2007

Channeling Hildegard of Bingen: Transcending Time and Fanning the Flame

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“You know, Hildegard, I didn’t ask for this calling to support the cause of women.”

“Well I didn’t ask for what happened to me either, Helen. I just happened to be born the tenth child of a wealthy family in the twelfth century. Do you know where the word ‘tithe’ comes from? In my day, the ‘tenth’ child was ‘donated’ to the church. So stop whining and let’s get on with this story.”

“Kind of cheeky for a 12th century nun, aren’t you?”

“We mystics can take on the vernacular of the time—should that be so surprising? In fact, one of my biographers correctly observed that there were ‘limits to my patience and humility, and that ‘meek’ and ‘ordinary’ were the last words to describe me” (Flanagan, 1998, p. ix).

OK, so I occasionally talk with a brass statue of St. Hildegard of Bingen that I bought in Germany. Ironically, about eight years ago, an invitation to keynote at a German conference on women and educational leadership came out of the blue from someone who had heard me speak about the topic as a social justice issue. I did not know my host, or at least had never met her in the physical sense. A new initiative, “Gender Mainstreaming,” was beginning in Germany, which recently emerged from iron curtain rule. It was an intentional effort to increase the number of women in educational leadership positions. I spoke about encouraging and mentoring female leaders in education at the transatlantic conference. The leader of the initiative in Bavaria, the source of my invitation, was at the University of Augsburg. Her name is Hildegard . . . I somehow felt compelled to buy the statue of her namesake while in a shop in that medieval city. I have felt Hildegard Bingen’s presence ever since.

Saint Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), mystic, writer, theologian, poet, and musician lived the majority of her life in an incredibly cloistered setting. She was often very ill. She had little formal education, even by the standard of the day. Yet she composed music, lyrics and poetry. She described (dictated) exquisite visions in language which showed depth of understanding far beyond that of her peers. She wrote three major books,
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Scivias (Ways of Knowing), Liber vitae meritorum (Book of Life’s Merits), and Liber divinorum operum (Book of the Divine Works), as well as numerous pieces of correspondence, treatises, and biographical works. Though her descriptions were grounded in her religious life, she wrote about topics that today we would call medicine, environmentalism, theology, and most important to this discussion, feminism. She often rebuked those in the male power structure for their abuse of the gift of leadership, yet popes and kings called her friend, counsel and even saint. How did she make that impact? Why is there renewed interest today in her wisdom, especially her feminist thinking? And why does she compel me?

Hildegard sits in sculpture form on my office shelf but “speaks” to me in ways known by many women. At least one contemporary scholar, Frederick Roden, implied that Hildegard might have the ability to communicate through time and space. He noted, regarding Hildegard and Victorian writer Christina Rosetti, “The way in which two religious women from different times and places reached strikingly comparable conclusions on similar questions about the divine and the places women occupy within God’s creation is sufficiently worthy to place them in textural dialogue” (Roden, p. 231). So even today, Hildegard’s life and writings may help us to understand and mediate the lives of medieval and modern women within patriarchal frameworks. Then, as today, powerful discourse and illumination through pictures and visualization may function as an alternative avenue to
Channeling Hildegard of Bingen

power for those who might otherwise be disenfranchised. Hildegard focused on sapiential conceptions of wisdom and the divine, conceptions that build on the synergies of gender rather than emphasizing distinctions. Her own words describe this beautifully, yet simply.

For man is the work of God perfected, because God is known through him, and since God created all creatures for him, and allowed him on the embrace of true love to preach and praise him through the quality of his mind. But man needed a helper in his likeness. So God gave him a helper which was his mirror image, woman, in whom the whole human race lay hidden. It was to be brought forth in the power of God’s strength, just as the first man was produced by him. And the man and the woman were thus complementary, so that one works through the other, because man is not called ‘man’ without woman, nor is woman without man, called ‘woman.’ For woman is the work of man, and man the form of woman’s consolation. Neither can exist without the other. And man signifies the divinity of the Son of God; woman is humanity (Flanagan, 1998, p. 143).

