

Embracing Mary Magdalene

By Devon Wood

Sermon given on July 30, 2006
First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh

READING BEFORE THE SERMON TAKEN FROM:

Barbara Rohde. In The Simple Morning Light (Boston, MA, Skinner House Books, 1994), p. 3.

“On Becoming a Person” by Barbara Rohde

When our oldest child was five years old, she walked into the kitchen one morning and announced, “I haven’t made my decision yet about heaven.”

I was somewhat startled. Heaven wasn’t a very big topic of conversation in our house, and one wouldn’t expect a small person carrying Raggedy Ann by one arm to be thinking much about it.

But I said, “What do you mean, you haven’t made your decision?” She said, “I don’t know whether you go there when you die or whether you just lie down dead forever.” She paused for a minute and added, “And that’s why I think it is sometimes hard to be a person.”

What is remarkable about that conversation is not so much that a five year old was wrestling with questions of immortality, nor that she already had a sense that life was not always peaches and cream, but that she had some understanding, even at five, that one’s personhood is always at issue. Will I become a person? Will I become the person I am intended to become? Will I become a person who can respond to what I am called to do? When I lose my sense of self, will something, someone, call me back?

The task of becoming a person is what life is all about. The care that helps others become their true selves is what parenthood is about, what the ministry is about. I suppose what led most of us to Unitarian Universalism is our understanding that the central question of religion is not whether one lives forever but whether one lives.

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I have a secret to tell you. It's a rather horrible one to confess as a Unitarian Universalist - we who pride ourselves on being intellectual, politically correct, and above the mundane. You see, among the stacks of magazines in my home: Sierra Club, Hip Mama, Utne Reader, and UU World, there lingers one more. Yes, it pains me to confess it. I love the tabloid magazine.

Week after week, at the grocery checkout, I nonchalantly toss my love into the cart. I pretend that I'm making a last minute impulse buy while I casually look around to make sure no one who knows me is in line too.

I continue this weekly pattern of denial until I start feeling guilty about paying full newsstand price. So, I do what every self respecting person does. I owed up and write a way for subscription. And on the line marked "Name," I write very clearly and legibly: I-A-N W-I-N-T-E-R. It's my husband's first and last name.

This is my story. I just couldn't see that my history of once desiring to be a professional actress is still a part of who I am. I never really bothered to look inside and see that the love within me always trumps my sometime shallow and voyeuristic self.

This morning I invite to think of your own story. To echo the reading we just heard, our “personhood is always at issue.”¹ In that spirit, I invite you to join me in our task of becoming a person.

“We receive who we are before we choose who we will become,” says the Rev. Rebecca Parker. Part of this means receiving our history. Part of this means receiving the divinity within each of us.

As we begin to understand Mary Magdalene’s part in history and listen to her voice in the *Gospel of Mary* (yes, she has her own gospel) we can, perhaps, see our own story a bit differently. We could picture this as hearing and embracing Mary’s life and message. We could picture this as incorporating history and the divinity within to help us in our task of becoming a person. And yet another way of looking at this might be this: ***knowing our roots helps us to have wings.***

The Roots

The roots, the history, what do we know? In 1945, a collection of 13 ancient Christian “books,” with over 50 texts were found in Upper Egypt near modern Nag Hammadi.² This collection is known as the Nag Hammadi Library. Some of the original writings scholars date from as early as the second half of the first century or 50-100 C.E., with most being written around 120 -150 C.E. That would place some them as being originally written as early or perhaps even earlier, than Mark, Matthew, Luke and John in the New Testament.³

In regard specifically to the *Gospel of Mary*, three portions of copies are currently in existence. Two from Greek manuscripts from the early third century and the most complete version in Coptic from the fifth century.⁴ The Coptic version of the *Gospel of Mary* was actually discovered even earlier than most of the Nag Hammadi Library. It was purchased in 1896, in a market in Cairo by a German scholar.⁵

Now there is mystery surrounding how the manuscript was discovered. According to the dealer who sold it to the German scholar, this Coptic version was hidden in wall for fifteen hundred years.⁶

Now really folks, can you imagine...some family in Egypt is doing renovations, "Wait, what's this in the wall...it looks really old book. You know what we should do? Let's take it down to that antique market in Cairo, sell it, and get some brand new rugs!"

The "hidden in a wall story" makes for great legend, but it is unlikely that the manuscript, written on papyrus, would have survived that long in the open air. More plausible is explanation that it was discovered in a graveyard in Upper Egypt.⁷ Who discovered it first? How was it hidden all those years? Under what circumstances was it brought out of hiding? We just don't know.

