

A Journey of Faith and Falling

Deb Johnstone

As a child I knew God: I met him.
He came to our place every Friday night, him and his wife.
(OK so it wasn't god, it was the couple who studied the bible with my mum.....)
While she studied, I got to sit and read books with strange pictures, pictures depicting
Babylon the Great, the huge statue in Daniels Dream with head of gold and feet of clay and
strange beasts rising out of the ocean.

I learnt that God had a name.
I learnt that he also had a son.
I liked Jesus. He liked the little children.
Jehovah on the other hand was a little on the mean side, what with all the revenge and stuff.
I hated having to dress up and sit still in those long and boring congregational meetings; 5
hours a week.
But I came to love God.

I learnt how to pray.
God was there for me, especially on those dark nights, alone with the night terrors where I
was too scared to walk the length of the hall to my mums' bedroom.
(Besides, you had to walk past the bathroom window and the way mum had dressed the
window, it looked like two demented eyes that I rarely dared to pass.)

I also loved fairies.
When friends stayed over, I would lay for hours in the dark telling them stories of the fairies
and their realm.

And I loved witches.
At school I was always the witch in the games we played.
I wasn't afraid of them, they were not evil, and somehow they were familiar and even
comforting.
Even then, though totally unaware, I was re-integrating the Goddess into this life.

Talk about madwomen though, the local bully must've thought I was well and truly nuts.
My brother and I were caught on the street corner on our way home from running an errand
for mum, and there we were, face to face with the young devil himself.
I told him one of God's angels was standing right behind him (huge he was) and that he'd
better leave us alone or he'd get it.
I *believed* it!
So did he: because in looking behind, he gave us time to run for it.

My love for God continued to grow and deepen.
I defended my faith to the hilt.

At 13 I was elected to represent my class in an intra-school debate. My topic?...."Diary of an unborn child"...a speech on how wrong abortion was.

(Ironic really, as in years to come I was to abort twice in my life. Where was God then?)

I ran a close second in that debate....beaten only by a fellow student with the potential to become a great comedian.

Then my body started to change.

Hormones raged, and I began to wonder how I could be worthy of the love of the Almighty while my lowly body became beastlike.

I earnestly prayed, begging him to calm the storm within, to remove this monthly stain that was womanhood.

He wasn't listening.

I began to doubt that he was there, that he cared.

I discovered the hypocrisy in the men that were appointed by Him as overseers of his congregation, and in doing so began to lose my sense of faith.

During this time I began also to lose my sense of self.

Not that my self was in anyway defined, I was still seeking my mothers approval and falling short in so many ways it was nearly impossible to have a sense of self.

Depression set in and my moods changed erratically so that I no longer even really wanted to live.

Then these 'men of God' questioned my virginity.

I was shocked that they could even consider that I would do such a thing. Sexual relations were for the sanctity of marriage and while my faith was dwindling, my morals were not.

As I said, I began to see God through the actions of these men and God was surely dying!

I left my hometown in New Zealand and travelled to Australia to meet my estranged father at the age of 16.

I had not known him as a father and yet I loved him and I felt loved for the first time.

I felt as if I truly belonged.

He was charismatic, charming and so seductive.

The beast within was allowed to roar and I felt a wildness, an abandoned freedom, through the carnal knowledge he taught.

(I shoved the guilt deep inside, into a tightly knit ball that only later in life would unravel to nearly destroy me.)

I was in love, in love with being loved, but love just the same.

And so the Heretic came to life.

Why heretic? Because I was the holder of an unorthodox opinion, let alone an unorthodox love and life.

It wasn't long before I realised it wasn't love I was feeling.

It was security.

I came to know that I had abandonment issues and the life I was living, also promoted identity issues.

We moved around a lot.

His work was transitory.

I never had the opportunity to make friends.

Not that I wanted to. The heretic was ashamed.

Women Journeying with Spirit

Editors: Deidre Michell & Jude Noble

It was becoming harder and harder to seal up the guilt, it persisted in unravelling.
It was during this shameful period in my life that the irony of my school debate came to fruition.

I was anaesthetised, bleeding and broken.
I tried to find comfort in God.
I couldn't find Him.
Heaven was so far removed from the hell I was in.
Besides, repentance required confession and I was in no fit state for that kind of mental and emotional strength just yet.

At 21 I escaped....into the arms of the first man who asked me to marry.
Marriage was sanctified by God.
Now I could ask him for help and receive not only forgiveness but a filling of the empty void that is called spirituality.
Yet still God avoided me.
Instead my body was filled with the bruises of what my husband called love.
I had nothing to lose, so I left, sick of the beatings.

I was becoming stronger.
I was beginning to recognise this thing called self.
My strength came from the wall I surrounded myself with.
Inside I trembled, lost and frightened while to all outward appearances I was an aloof tower of strength, or so I was told.
I lived alone for a time, in between flitting from one man to another.
Sex had become love.
But love was a transitory thing, wearing off after the first few months of sexual frenzy, leaving me empty and angry.

