondary school. He suspected that he would have even a greater sense of urgency than he did about the need for the Catholic Church to become more relevant to its time and place if he and Bride had had their own children.

And yet he wondered if it were possible, that he be could be more concerned than he was. Richard leaped into his lap, and he pulled himself up, gave Richard a hug, petted the other cats, and left for the interview with the priestess.

He rang the doorbell of the parish house and it was answered surprisingly quickly. The priestess was in full clerical regalia. He found himself rather amused. She ushered him into the office and sat down behind her desk and he almost felt he was expected to stand rather than sit but he did sit down, across from her. "Yes, my son," she began. He winced.

"I'd rather we think of each other as friends," he suggested. "Mother" stuck in his throat. "Well, there are the formalities," she ventured. He decided to get right to it.

"I want to be a priestess," he said, "I know that Goddess wants this of me, too. I am well trained, financially solvent, and I have made a reasonable success of my life. I am weary of the specious reasons being given for keeping me from being a priestess. It really boils down to the fact that I have a penis and you have a vagina and that's not enough reason to keep me from fulfilling a vocation that I know is mine." The blood had drained from her face.

"You know as well as I do that the Holy Mother has prohibited us from even discussing this issue. True, there are people like Bishopess Roberta Strongland who want discussion but Rome has spoken and that finishes the matter," the priestess remonstrated.

"It doesn't finish the matter," he persisted "Priestesses and sisters in North America have helped to make possible the best educated Catholic laity in the history of Christianity and you are asking us to leave our brains at the church door over these issues and others. You tell us that we can be brothers but it's not enough. Some of us really feel that our vocation is a Eucharistic one. It just will not do. It will not do. In an age when women held all the public offices and were the better educated of the sexes, this may have made sense. If Ignatia of Antioch had been less Roman in her thinking, men would be priestesses today. Men are increasingly showing that they are competent, too, but in different ways.

"Surely, in a church that preaches in theory equality of the sexes, the time for the ordination of men is ripe – unless we begin to deal with the real issue of whether or not we ought to be ordaining anyone at all!" He was furious with himself. He had promised himself to stay calm, not to raise his voice, to make his case rationally. "I had hoped you might understand."

"You know that the Canadian bishopesses made an excellent intervention about this at the 1990 Synod but Rome moves slowly."

"Rome does not move at all these days except backwards," he shouted. He knew it was over. "We need an episcopal conference, just one, that will ordain men. It cannot be an isolated bishopess because she will be crushed. In our herstory we looked to women as bishopesses who were married, who had successfully raised their families, who had had one husband. Why not think of the same now, as priestesses, but look to men as well as women for sacerdotal and episcopal offices? Would it be so terrible to have deacons as well as deaconesses, priests as well as priestesses, bishops as well as bishopesses? It is so simple. "

For just one moment the priestess let down her guard. "It's so simple, but it isn't easy." And then she was all clerical caste again. Did she have any real friends he wondered, or were they all only cronies, helping to keep the old girls' network intact, afraid that they would lose their personal identity without it? One older priestess whom he knew well once lamented to him. "They used to come to be priestesses in the 1960s with sandals on their feet and guitars over their shoulders. Now they arrive with watered silk for vestments under their left arm, and the sewing machine to make them under their right. "

He had regained control. He knew he had reinforced the stereotype of men as emotional and women as rational but he tried again. "Will you at least come with me to an interview with the bishopess? You know what I do here in the parish, what I am capable of contributing. At least a quarter of our Catholic parishes in the country

are without a priestess. Talk about a Eucharistic fast!"  
The lines on her face began to harden.

And then she said, "No."

"Why not?" he pleaded.

"It has been divinely revealed that Goddess is Mother and Jesusina is Daughter. And the Spirit is, well, the Spirit. There is simply no way around that. Like it or not we have to live with it."

"No, Mother," he said softly. "We will not live with it. We will die by it." He felt an overwhelming desire to comfort her. He took her hands and kissed her gently on both cheeks. She did not draw back. Her eyes filled with tears. His overflowed down his cheeks. He could taste the salt on his lips. He thanked her for her time and left.

Instead of going home immediately he drove to the nearby river. He walked along it weeping unashamedly. In his heart, he kept saying, "I cannot. You must. I am Yours." He thought about doing something really dramatic like going to a papal audience in Rome and throwing himself at the feet of the Holy Mother as St. Terrence of Lisieux had once done centuries ago, pleading to be admitted to the brotherhood before he was canonically old enough to do so. But now there was the popessamobile to contend with and the security guards. He gave that up as lost.

The water soothed and calmed him. It had always been that way. He decided that he liked rivers better than lakes or crashing surfs at oceans. Eventually he got into the car and drove the short distance to their home. He still thought of it as theirs. He thought of all the persons they had both welcomed to their home and of the open door policy that he still kept. This wonderful eleven acres of fragile bush, fifty years later still recovering from the bulldozers that took its wood during World War. He poured himself a large drink into the glass that said "Living well is the best revenge." He remembered the friend who had given him a set of them at the time of Bride's death. He chuckled remembering that it was an old Spanish proverb according to the glass. He had always thought it was Woody Allen.

He walked with his drink down the laneway toward the road and stopped at the persistence tree. He and Bride had first seen it many years ago. It had grown in a complete circle to get the light it needed for itself. She had stopped, pondered it, and then said, "Would that people had such persistence!" I need persistence now, Bride, he thought. I need it now.

He made his way around the house and then sat on the deck that was on the back bush side. It was from here that he often saw the deer come. When Bride was alive she had a kitchen garden, a huge one, and deer had their share of it. So did the raccoons. The garden was all grass now. Sometimes the children of friends played on it when they came to visit. From here he watched gray and black squirrels, and blue jays, and nuthatches, and chickadees, and wild canaries, and cardinals whom they had named "Ralph and Meggie" after the characters in the book "The Thornbirds."

He went back into the kitchen and poured himself another drink. Was this later life alcoholism he was dealing with? He hoped not. He found himself enjoying the drink. He remembered Bride flat out on her back on the deck one summer day, with her drink beside her, gazing up at the blue sky and the trees, savoring every ounce of beauty around her, Beauty itself. He had done that often the summer after she died, stretched out flat on the cedar deck, seeing things so differently from that angle. Trees took on whole new characters. The tears came again. "I cannot. You must. I am Yours."

He could hear Bride saying, "What's with all this cannot stuff? If you say you can, you can." Initially she had annoyed him with that insight. Finally he came to understand it. It was classic Buddhism, all about right thoughts. It was a lot like Jesusina's idea about the origins of lust, so badly understood by so many. Get the thoughts right, and the rest can follow. "I can, Bride. I can. But it was so much easier with you beside me helping to make it all happen."

He went to his desk in the library. He took up the letter from Bishop Robert Harris. He was the first man to be ordained bishop by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. He had written to Bishop Harris and told him about his vocation. There was a warm letter in return. Bishop Harris knew what it meant to push the matriarchy toward real justice, to want to end all kinds of discrimination. He would help and welcome any man from any Christian communion who felt Goddess was calling him to Her service, especially one so qualified as he was, the letter said. The bishop had good friends in the Anglican Church in Canada. He would happily do what he could there.

The man read and re-read the warm and inviting letter. He picked up a pencil to draft his letter requesting admission to the Protestant Episcopal Seminary. "I can Bride," he said aloud. "I not only can, but I must." Richard bounded into his lap, made himself very comfortable, and began to purr.