Now back to our German scholar and his nifty little purchase. He takes the manuscript containing the *Gospel of Mary* back to Berlin. He puts the manuscript in the Egyptian Museum. Time passes and it is now 1912. An Egyptologist translates it and attempts to get it published.

However, a series of events stall the publication including, water pipes breaking at the printers just as they are ready to go to press, the death the Egyptologist, and both World Wars. It is now 1955, the first printed edition of the text of the *Gospel of Mary* is in print with a German translation.⁸ Almost 60 years have passed since the original purchase in Cairo.

The wheel of progress move slowly indeed. But the fact that the *Gospel of Mary* was recovered at all is rather remarkable. The content of the *Gospel of Mary* and the rest of the Nag Hammadi Library fall well outside the Christian dogma formulated at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E.

Karen King, in her book, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, comments, “One consequence of the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy was that the viewpoints of other Christians were largely lost, surviving only in documents denouncing them. Until now.”⁹

Until now, for me, was just last spring. I was invited by to hear a talk at a neighboring church entitled, "Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the Da Vinci Code."¹⁰ When the secular world meets the religious world – it's a Unitarian Universalist fiesta! ¡Arriba! ¡Vamos! Let's go!

The guest speaker was Dr. Antti Marjanen of Finland. He is considered to be one of the leading scholars on Mary Magdalene in early Christian texts. At end of the talk, my healthy Unitarian Universalist curiosity was piqued. Dr. Marjanen commented that yes, the book, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, got people talking about Mary Magdalene. However, portraying her as “sacred vessel” didn't really help the feminist movement at all (you see, in the book *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary Magdalene bears children with Jesus and she and their descendants are the Holy

Grail). Dr. Marjanen went on to suggest that maybe this is just another way of objectifying women, while at the same time diminishing a life of a woman whose message is much greater than that.¹¹

As my 2 and ½ year old daughter likes to say, “What’s that all about?” Give me Starhawk any day, but Mary Magdalene? Wasn’t she the biblical archetype for “female sexuality redeemed?”¹² I was happy to learn that women had a greater role in Christianity than once thought. But what did this history or teaching have to do with me?

Apparently, a lot. More than I ever really consider. I started reading about early Christianity. I learned that by the end of the second century, discrediting Mary Magdalene’s teaching, like those in the *Gospel of Mary*, may have been a goal of early church fathers. The creedless teachings were well outside the direction of the church they were developing.¹³ Moreover, men were beginning to claim sole leadership in the newly forming Christian church.

Still, Mary managed to make it into the Bible - she is prominent throughout the whole story of the crucifixion and resurrection. Unfortunately, her role in the New Testament was intentionally misrepresented in Western Christianity starting in the fourth century. When just suppressing writing about her wasn’t going to keep her down – let alone any other women in that *present* time – leadership developed a different strategy.¹⁴

That's when the repentant sinner image develops. It's an attempt to construct an alternative story to the one I was discovering. The one I'd like to share with you now: Mary Magdalene was most certainly an apostle. She was held in high regard in the eyes of Jesus as well as many of the other apostles. Historically, Mary may well have been a "prophetic visionary and leader" within some group of early Christian even after Jesus' death. According to the *Gospel of Mary*, she's the one that is the most spiritually advanced. She is the "apostle to the apostles."¹⁵

The one that teaches the others.¹⁶

These writing have been intentionally held back from history. That matters to everyone. Karen King tells it well:

...the story is incomplete and noticeably slanted. The roles of women, for example, are almost completely submerged from view. In the master story, the male Jesus selects male disciples who pass on tradition to male bishops. Yet we know that in the early centuries and throughout Christian history, women played prominent roles as apostles, teachers, preachers, and prophets.¹⁷

This revelation total turns my world upside down. If women's stories were "almost completely submerged from view" in early Christianity, what about the other world religions – Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism? What is missing from that part of history? I can count on one hand the female religious leaders I know that aren't from contemporary society. ***Where are our mothers?***

A piece of our religious history has been "submerged from view" for a very long time. And make no mistake that history shapes the world in which we live. If you don't believe me...you show me one country in the whole world where the majority of the leaders are female and the poorest of the poor aren't the women and children.

The lyrics to the old spiritual ring true:

(Sung)

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home, a long way from home.*¹⁸

We have been a motherless child for too long. Yes, we embrace you Mary Magdalene, a mother of early Christianity. And I'm guessing we should be saving hugs for your sisters in other world religions too.

Their voices need to be found and heard to help us understand the full story of our humanity.

Those prophetic voices from history that help us in our task of becoming a person. And that's where this story can get some wings – in the *Gospel of Mary*.