During this time I came into contact with the 'psychic realm'.
An acquaintance introduced me to 'astral travel'.
Through the use of breathing techniques, and a little cannabis, I caught a glimpse of the spirit world.
It was terrifying!
My childhood beliefs had me convinced I was in touch with the demonic forces that Satan himself governed.
The very first time I actually left my body, fear had me crashing back into it at a frightening speed. The rushing sound, like that of a jet engine had me petrified into paralysed stillness for hours, ears straining to confirm I was alone.

Life took on some semblance of normality as I immersed myself into my work and the pending arrival of my unborn child.
I was prepared to face life alone as a single mother.
I was sick of men and their lies, their using me for self-gratification.
I turned to this thing called 'spirit' that so many were speaking of.
The laws of Karma, threefold and reincarnation took precedence in my mind.
Meditation became a daily practice, yet fear of the demonic hordes still plagued me.
At the end of my 1st trimester, I sought the advice of a psychic.
She told me I would soon meet the man who would provide me and my unborn daughter with a home and a family, a place of refuge.

She was right.

Shortly before I married, I decided it was once again time to find God.

This spirituality labelled 'New Age' hadn't proven to satisfy.

I returned to my childhood faith only to be disfellowshipped because I was living in sin.

It wasn't good enough that I would be married in a few short months; I was shunned all in the name of God and the *cleanliness* of His congregation.

Determined to return to God, I endured the leprosy of silence.

Meanwhile I was married and began to carry the first of my son's.

A few months after his arrival, I was reinstated into the Congregation and those that had shunned me now welcomed me with open arms and the love that Jesus spoke of that would identify those who were supposedly his followers.

Did I find God?

No

I found I fell short of His requirements, my meeting attendance was poor....I mean come on....one mum two kids and an unbelieving husband...of course it wasn't going to be on par with those families who worshipped united. Of course the hours I spent in the door to door preaching work were a pittance in comparison to theirs...and so in my failing to reach, let alone maintain the requirements of a congregation; I failed to find God.

God was still male, He was still a *Father*.

I wandered away from God yet again, discontent in my failure to find Him, discontent in what seemed to be offered in His service.

We moved back to Adelaide instead.

Adelaide offered me family; in-law's, but family just the same.

I was a stay at home mum now, and really not content to be so.

I was lonely.

We had our family, our 'pigeon pair' but the Universe had other ideas for me.

I was pregnant yet again.

While it was not part of 'the plan' my husband and I had made, we welcomed this unexpected child into our lives and hearts.

He was a big baby, so different from my others, happy and content.

Determined to fulfil my spiritual need, I prayed one night to God and offered him my newborn child. "Please God, forgive me and guide me and I will teach this child of you...."

It seemed that He listened.

I entered into the folds of yet another congregation, a congregation where tolerance and concern reigned. I was given assistance from the 'sisters', encouragement from the 'brothers' and made to feel like part of God's family.

Meanwhile, I endured my husband's disapproval at my choice of religion.

My religious friends were discouraged from visiting, unless during the hours of 9-5.

I understood his angst and so I complied. (The victim in me was still continuing to surrender to the will of another...)

Then came the shock of our lives; the pending arrival of our fourth child.

It had only been several months earlier that we had received the 'all clear' from vasectomy results.

Women Journeying with Spirit

Editors: Deidre Michell & Jude Noble

I remember clearly, waking one morning and feeling oh so familiar...booking into see the doctor because this just couldn't be so....but it was.

I cried, sobbing convulsively. I didn't need *another* child. Abortion wasn't an option; this child would not be born a monster, genetically deformed.

And so, I gave birth, losing sight of God, as I strained to bring into the world another one of his children.

It was all too much.

I became the 'madwoman'.

I mean really mad....not just offbeat as I normally was....I was admitted into a psychiatric ward after attempting to kill myself and my children.

(You didn't think I was going to leave them to their own defences in this godforsaken world did you?)

I was signed up for electro-convulsive therapy.

A slight headache was the expected side effect I was told.

Bullshit, a freight train had run over my head and I was left alone in a darkened room with a couple of Panadol to recover.

I can't remember how many times I submitted to this.....too many I think.

For 12 weeks I was shut away from the world, surrounded by the less fortunate of society.

My 'brothers' and 'sisters' came to visit but even they were at a loss as to how to deal with mental illness and so they eventually stopped coming.

I was secretly relieved....I was no longer a 'nice' person; no longer 'acceptable' in my own eyes let alone the eyes of His people.

I was in and out of psychiatrist's offices and psychiatric wards for two years.

It was one hell of a journey.

Do you know what I discovered?

I discovered that the jewels of humanity are to be found in the darkened, drug induced hallways of these institutions....

And I found myself....a small shadow with a tiny spark of humanity. That wonderful, hope inspired spirit...I caught a glimpse of it.

I had gotten so used to looking into my reflected eyes and seeing emptiness.