“I’m proud of that piece, Helen. However, since you and many of your contemporaries believe that the lived experiences of women can illuminate the way in which we meet challenges, and so that your readers can better know me, why don’t you give them a short version of my life? Tell them, for example, how I predicted the markings of an unborn calf when I was only a little girl, shocking my family.”

“You just told them.”

“Oh. Right.”

Though Hildegard had visions of luminous objects from the age of three, she hid the ability from others for obvious reasons of potential ridicule or accusations of being insane.

“There is a lot to be learned from my decision to stay quiet, Helen. One of your colleagues described it. She suggested that key events and people have a major effect on how we feel and act upon those feelings. We learn life lessons over time (Ambrose, 1995, p. 27). Despite how daunting that first vision was to me, at a young age I knew that I didn’t know enough to explain what I felt. I knew that the timing wasn’t right.”

“How do you know about my colleagues?”

“As I told you, mystics are pretty good at the time/space continuum thing, especially when there is something important to be learned. The eastern mystic Rumi, who preceded me by many centuries, said, ‘When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.’ In my day, no one was about to accept wisdom from a delusionary child. Had I spoken more about my visions at that time, I may not have completed what I was called to do. My parents may not have sent me to the anchorage. Timing is important. My students weren’t ready for the teacher to appear. Don’t be disappointed if your ‘students’ aren’t ready the first time they hear you, but don’t let that stop you, all of you, from preaching for human rights over and again.

Now please go on with the story. Pick up the story at the anchorage. Hopefully, my challenges will give others courage.”
“Alright, Hildegard, but you are one of the most assertive sculptures I have ever met.”

I sense a smirk from my stationary colleague, “Helen, you just admitted that you talk with statues. Try not to criticize.”

Beginning at age 8, Hildegard studied with an “anchoress” named Jutta. “Anchors” in that period were those, often women, who shut themselves off from the world in a small space, usually close to a church so that they could follow services and receive food through a small window (McInerney, 1998, p. 1). An anchorage was an intentionally small, highly cloistered environment where attention was focused solely on things divine. When a person entered there, the event was accompanied by a full burial service—she was now dead to the things of the world. Hildegard’s first biographer, a monk named Godfrey (circa 1180), described her entrance:

When Henry, fourth of that name, ruled the Holy Roman Empire, there lived in hither Gaul a virgin famed equally for the nobility of her birth and her sanctity. Her name was Hildegard. Her parents, Hildebert and Mechthilde, although wealthy and engaged in worldly affairs, were not unmindful of the gifts of the Creator and dedicated their daughter to the service of God. For when she was yet a child she seemed far removed from worldly concerns, distanced by a precocious purity (Vita, Bk 1).

Jutta was a well-respected anchoress of the time, initially educating about a dozen girls, usually sent by wealthy families since Jutta herself came from a noted lineage. Education was basic, learning to read the Psalter in Latin. Yet regarding Hildegard’s learning, Halsall notes:

Though her grasp of grammatical intricacies of the language was never complete—she always had secretaries to write down her visions—she had a good intuitive feel for the intricacies for the language itself, constructing complicated sentences fraught with so many meanings on so many levels, that they are still a challenge for students of her writings (McInerney, 1998, p. 2).

Jutta’s anchorage was connected to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg, and so Hildegard was also exposed to musical composition. Though not explored here, noted scholars over the centuries have studied and, in most cases, lauded Hildegard’s accomplishments in that arena.

One of Hildegard’s contemporary biographers, Sabina Flanagan, summarizes what little is known about her early years.