The Wings

Feminist Theologian Nelle Morton talks of “a hearing that brought forth the word.”¹⁹ The author of the *Gospel of Mary* hears. She is strong yet distinctly intuitive and contemplative. The *Gospel of Mary's* theology is from a distinctly feminine perspective. That is amazing. She provides us with hope toward balance and equality.

Language in the *Gospel of Mary* concerning Divinity or humankind is inclusive. Divinity is simply called the “Good.” Terms like “brothers and sisters” and “Human beings” are lifted up. That is astounding.²⁰ The words provide us with wisdom worth remembering.

The heart of the *Gospel of Mary* is revealed early in the story. The message provides a foundation for our being. It is as the Buddhists say, a way to be in “right relation” with ourselves, each other, and our world. The words appear at the top of your order of service:

When the Blessed One had said these things, he greeted them all. “Peace be with you!” he said. “Acquire my peace within yourselves.”

“Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, ‘Look over here!’ or ‘Look over there!’

For the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.”²¹

In this passage, Jesus and Mary Magdalene teach a message of peace and equality. Peace that is so badly needed at this very moment. Mary Magdalene and Jesus console us - divinity exists within each of us. Can we trust ourselves to receive it? Will we know what that divinity sounds like? Will we hear it? In the task of becoming a person - what will be your story?

Let us continue to remind ourselves and each other that “revelation is not sealed.” *Knowing our roots so that we may have wings.* Shalom, as-Salam-u’Alaikum²², and may those wings provide you with a wonderful flight!

1. Barbara Rohde. In The Simple Morning Light. (Boston, MA, Skinner House Books, 1994), p.3.

2. Antti Marjanen. The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents. (Brill Academic Publishers, June 1996), p.4.

3. Originally suggested by Professor Helmet Koester of Harvard University. See H. Koester, Introduction to the Gospel of Thomas, Nag Hammadi Library 117. Elaine Pagels. The Gnostic Gospels. (Vintage Books Edition, September 1989), p. xvii.

4. Karen L. King. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle. (Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2003), p.11.

5. Account by Carl Schmidt, the Egyptologist to first edit and translate the *Gospel of Mary* from 1896 - 1912. Schmidt, Carl. "Ein vorirenäisches gnostisches Originalwerk im koptischer Sprache," Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, phil.-histo. Kl. Vol. 36. (Berlin, Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1896) p.839.
6. Ibid. p.839.
7. Schmidt, Carl. Die alten Petrusakten im Zusammenhang der apokryphen Apostellitteratur nebst einem neuentdeckten Fragment untersucht. Texte und Untersuchungen 24/1 n.F. 9/1 (Leipzig, 1903). p.2.
8. The complete work is commonly referred to as the Berlin Codex and contains the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the *Act of Peter* in addition to the *Gospel of Mary*. Karen L. King. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle. (Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2003), p.7-11.
9. Ibid, p.160.
10. Antti Marjanen. "Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Da Vinci Code." Lecture at the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, November 16, 2005.
11. Ibid.
12. Karen L. King. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle. (Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2003), p.149.
13. Ibid, p.151.
14. Ibid, p.149.
15. Fiorenza Schüssler. "Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles." Union Theological Seminary Journal (April 1975), 22-24.
16. This paragraph is written in the spirit of positions of King and Marjanen's books cited above as well as conversations with Dr. Marjanen after his lecture.
17. Karen L. King. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle. (Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2003), p.160.
18. African American spiritual, c. 1750-1875. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" Singing the Living Tradition, hymn 97.
19. Nelle Morton. "The Dilemma of Celebration." Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion. (New York, NY, Harper and Row, 1979) p.164.
20. Found in all three translation, one Coptic and two Greek. Translation found in Karen L. King. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle. (Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2003), p.13-18.
21. Coptic translation from a fifth-century CE papyrus codex. Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1. Karen L. King. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle. (Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2003), p.14.
22. Traditional Muslim greeting in Arabic that means, "Peace be with you" or "Peace be upon you."

Closing Prayer by the Rev. M. Susan Milnor

Eternal God, Mother and Father, Spirit of life, we gather grateful for the companionship of hearts and minds seeking to speak the truth in love. We gather grateful for our heritage, for the women and men before us whose prophetic words and deeds make possible our dreams and our insight. We gather grateful for the gift of life itself, mindful that to respect life means both to celebrate what life is and to insist on what it can become.

May we always rejoice in life and work to cultivate a sense of its giftedness, but may we also heed the call to transformation and growth. May we find in ourselves the strength to face our adversities, the integrity to name them, and the vision to overcome them. May we honor in pride the heroines and heroes of our past, but may we also keep company with the fallen, the broken and the oppressed, for in the dazzling of noon day's heat, and in the star-studded shimmering of night's rich blackness, we are they. Amen.