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Dethroning whitemalegod 4: Canceling 'Darkness' and Entering the Womb

Featured art: Womb Space by Kera Morgan

"Women grow things in darkness, not in light." -- Ursula LeGuin

To become whole, body and soul, we need to depart from the safety of the childhood house of beliefs into the wilderness, into the cave, with only the psychic necessities. We rarely have the safety of leaving one house of beliefs when we can clearly see the new house ahead lighted and warm. More often, we need to leave the old without any promise of the new, need to spend time as forest dwellers, just surviving. -- Jill Mellick
CONSIDER

Even before I consciously began my decolonial spiritual journey, I'd been deeply uncomfortable with Christianity's 'spirituality of darkness' in which, generally speaking, God is present in the light and absent in the darkness. Not only is it racist to associate light with good and darkness with evil it is also reductive, unimaginative and flimsy. (No surprise here. "Reductive, unimaginative and flimsy" are markers of patriarchal thinking.) So, even when I tried to reject "darkness = bad" thinking, I was left with little to guide my spiritual imagination beyond this point.

OK, so God is not necessarily absent in the darkness. Now what? Now what do I do? How do I engage with the Divine when I find myself in a liminal space, a space full of uncertainty and trepidation (such as our current COVID-19-induced liminal space)? And how do I engage with the Divine when, as a Black woman, it seems that my life is one long continuous string of liminal spaces?

Per my *modus operandi*, I spent years trying to "reclaim darkness" by devouring great books like Mirabai Starr's jaw-dropping translation of St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul* and by trying to make sense of vague spiritual-speak like "but the light is most apparent in the night!" In 2014, I even tried to communicate a different approach to darkness in a widely-read Advent essay. But none of this quite set my spiritual imagination free, much less empower it to build something new.

I also began to recognize that our limited spirituality of darkness is one of whitemalegod's ploys to keep us in the patriarchal fold – for it is directly into liminal space that we must march if we are ever to liberate ourselves. If we don't have any tools to unshackle our spiritual imaginations and guide our discovery, we will be forever confined to what-is, never able to become the liberation-bound forest dwellers that Jill Mellick speaks of in the quote at the top of this essay.

I needed to do more than simply reject the flimsy spirituality of darkness that I was taught. I needed a new way, a new metaphor, a new spiritual foundation from which to build. That's when I realized that I not only need to re-examine my language for God, I also need to re-examine my language about God. And I needed to cancel the "house of beliefs" that just isn't working for me, so I can discover something new.

I've been deeply moved by the spiritual metaphor of the womb for a few years now but this past winter I read a good chunk of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas' work. Gimbutas, who was known for her study of the earliest religions, describes how the majority of the earliest images of the Divine highlight the womb and or umbilical cord. Indeed, in her archaeological research, she encountered numerous prehistoric statues and etchings that showed humans/lesser gods forever connected to the Divine Mother via the umbilical cord. Gimbutas' research suggests that early humans understood that the umbilical cord is more than an anatomical reality. It's also a spiritual reality, forever inviting humanity into radical dependence upon the Divine.

My reading of Marija Gimbutas' work coincided with Oakland's COVID-19 shelter-in-place order. During one of my regular walks through redwood forest near our house, I noticed that the moist redwood forest canopy which blocked out almost all of the sunlight felt very womb-like. And that's when it hit me. As I carried uncertainty around

the global liminal space of COVID-19 as well as uncertainty around my own personal liminal spaces, it occurred to me that “womb” is a more life-giving metaphor than “darkness.”

Imagine a fetus saying to the womb-holder, “Hey, I’ve been ruminating about life after birth and I’m stressed about what it will be like and how I will survive and whether you will reliably provide for me.” It sounds preposterous because obviously a fetus doesn’t have the cognitive ability to imagine the future, much less stress about it! And that is exactly why the fetus is able to relax into dependence and intimacy. Without an ability to rely on its own analysis of the situation, the fetus must rely on the parent, despite the uncertainty. The fetus must surrender to the womb; there is no other way to be free.

But our adult higher order cognitive thinking gets us into trouble. Rather than surrendering to the womb as the fetus does, we ruminate on every possible threat, both real and imagined. Since we are accustomed to relying on (read: idolizing) the information we glean from our senses, we devolve into even greater panic when we encounter situations that we cannot sense or reason our way out of. (For more on this, I encourage you to read endocrinologist Robert Zepolsky’s hilarious and accessible book *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*.) My human instinct to devolve into greater panic during liminal spaces is why a flimsy spirituality of darkness never worked for me. Liminal spaces are legitimately scary and as a human I have all of these built-in coping mechanisms that actually prevent me from connecting with the Divine when I need Her most. But I’m beginning to imagine a spirituality of the womb that offers a pathway to connection in the midst of it all. When I think of a liminal space as a womb space instead of a dark space, many more possibilities open.

The womb gives me a place to stop carrying the burden of the liminal space and instead be carried.

The womb offers me a nurturing place to go when I am grappling with uncertainty.

The womb gives me a spiritual umbilical cord which activates precisely when I am faced with uncertainty. I can trust that if I reach for the cord, it will nourish me with the outlook, wisdom, and love that I need in that moment.

The womb assures me that I will experience new birth on the other side of this liminal space.

The womb promises spiritual abundance, even when I don’t know what’s going to happen next.