Between that time and the death of Jutta in 1136, when Hildegard was about 38 years old, the sources provide no information about her life except for the blandest platitudes. Thus, according to Godfrey, she ‘went from virtue to virtue’ and ‘the tranquility of her heart was demonstrated in modest silence and economical speech.’ Hildegard, when recounting the history of her visionary experiences, says that during this time she ceased talking about what she saw by supernatural means, as such openness had only caused her embarrassment when younger.
Now she confided only in Jutta, who in turn informed ‘a certain monk,’ presumably Volmar of Disibodenberg, who was to become Hildegard’s teacher, trusted assistant, and friend until his death some thirty years later. In view of Hildegard’s later talent for organization, it would not be surprising if she had some part in the administration of the convent. At any rate, when Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard became head of the establishment, the unanimous choice of the sisters, according to Guibert (p. 3).

So at age 38, Hildegard was the spiritual and educational leader of a growing number of nuns. Prior to that time, she shared the fact of her visions with only Jutta and Volmar. In her book, Scivias, Hildegard describes the moment in which she decided to share her visions publicly.

And it came to pass . . . when I was 42 years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breasts like a flame, not burning but warming . . . and suddenly I understood the meanings of the expositions of the books . . . but although I heard and saw these things because of doubt and low opinion of myself and because of diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time a call to right, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by a scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness (p. 4).

Even as age wore on and despite her illustrious visions, Hildegard sought validation from others before she wrote about her visions more publicly. “. . . though she herself never doubted the divine origins to her luminous visions . . . she wrote to Saint Bernard, seeking his blessings. Though his answer to her was perfunctory, he did bring it to the attention of Pope Eugenius (1145-53), a rather enlightened individual who exhorted Hildegard to finish her writings.” (Halsall, 1995, The Awakening, ¶ 3) Interestingly, she called her first book Scivias, the title of which might be interpreted on several levels. In the religious sense, it can mean “knowing the ways of the Lord.” However, Flanagan suggests that it is an intentional contraction of that phrase in Latin, Sci vias Domini. Abbreviated, it could refer to “knowing,” as is often used in the sense of “women’s ways of knowing.”

“Stop there for a while, Helen, if you don’t mind. Did you ever have a time when you doubted the validity of your actions or feelings?”

“Shall I count them for you? There were many, and I’m sure will be more.”

“What do you do when you feel that way?”

“Well if you don’t count talking to statues, I read a lot, try to share my experiences and that of others through written reflections and monographs, and talk with trusted mentors who are mostly older than I am and have shown the kind of leadership that makes a positive difference in other lives.”

“When did you start going public?”

“In my 30s and 40s I guess.”

“Why then?”
“Because my mentors gave me courage, because others asked me to, and because I somehow just ‘had’ to.”

“Does that sound familiar, Helen? You know, we’re not so different through the ages. We’re guided to be mentors, invoked by those in need, and inspired by a spirit we may never fully understand. But we do it anyway, don’t we? I wrote about shocking things for my time; I wrote about what you now call feminism and environmentalism; I wrote about social justice; I wrote about a transcendent spirit. I wrote more prolifically than even my noted male counterparts. Most importantly, I wrote . . . and so must all of you. Fill pages with the wisdom of your voice.”

Roden praises Hildegard’s writing:

... what is never absent in Hildegard’s writing is Hildegard’s great talent for seeing the power that lies in language and for using that power to the best of her considerable ability to secure a modicum of control and influence that a woman in a small abbey in the German heartland could otherwise never hope to achieve (McInerney, 1998, p. 22).

In this way Hildegard not only guides but challenges us. There is swirling energy in our words and in the very vision of our actions. She knew how to use the gifts she was given to break through the power structure often without the realization of its male members. She dares us to do the same.

“By the way, there is a book in honor of your colleague, Hildegard, isn’t there?”

“Yes, it’s titled Vornweg and mittendrin.”

“I know.”

“You’re such a show-off.”

“Remember, I wasn’t perfect. Anyway, the terms don’t translate exactly into English. The closest is something like she is “in front and in the middle,” but the English translation loses some of the centrifugal energy implied in the original. Kind of like being in the eye of the tornado but also part of its fury, yet without being harmed.”

