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Zierdt, Ginger L., "Women in History - Hildegard of Bingen" (2007). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 60.
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Women in History— Hildegard of Bingen

Ginger L. Zierdt

“Wisdom teaches in the light of love, and bids me tell how I was brought into this my gift of vision . . .” (Hildegard)

Visionary Prodigy

Hildegard of Bingen was born in Bermersheim, Germany near Alzey in 1098 to the nobleman Hildebert von Bermersheim and his wife Mechthild, as their tenth and last child. Hildegard was brought by her parents to God as a “tithe” and determined for life in the Order. However, “rather than choosing to enter their daughter formally as a child in a convent where she would be brought up to become a nun (a practice known as ‘oblation’), Hildegard’s parents had taken the more radical step of enclosing their daughter, apparently for life, in the cell of an anchoress, Jutta, attached to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg” (Flanagan, 1989, p. 3). Gössman’s analysis of Eibingen Benedictines Marianna Schrader and Adelgundis Führkötter’s research, concluded that Hildegard “saw light phenomena as early as the age of three, even before she could express herself about it, and all during childhood she had visionary impressions” (p. 27). In early conversations with Jutta, Hildegard intimated that she knew she was different from those around her. At first, this was “more unsettling than strengthening to her, as she was not yet able to justify her visionary gift with her calling, as she would as an adult” (Waithe, 1989, p. 28).

About the Author

Ginger Zierdt is an Assistant Professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She has led the Center for School-University Partnerships as its director since 2004. From 2001–2004, she served with the teaching faculty in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood at as a pre-primary and primary grade methods instructor. Prior to working in higher education, Zierdt taught kindergarten and second-grade students as an educator within the Mankato Area Public Schools. Zierdt has a B.S. in Broad Area Elementary Education from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, a M.S. and Ed.S. in Education Leadership and Administration from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and is currently a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Higher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Email: ginger.zierdt@mnsu.edu.

Early Adulthood

Around 1113–14, Hildegard received the veil from Bishop Otto of Bamberg and took the vows of the Order, “at an age which by today’s standards seems quite young, but which corresponded to the age for marriage for girls at that time” (Waithe, p. 28). Flanagan, among other researchers, concluded that between the time of accepting her vows and 1136, when Hildegard was about 38 years old, the historical sources provide no information about her life, but upon Hildegard’s “recounting the history of her visionary experiences, note that during this time she ceased talking about what she saw by supernatural means, as such openness had only caused her embarrassment when younger” (Flanagan, p. 3). Hildegard remained stalwart in confiding her visions only to Jutta, who in turn informed Volmar of Disibodenberg, a monk and one of Hildegard’s teachers. Volmar became one of Hildegard’s most trusted friends and collaborator in recording her visions until his death some thirty years later.

Leadership Recognized

Hildegard’s trusted anchoress, Jutta, died in 1136, and Hildegard was chosen as magistra by the community of women in the Order. “Now she herself was responsible for instructing her young colleagues in the seven liberal arts, for choosing the readings from the Bible and from the works of the Church Fathers, and, for organizing liturgical singing in the convent” (Waithe, p. 29). The election of Hildegard to head the convent suggests recognition of her gifts and abilities as a young leader and foreshadowed her later talent for organization and skillful administration of multiple convents. As Hildegard became more self-assured, and “because of her abnor-

mal gift, she saw herself as ‘called’ – notwithstanding all her inner fears and uncertainties—to the role of prophet” (Dronke, 1984, p.146).

“Visio”

“Hildegard used ‘visio’ to designate three related things: her peculiar faculty or capacity of vision; her experience of this faculty; and the content of her experience, all that she sees in her visio” (Dronke, p. 146). According to Helen John, “her visions portrayed reality in ideal forms: divine Wisdom and heavenly Love; Eve and Mary as archetypes of fallen and redeemed humanity; Ecclesia, Mother Church, as the graced and vulnerable people of God” (McAlister, 1996, p.17). During the times that Hildegard experienced “visios,” she was often afflicted with accompanied exhaustion leaving her “immobile and racked with migraine for days or even weeks at a time” (Cantor, 1994, p. 90). Despite these physical challenges, Hildegard’s prophetic calling served “to energize her own natural gifts of symbolic imagination, analogical reasoning, understanding of what she read, and observation of nature and human experience. Certainly, physiology and psychology played a role in shaping her thought, but she herself sought and found validation for her visions and message in the affirmation of the church community, which she secured early in her career and valued throughout her life” (McAlister, p. 22).