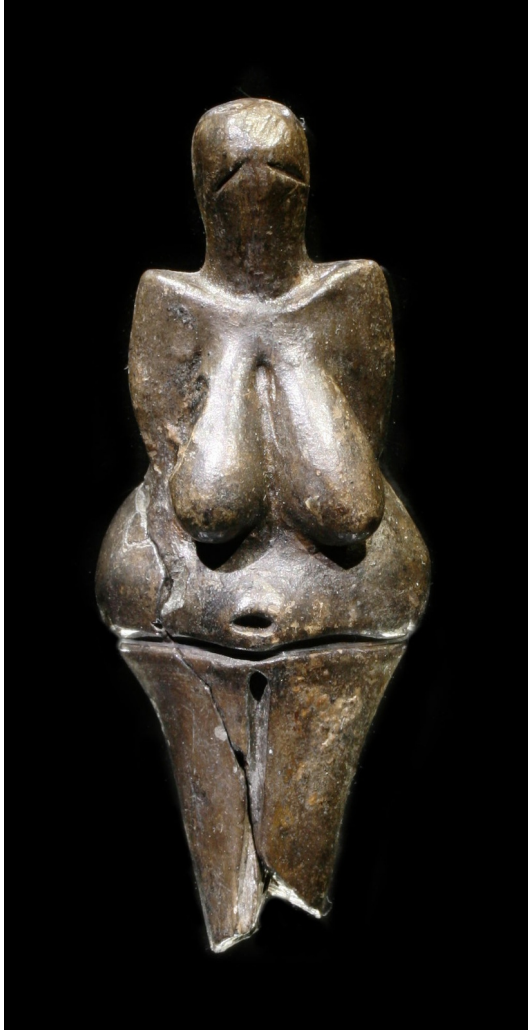
The womb insists that I am completely surrounded by Love’s life force no matter what is going on.

The womb offers a profound invitation to rely more on the Divine Parent when I cannot sense or think my way out of uncertainty. In this way, I am invited into an even deeper dependence that begins to chip away at uncertainty. The fetus connected to the

umbilical cord is faced with zero uncertainty. Its needs are fully addressed. Its pain is immediately attended to.

Y'all, I'm canceling 'darkness' and entering the womb. Uncertainty = womb space, and I am safe.

ENGAGE some of the earliest images of the Divine



Venus of Dolní Věstonice (29,000 - 25,000 B.C.)



Catal Hüyük goddess (5000 B.C.)



Venus of Hohle Fels (40,000 - 35,000 B.C.)



Venus of Willendorf (28,000 - 25,000 B.C.)

REFLECT

1. Describe the “spirituality of darkness” that you were (implicitly or explicitly) taught as a child. What entities (people/ideas/behaviors/emotions) were present in the darkness?
2. What thoughts, emotions and behaviors do you tend to automatically engage when you are faced with ongoing uncertainty? How might these tendencies be related to your existing “spirituality of darkness”?
3. Try to imagine what a fetus experiences in a healthy womb. What do you think is true for the fetus?
4. What, if anything, does the metaphor of the womb do to heal your relationship to uncertainty?

PRACTICE – 'Abwoon' Womb Mantra

Few things are bringing me more joy these days than my participation in [The Black Feminist Breathing Chorus](#). As a chorus member, each day I am granted access to an incredible mantra meditation based on the words of a Black feminist. A recent meditation was based on Black trans activist [Marsha P Johnson](#) who insisted that if we

encounter a message or energy that isn't coming from a place of love, we should "pay it no mind." In the introduction to the meditation, the facilitator Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs mentioned that the word *mantra* means "mind free" or "no mind." As she invited us to join her in repeating "pay it no mind" 108 times, Gumbs added that mantras "help us get out of our head and into our heart."

This is exactly what the womb offers us – a chance to get out of our head and into our heart as we face uncertainty. The womb offers us to release our cognitive thinking that prevents us from connecting with the Divine Parent who is constantly working to provide us with everything we need this moment.

Last year, in my Virtual Black Madonna Pilgrimage essay "[The Dear Dark One of Montserrat, Spain](#)" I wrote about how the first phrase of the Lord's Prayer has probably been mistranslated from the original Aramaic word *abwoon*. Rather than "Our Father", *abwoon* could be translated "O Birther!" which opens up so many divine feminine possibilities. And as is usually the case with the feminine, the invitation is for intimacy and dependence. In fact, according to the mystical Aramaic tradition, the unique way *you* pronounce the word *abwoon* is the Divine's special name for you. Talk about intimacy!

So, in the spirit of the Black Feminist Breathing Chorus and following the wisdom of the Marsha P Johnson, I invite you to repeat the mantra *abwoon* 108 times, allowing the tone, syllables, and connection to wash over you and help you drop into your heart and into the womb. Notice how you uniquely pronounce *abwoon* and cherish the intimate "name" the Divine Parents gives you in your pronunciation.

(Or, if you'd like, you can set a timer for about 10 minutes so you don't have to keep track of the number of repetitions. The precise number isn't important, the repetition is what is valuable. When I did this practice earlier today, I wrapped myself in a gravity blanket and curled up in the fetal position, just as a way of physically reminding myself that the complete saturation of love's life force is available to me as I let go. I also created a short playlist of soothing songs to listen to in the background while I repeated *abwoon* over and over and over again.)

GOING DEEPER – resources on spiritualities for grappling with uncertainty

- [Christ our Black Mother Speaks](#) by Christena Cleveland
- [The Cross in Contexts: Suffering and Redemption in Palestine](#) by Mitri Raheb and Suzanne Watts Henderson
- [God of the Oppressed](#) by James Cone
- [The Black Christ](#) by Kelly Brown Douglas
- [Kali the Feminine Force](#) by Ajit Mookerjee

· [The Benefit of the Doubt](#) by Greg Boyd

· [Dark Night of the Soul](#) by St. John of the Cross (translated by Mirabai Starr)

The Creative Spirit and Children's Literature by June Jordan (essay in [Revolutionary Mothering](#))