“Or like standing in a flame, but using its power instead of being consumed by it? But a man chose the title of the book.”

“And we’ll let him continue to believe that . . .”

One of the most surprising illuminations that Hildegard provided was the first written description of the female orgasm:

When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man’s seed. And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it, and soon the woman’s sexual organs contract, and all the parts that are ready to open up during the time of menstruation now close, in the same way as a strong man can hold something enclosed in his fist (Liber Vitae Meritorum).
Scholars who study Hildegard can only speculate upon the source of her knowledge in this area. Some of her other sexual descriptions are extremely negative, evoking images of the forceful power differential of men over women. Hildegard studied and wrote about various aspects of physiology and medicine. Preparing herbal remedies was common among religious cloisters of the time. As will be noted later, however, the public admonitions she preached in the latter part of her life suggest that she was far more aware of the male physical and structural power than one would have anticipated for someone in her position at the time.

Her scientific views came from ancient Greek cosmology of fire, air, water and earth.

Related to the environment Hildegard noted, “One thing however is absolutely clear; they [the organic ends and the organic worlds] are entrusted to man’s sovereignty for use, not for abuse” (McInerney, 1998, p. 232). Hildegard believed that God had given human kind everything needed to flourish both physically and spiritually. We just had to cherish and enrich it for future generations. While we assume she was referring to the green things of the earth, her works imply that we might also use other people, including men, to flourish. For this Hildegard is often considered an early environmentalist as well as feminist.

Hildegard influenced through “sapiential” thinking and visions. She combined both theological and feminist conceptions to bring an understanding of gender and women’s ways of knowing to a level far beyond typical discourse. Rap notes that:

Language and rhetoric have always been as important in the history of ideas as have been the ideas themselves, for an inarticulately expressed idea, or one left untold is doomed to be at most historical periodicity, at worst without power of effect. Hildegard of Bingen understood this. She was aware of her world and her times, not only in terms of their political and cultural aspects but also of how her use of language and self representations could affect her ability to influence those events which concerned her. Keenly cognizant of her status of a ‘mirror’ woman in a man’s world, she nevertheless used language to exploit her unique visionary gift to procure for herself the power and influence she could otherwise not hope to have (McInereny, 1998, p. 3).

Roden adds, “Her Vita demonstrates her determination and adherence to her purpose . . . her unique place, as at once existing in her tradition—an inordinately male and orthodox one—and somehow speaking from outside of it, makes her work striking to a twentieth century reader” (McInereny, 1998, p. 228). Her words flowed into images that showed women, even at the most seemingly vulnerable moments, as powerful sources of energy and strength. Hildegard’s roots in religion helped her to understand how God often used the weak to confound the strong, and that women could do the same. She wrote the following in a song which she reportedly voiced often:
“O great is the strength of man’s side,
from which God took the form of woman,
and made her the mirror of all adornments,
the clasp of his entire creation” (Flanagan, p. 177).

What greater strength can anyone have than to be the “clasp of all creation?”

In Scivias, Hildegard was the first to truly transcend notions of gender when speaking of wisdom, growth, and, one can argue, even leadership. Most of Hildegard’s biographers freely use the word “transcendence” when they refer both to her rhetoric and her being. As McInerney notes:

This contrast between her fragile, feminine self and the divine voice which spoke through it, was one which Hildegard amplified, developed and indeed exploited throughout her life. It became the foundations of an authority which was not subject to the laws of church or state, and that would lead Hildegard to devote her extraordinary, erratic and eclectic intellect to an improbable range of subjects (p. xviii). [emphasis mine]

So Hildegard shows women that our strength is speaking beyond and outside of traditional authority. We possess inherent authority in the ways we know. Roden continues with this theme:

In recent years, a feminist theology has sought to reclaim women’s voices in speaking of, and from, the divine. Historical theologians and literary scholars have looked to the works of medieval women mystics to understand the ways which, within hegemonic, patriarchal culture, women have striven and succeeded in finding a voice to speak with authority on matters of spiritual [and other] life. Concurrent with these projects have been inquiries as to the place and space of what might be called the ‘feminine’ aspect of the divine.