Sharing “Visio” with the World

Hildegard began prolific literary activity beginning in the year 1141, with the first work of her visionary trilogy, the *Liber Scivias*, on which she worked for a decade. “In 1147–48 at the Synod of Trier, the pupil of Bernard of Clairvaux, Pope Eugene III, had that part of Hildegard’s first visionary work which had been written by then, examined. In the name of the assembled bishops, the Pope gave her encouragement to continue with her writing” (Waithe, p. 29). In the 1150s Hildegard wrote her works on the natural and medical sciences, “through which she became significant for European medical history. This work brought her the title of ‘first German woman physician’ ” (Waithe, p. 30).

Between 1151 and 1158 Hildegard collected seventy-seven of her chants (songs) into “*Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of the Heavenly Relations). The repertory was intended mainly for use within her own convent, whose members all had trained voices” (Neuls-Bates, 1982, p. 14). Hildegard wrote both the texts and the music for her liturgical songs, and likewise for her morality play “*Ordo virtutum*” (Play of the Virtues). “A large number of the songs are addressed to two women: thirteen to Saint Ursula and fifteen to the Virgin Mary” (Neuls-Bates, p. 14).

Between 1158 and 1163, Hildegard worked on the second volume of her trilogy, the *Liber vitae meritorum* (*Book of the Merits of Life*). “Around

1160, Hildegard undertook her first major preaching tour, and in 1163 was successful in obtaining for her convent a 'letter of safe conduct' from Emperor Barbarossa, through which the convent escaped the sad fate of many other convents, which were destroyed in the numerous feuds of that time" (Waithe, p. 30). In 1165, Hildegard founded her second convent, in Eibingen near Rudesheim, and set to work on the third volume of her trilogy, *the Liber divinorum operum (Book of Divine Works)*, or *De operatione Dei (On the Workings of God)*.

Hildegard's third preaching tour in 1163 had great significance for in her stopover in Cologne she confronted the problem of the Catharists. "With these trips, she clearly exceeded the role of woman and especially that of a nun, a woman of the convent she also exceeded the Benedictine *stabilitas loci*. All this was possible because Hildegard was even during her lifetime, viewed as a prophet, not primarily in the sense of predicting the future, but rather in the sense of interpretation of her own time" (Waithe, p. 31). Coakley states, "that it is important to note, however, that Hildegard had never countenanced a collaborator with the power to approve her visions and to stand between her and her audience. Her refusal to do so was no incidental feature of her visionary career but expresses the claim to direct divine validation that lay at its heart—a claim that, at crucial moments, had supported her resistance to the wishes of men of ecclesiastical authority" (2006, p. 47).

Saint Hildegard

Hildegard of Bingen died in 1179 and was revered as a saint in the Catholic Church by the early fourteenth century. In Hildegard's *Vita*, edited by monks Gottfried and Theoderich, she is "compared to the Old Testament judge and prophetess Deborah, and portrayed as the corresponding figure to her in the Christian era" (Waithe, p. 31). Dronke concludes that "there is scarcely a field to which Hildegard did not bring her individual contribution. Her approach to every problem—human, scientific, artistic, or theological—was her own. Her conviction that she saw the answers to the problems in her waking vision meant that she did not have to defer to established answers" (p. 201). Hildegard's visionary themes and theories (the image of God, the human being as God's image, gender symbolism, the strength of female weakness, woman and wisdom, and the weakness of male strength) enriched the image of both God and Man in a patriarchal time, and continues to confront, challenge, and inspire us more than nine centuries later.

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