

# What Would the Goddess Do?

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I have to confess that like many of us I am left daunted by the scope of the problems being created by global climate change. Other than an occasional reference to the fact that there is a problem, I have never devoted an entire sermon to the eco-disaster we face. I can feel myself retreat into uncertainty about how to proceed even as I begin. What can I say that will make a difference? What can any of us do to save the planet? Rainforests, one of our best defences against rising CO2 levels, continue to be stripped away at an appalling rate, often for raising methane farting cattle. (That was fun. I never found an opportunity to say fart in church before.) Temperatures are climbing, contributing to the desertification of formerly habitable land. Rising sea levels are creating a new kind of refugee where countries are slowly being reclaimed by the ocean—an ocean we are killing with toxic chemicals and plastic rubbish. Never mind the poor polar bear, species are being made extinct even before we have discovered them. Super cyclones are wreaking havoc, killing large numbers and costing billions in property damage. My former home in California is in the grip of a crushing multiple-year-long drought contributing to wildfires and a reduction in food production. I could keep going, but that is more than enough to have all of us calling our doctor for anti-depression meds in lieu of being put on suicide watch.

The worst part of it for one who is of the gender cursed with a Y-chromosome, is that I want to fix it and fix it now. Not likely when I feel powerless and alone. Nor is it likely when it could be argued that the Y-chromosome is at the heart of the problem. Patriarchy, as reflected and supported in Judeo-Christian scripture, made it clear that there was nature and there was Man. Man was given power over creation. God made it for Man. He got to name all the animals as a clear sign of his domination over all that he surveyed. Yes, he was to be a good steward over it but that was before he discovered coal and oil, created fertiliser full of nitrogen and decided having a filet mignon was tastier than the garden salad on the side.

Clearly it is time to shift my perspective if I don't wish to perpetuate the problem. This got me wondering what it was like before Y-chromosomes took over. To find out we have to go back a long time before there were historical records, as we understand them. These prehistoric records were kept in gravesites and were found in the detritus left in our forebears' rubbish dumps that have been pored over by archaeologists and anthropologists.

Most currently accept the belief that modern humans originated in Africa about 200,000 to 250,000 years ago. For most of that time, less the last 8000 years, our ancestors organised themselves into hunter-gatherer societies. Humans alone had developed the realisation that their life was finite; that they would all die. This resulted in the development of primitive religious beliefs. Societies that relied mainly on hunting by men, naturally developed hunting gods to worship. Those centred on gathering by women generally created vegetative Goddesses. Because of the importance of fertility to survival, in crops, in domesticated animals, in wild animals and in the tribe itself, the Goddesses had primacy. The female life-giving principle was considered divine and a great mystery.

Many of these findings by archaeologists and historians are speculative in nature. For example, the interpretation that the old European culture stressed the female as divine is largely based on the number of carvings of a female shape found from this era. Some point to the relative lack of equivalent male statues as evidence of a Goddess culture. Others, who were probably dirty old men archaeologists, suggest that the female statues might have been the old European culture's equivalent of modern-day porn.

This “old European” culture lasted for tens of thousands of years in what is now Europe. What is not debated is that they generally lived in peace; there is a notable lack of defensive fortifications around their hamlets. As evidenced by their funeral customs, males and females appear to have had equal status. Many historians and archaeologists believe that their society was matrilineal and that children took their mothers’ names. Life was based on lunar (not solar) calendar. The moon was considered female and the sun male. Time was experienced as a repetitive cycle, not linearly as we think of it now.

Many academics believe that the suppression of Goddess worship in Western Europe occurred when the Indo-Europeans invaded Europe from the East. They brought with them some of the “refinements” of modern civilisation: the horse, war, belief in male Gods, exploitation of nature, knowledge of the male role in procreation, etc. Goddess worship was gradually combined with worship of male Gods to produce a variety of Pagan polytheistic religions among the Greeks, Romans, Celts, and others. With Christian patriarchy the Goddess was thoroughly suppressed. The Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, was to become an icon for the feminine, but she was not honoured for her fertility but for her sexual purity.

A renaissance of Paganism in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revived worship of the Goddess. Most Neo-pagan traditions worshipped the Goddess and God in balance. However, with the rise of feminism, new Neo-pagan traditions like Wicca have been created in which the Goddess grew in importance, and the role of the God shrank into obscurity.

The Goddess in both Goddess Worship and Neo-Paganism is often visualised in three aspects: Maiden, Mother and Crone. Her aspects are mirrored in the phases of the moon: waxing, full and waning.

The Maiden represents youth, emerging sexuality, the huntress running with her hounds. The Mother symbolizes feminine power, fertility, and nurturing. The Crone is wisdom, the compassion which comes from experience, and she is the one who guides us through the death experience. This Goddess has many names in many cultures but for today let’s call her the Earth Goddess or Mother Earth.

Since I’m not inclined to believe in either Gods or Goddesses, I consider the Earth Goddess as a way of speaking about earth-centred spirituality, as in, a heightened emotion from a significant experience with Nature. So, I’m asking today “What Would the Goddess Do?” in the face of our catastrophic destruction of the planet. But first we have to find her. One place to encounter the Goddess and her spirituality is in literature. Author Joann Hart wrote an essay on how to let the Goddess sneak into real-life characters, meaning us, the protagonists of our lives:

“When I was an impressionable 14 year-old, women were throwing off the shackles of patriarchy in the streets and in their homes, even in churches, chucking out any male god who lived on a cloud. Many turned to the Old Religion, governed by the Goddess, who once reigned over a peaceful, matrilineal world in harmony with Nature. Then, according to legend, the priests came, driving her and her followers underground where they were called witches, and thus began civilisation’s slide into constant war and ecological devastation.