Regarding wisdom as feminine in Scivias, Hildegard herself says:

She looks out at people in the world, truly she always guides those who choose to go under her roof, and, conscientious she intently keeps watch over those who stand firm in her . . . Her head shines like lightning with such a brightness you may not be able to look at it head on . . . just as the human eye declares what happens to be placed before it, however, it has power to be led to the heights and depths of its mystery by nothing human”.

“Helen, let me interrupt. Remember that I wrote in Latin to be respected by the scholars of my time, but I also wrote in visionary metaphor to explain the unexplainable. My feminist allusions have an important meaning for all of you dealing with the challenges of being marginalized. There is strength in perceived weakness, if only you understand and use it as such. An often unaccepted reality is that there are ways of knowing and inspiring which we may never quite be able to describe in terms of scientific evidence. I understand, for example, that some of your contemporaries like Wheatley use nano physics to describe leadership and human relationships. Your scien-
artists don’t understand why a ‘strange attractor’ creates beautiful patterns by enticing seemingly chaotic particles to surround its being. Yet they know it happens. Fortunately, they are able to take pictures of the phenomenon with specialized cameras. Your scientists haven’t yet invented the camera which can capture the transcendent phenomenon of woman’s wisdom and strength as she attracts and forms beautiful organizational structures around her. Does that make it any less real?”

“But some will call this ‘soft’ evidence.”

“Well some of my latter day critics tried to brush off my visions as misguided migraines. Does that make them any less worthy? As another of my early mystic colleagues, Lao Tzu, admonished, ‘The way to do is to be.’ Women need to be who they are. I wrote often about women and light. Woman can be in the light, but not consumed by it. She can use it to fan the flame of social justice. Man cannot put out that flame unless woman lets him. Even if it is smothered at times, it will rekindle more strongly at another time, especially when fanned by other women.

Write what you see and feel. Write about your life experiences. Help your colleagues, especially women, do the same. Use the support of the dominant male culture to your advantage when it is necessary, just as I did with Pope Eugenious and Saint Bernard. I may not have liked finding support through male champions at the time, but without the Pope’s recognition, my understanding and vision might not have spread any further than my cloister cell. Would that have been wise?

Seek to strengthen and use the transcendent power that you have as women. Gather evidence, share evidence. But also stand for unseen principle even when it can’t be proven. Rail against those who try to say otherwise. Don’t let them consume your wisdom in the flame—use the energy to burn more brightly.”

“This reminds me to return to your life. I forgot to tell the rest of your story, or at least as much as is known to us.”

“Yes, I lived the full range of human emotion. I cared deeply, for example, about a nun named Richardis. I wrote lovingly about her, even though I was at times jealous (Flanagan, 1998, p. 176).

While I was writing the book Scivias I held a certain noble girl . . . in great affection, just as Paul loved Timothy. She allied herself to me in diligent friendship in everything and consoled me in all my trials until I completed the book. But after this, because of her noble connections, she turned aside to the honour of a higher position and was elected head of an important foundation . . . . Soon afterwards she left me, and in another place far from me, she gave up the present life and the dignity of her appointment (Vita, Bk 2).

I cried when she left me to return to the secular world. I also was often at odds with my superiors. I was angry, proud, frustrated when they wouldn’t do as I asked, but I also sang and wrote music. I was like all of you. You have all of those emotions, you have disappointment and loss, and you have ‘visions.” Share the visions—in language, in pictures, in deeds.
At age 60, I left the anchorage and traveled throughout Europe, sharing my visions and wisdom, while railing against social injustice in both public and religious settings. Obviously, my audiences were almost always men. I was pretty tough on them, even priests, since they had the most sacred power of leading mother church—another metaphor that was always feminine in my mind. Here is one example:

... for they [priests] besmirch my face thereby, because they give and receive the body and blood of my spouse with the great filthiness of their lascivious lives, and the great foulness of fornication and adultery, and the dreadful rapaciousness of avarice, in buying and selling (Flanagan, 1998, p. 167).