I had befriended the sorrow within me, the incredible loneliness that comes from disconnection of spirit, and yet here, in the middle of a group of seriously disturbed people, I came to see me: the real me.

Just a glimpse but enough to give me hope that I was not lost, that I could be found, that maybe, God *could* love me.

But I never did return to God, at least not the God of my childhood faith.

What *I* found was a Goddess...

How did I find her?

How did I escape the bonds of depression and anxiety?

How did I survive and grow?

The first step was in challenging my internal beliefs...the persistent voices that told me I was unclean, worthless, and ugly.

I remember when being admitted into the psyche ward, being petrified at being locked in with all the '*loonies*'.

But I came to see them for what they truly were...wonderful sparks of humanity confined within the tortuous prisons of their minds, confined because society could not accept them.

I learnt to challenge my own beliefs; after all, this one had been proven false so how many more were there.

In changing my inner 'self-talk'...I began to release the bonds of depression.

I began a journey of self-discovery.....

The first rede of Wicca is '*to know thyself*' and although I never knew this at the time I took my first step, it was however an innate knowing that this was what I must do in order to grow and blossom into the woman I knew I could be.

The process was at times arduous and painful, frantic and erratic...like a pendulum swinging wildly...that at times was, and still *is* me....

It took 6 years to come to the knowledge that I am not all good and not all bad, but that I am both...

And, in seeking to find myself I read and read anything I could get my hands on...

And, in doing so I discovered Wicca....

I discovered a Goddess who recognised this shadow aspect of me...a goddess who not only accepted it but encouraged its exploration.

For many years I had been consumed with the destination and disregarded the journey....Goddess taught me to enjoy the journey...to revel in life and to continue to grow and learn of myself.

She didn't 'lord' it over me, she didn't shun my sexuality.

Instead she celebrated my womanhood, recognised my 'shadow within', encouraged growth through life and love and through this experience we call humanity.

She set me free, she answered an oh so familiar call deep within.

She *let* me dance naked under her lunar glory, revelling in the rhythm of life.

I found my true calling within ritual, within the womb of her earth, riding the breezes, communing with the elements.

I discovered I am witch.

I discovered I am 'Woman'..... and in that discovery I learnt that women I had earlier avoided because of their intuition and inner knowing weren't condemning me for my past, but were rather condemning me for the denial of my womanhood.

I reached out, beginning to seek their company and in connecting discovered the warmth, the strength and the power that is "Woman".

With that discovery came the realisation that I am a healer, a healer of hearts.

I learned Reiki, as most of us do. It came easy, I had practiced it all my life, and I just never knew it.

Herbal lore, earth magic, crystals and the realms I had loved as a child now had meaning, purpose and *reality*.

I discovered that through forgiveness and the understanding of human nature and its inherent 'shadows' that I could heal not only others but myself also.

Forgiveness is not easy and it is not a 'once off' process...it is a continual process of re-evaluation, condemning and forgiving...
a lifelong process that affords growth and connection....
(For me it is not the forgiveness of the bible....
I am human...how can I ever hope to attain such high ideals?....
For me it is an 'acceptance' and a 'coming to terms' and an 'understanding' of the sins committed against me in order to move on from them or live with them...either way...as I said...it is a continual process.)

Goddess has taught me connection....
I am not a lonely individual afloat within the sea of humanity....
I am a part of the sea...the earth...the universe... and the pulse of love flows through me....
And I now seek to be connected in *all* that I do....
no longer hiding in the shadows of shame...no longer spending useless energy in building the walls of self-protection...no longer denying....

The Goddess gave me what I had sought all my life, she gave me belonging.
She gave me love and through the eyes of those that I now allow to love me; I am learning to love myself, more and more each day.
She continues to teach, guide and protect, as do those She lovingly brings into my life.

My fear of demons?.....Gone, with the realisation that my demons are within and that I have the power to expel them...and expel them I do...because I am a Goddess, I am a Madwoman, I am a Heretic and I am a Healer.

And here I am five years later, having gone through a period of referring to God as "Prime Creator", I now find myself more often using the name God again.
Why?
Perhaps I'm finally learning of my own 'authority' and that it depends not on the men around me but on myself as 'woman'.
Defining God as male no longer bothers me.

My 'faith' is eclectic; evolving from my life experiences.
And is not that the way of life: to evolve and grow?
I have learnt to trust myself; to put faith in the person I am becoming; to recognise that 'spark of divinity' within me and to believe that "the universe is unfolding as it should" despite my doubts and fears.

I will journey the path of self-knowledge; continuing to fall along the way.
I will ride the spiral of spirituality around and around, gathering and evolving as I go!

Blessed Be.

About Deb Johnstone

Debra Johnstone lives with her family in Adelaide and currently works within the Aged Care Industry. She is also a Diversional and Alternative Therapist, a published author and a professional counsellor. Debra has an on-line counselling service and can be contacted at www.taletimetherapy.com.