“Women writers of the 70’s and early 80’s incorporated [the Goddess] into their novels. Marge Piercy, in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, wrote about an ideal society based on the assumed female principles of peace and love of the earth, set against a cautionary tale of continued male domination and its attendant disregard for the planet. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood created a dystopia of sexism and violence after men become infertile by a toxic event of their own making... Marion Zimmer Bradley retold the King Arthur myth in *The Mists of Avalon*, making the goddess worshipper the heroine and not the villain. Jean Auel, in the *Clan of the Cave Bear* series, placed the goddess plunk in the centre of the Stone Age.

“By the mid-80’s, as women put on their shoulder pads and floppy ties and went to the office, feminism began to pull away from the Earth Goddess. Flouting one’s fertility and innate peaceful nature at the office was not going to break any glass ceilings. The focus had turned to job equality and pay equity, so academic and political interests set out to prove there were no differences between the genders. And rightly so. It’s a small step from archetype to stereotype.

“But I believe there’s still a place for the goddess and her reverence for the earth in fiction, perhaps now more than ever. As individuals we recycle and consider our carbon footprints, so why not ask the same of our characters?

“Some writers may be afraid of opening up the Pandora’s Box of climate change or toxic waste because they don’t know what can be done about it. But fiction does not have to provide the answers, as Chekov said, it only has to ask the right questions.”

Living a spiritual life is all about asking the right questions. In regards to this morning’s focus, asking, “What must we do to save the planet?” may be the wrong question. It is a Y-chromosome question. We do not have to save the planet because it will go on in one way or another, with or without us. The planet has survived cataclysmic and catastrophic changes for millions of years. Over that time, it is believed that 99 per cent of all species have come and gone while the planet has remained. Nature doesn’t give a hoot if human beings are here or not. So when we talk about our actions destroying the Earth, what we really mean is that we will make it inhospitable for humans. And when that happens, the Earth will just shake us off and be happy to be done with us, with our fossil fuels, our pesticides, and our methane-producing cows. We will be just another failed experiment in evolution.

So if what we want is to really save the planet, we should just keep on doing what we’re doing, spewing carbon into the atmosphere and sending plastics and toxins into the seas. Humans will be gone soon enough and the poor Earth can start repairing itself, and in time, return to some form of a healthy paradise that existed before we crawled onto the scene.

The Goddess would offer us a better question, “What must we do to save the human species?” This is a spiritual question that moves us beyond our inertia. Many people in the civil rights movement were moved to action by their spiritual commitments. Be it the “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” of the Golden Rule, or Gandhi’s call to “Be the change you want to see in the world,” social change starts with the small acts of the individual and comes to fruition when those individuals come together in collective action.

So when we make sound ecological decisions, what we are really doing is saving other human beings, whether we are related to them or not and whether we even know them. This is the precept of many world religions; it is the moral obligation to love one another. When we make bad ecological decisions, it is humans we kill with our neglect. To love the Earth and the Goddess is to love one another. And to do this, we do not have to change the behaviour of others. All we have to do is change ourselves.

The Earth Goddess has a few tips for extending our stay on this planet. First, she would like everyone to return to the earth what came from the earth. One of the simplest ways to combat climate change is to keep rubbish out of the landfill. Food and garden waste fills a quarter of the nation’s landfills, where it releases methane gas, which contributes to global warming even more than carbon dioxide released by fossil fuels. But only three per cent of food scraps are composted. Perhaps we could push Auckland Council to have kitchen waste picked up along with recyclables and trash.

And as inconvenient as I would find it, perhaps we could lobby for a plastic bag ban. The Goddess worries a lot about plastic rubbish. And while we’re at it, no more helium balloons either, please. The Goddess loves her sea mammals, and balloons become fatal food for the whales.

Speaking of food, what would the Goddess choose for dinner? Preferably a vegetable that did not travel from some other continent to get to your dinner table, or meat that was not raised in some animal confinement factory before being killed. She loves all her animals, and would rather us eat a bit less meat altogether, because eating lower on the food chain is one of the single most important things that can be done to save the world resources.

These acts may all seem too small to do something so large as saving the human species. But let me introduce you to the concept of trophic or feeding cascades.

When they introduced wolves back into Yellowstone in 1995 it was highly controversial and strongly resisted by ranchers, but it led to proving the theory of trophic cascades: an ecological process that starts at the top of the food chain and tumbles all the way to the bottom. It is when predators limit the density and behavior of their prey and thereby enhance survival of the next level on the food chain. And it can change everything.

When the wolves were reintroduced it had been 70 years since they were last there. In that time deer had multiplied to large numbers and had grazed much of the vegetation to nothing. While the wolves did kill some of the deer, the most important thing they did was change the behaviour of the deer. The deer began to avoid open places where they could be trapped and immediately those places began to regenerate. Trees quintupled in five years. New forests began to grow. When that started to happen the birds started moving in. Beavers began to show up because they liked to eat the trees. The dams they built created ecosystems for otters, muskrats, ducks fish, amphibians and reptiles. The wolves killed coyotes, which meant the number of rabbits and mice began to rise which meant the number of hawks began to rise as well as weasels, foxes and badgers. Ravens and eagles came to feed on the carrion the wolves had left. Bears were also drawn to the carrion and their numbers began to increase in part to the increase of berries on regenerated shrubs. But this is where it really gets interesting. The wolves changed the behaviour of the rivers. They began to meander less. The channels narrowed. More pools formed. All of which was good for animal habitats. This happened because the regenerated forests stabilised the banks and stopped erosion. This all happened because of the reintroduction of wolves to a habitat. If wolves can move rivers, why can't we? In our habitat we are at the top of the food chain. By changing our behaviour individually and collectively we can work hand-in-hand with the Goddess to save our selves by letting the planet heal itself.

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