They didn’t enjoy hearing what I said, but they also began to call me ‘saint.’ The weak confound the strong.”

Flanagan describes the years 1158 to 1161 when Hildegard began a pilgrimage of public preaching:

Some of these would have entailed visiting different monasteries and addressing the assembled monks or nuns in the chapter house, as for example at Siegberg or Zwiefalten. Sometimes, however, she took a more unusual step, as on her second tour in 1160 where she preached in public in Teier, as well as visiting Metz and Krauftal. It need hardly be said that public preaching—indeed preaching at all—was a rare privilege to be accorded a woman. In 1163 the places she is said to have visited include Cologne, Boppard, Andernach, Siegburg, Werden, and Liège. Although river transport would have been available for parts of these journeys, some overland travel could not have been avoided, and such travel, whether by foot, horse, or litter, must have taxed the strength of the 65-year-old nun. This is especially true of her last great journey to Swabia in 1170, where she is said to have visited a series of monasteries including Maulbronn, Hirsau, Kirchheim, Zwiefalten, and Hördt—an overland circuit of at least 400 km (pp. 8–9).

Yet after that long journey, Hildegard returned to not only complete her third book, but also to found another anchorage across the Rhine at Eibingen, a place she visited frequently. She wrote a book on the life of St. Disibod, then traveled again, despite ongoing illness, over 200 kilometers from Rupertsberg, a convent she founded years earlier. She became embroiled in disagreements with local clergy over the rights of a man to be buried who had previously been excommunicated. Even then she called for religious (social) justice, finally winning the case six months before her death, interring his remains on the grounds of her convent. Flanagan relates what little we know about Hildegard’s own end:

... Hildegard spent her last six months free from major conflict. She died peacefully on 17 September 1179, having forecast her approaching end to the nuns. It is a pity that Guibert of Gembloux, although resident at Rupertsberg at the time, has left no account of her death—his Vita, for reasons that are not altogether clear, only takes the story as far as the proposed move to Rupertsberg. The account we have from Theodoric, who had to depend on what the nuns told him,
unfortunately has nothing of the moving intimacy of some of the descriptions of the passing of other monastic saints. He relies heavily on an account of the meteorological prodigies which accompanied her ‘joyful transition to the heavenly Bridegroom’ (p. 11).

“Vision and truth do prevail, Helen. You can see I kept challenging till the end. I continue to do so to this day.”

“To this day? But you died in 1179.”

Silence—a sign that I should think. Surely Hildegard doesn’t expect me to influence others through our conversation. Or does she? What is to be learned from her life and actions? She was “donated” in childhood, lived most of life in a barren cloister, at best suffered regular pain, at worst lived middle life under some form of patriarchal domination, battled injustice till the end, climbed hills and traversed rivers even in her 60’s. Why did she do it? Why did she keep going? Why?

Hmm... why does the strange attractor compel its surrounding particles to move in beautiful ways? We don’t know why, but it does. Maybe “why” isn’t the ultimate question. Maybe it’s not even a question that is important. Maybe it’s a statement. The way to do is to be. Hildegard was. Hildegard’s life happened. It touched our existence. Maybe what is important is that we transcend in the same way, that we keep standing for right and inspiring others to do the same, that we continue to be. As M. Scott Peck noted, good doesn’t really die even when it does. It comes back in another, stronger form.

Hildegard’s light temporarily fades back into its rigid metal form on my shelf. I somehow know that this particular conversation is coming to an end, but I sense a smile.

“How old are you now, Helen, 60 something I believe? . . . and you’ve traveled to speak in Europe? . . . on issues of women and human rights? . . . ?”

She is still cheeky and evocative—but a good, supportive friend. I guess I did ask for this. How else will we [she] stand strong in the fire and continue to fan the flame?

References