

## **The Shock of Meeting Mary Magdalen**

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My encounter with her occurred at a moment when I was questioning, studying deeply, seeking with an open heart to understand why the church into which I had been indoctrinated seemed to me so utterly incomprehensible. In my late forties, an intense hunger for spiritual connection led me back to church, and I wanted to believe its teachings. I took up contemplative practice, and there I could feel a reconnection to the ground I had intuited as a child, some love that exists despite humanity's manifestly unloving behavior. I encountered the Brigid's Place community and found common ground with other women asking many of my questions.

Despite my earnest efforts, the feeling of dissonance with what was implicitly taught in the liturgy remained. And then, through working on one of the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene celebrations twenty years ago, there came the shattering truth of how her legend had been reversed from beloved and follower of Jesus to reformed prostitute. The recognition took hold, at once affirming and astonishing: the reason I couldn't accept the conventional Christian doctrinal understanding was that it was a construction based on lies and politics and prejudice.

Off I went to seminary, seeking to understand more deeply, hoping perhaps to find something that would allow me to remain. Five years later, I emerged with a master's degree in theology and, more importantly a Certificate in Women's Studies that afforded me the impetus to explore deeply the story of Mary Magdalen in both the canonical and extra-canonical traditions. I read and studied ravenously, absorbing the explosion of Magdalen scholarship that had occurred over the previous decade. My major project was a study comparing the treatment of Mary the Mother and Mary Magdalen. Whoever she was, it was clear to me Mary Magdalen as portrayed in the canonical gospels was a distortion that largely served to minimize her importance, and that Mary the Mother was a patriarchal co-optation, equally distorted but designed to serve the church's pathological need to control the narrative of women and women's bodies at any cost.

A memory of those days comes forward as I write, one of many moments that steadily chipped away at my ability to unsee the misogyny that is the warp and woof of institutional Christianity. The Harvard conference, "Transforming the Faith of our Fathers," an effort to find some common ground between faith and feminism, was memorable as an opportunity to hear in person many of the feminist theologians whose work I had been devouring. The exhilarating moment I will never forget occurred when the iconic, illustrious, and radical feminist theologian Mary Daly took the stage and yelled at the top of her lungs, apparently with frustration at the impossible project behind the conference to strike some kind of compromise: "IT'S THE PATRIARCHY," she screamed. Friends around me, who purported to speak for women in the church, but found their social and material comfort demanded compromise with patriarchy, expressed disapproval: "it's not the feminine way."

Over the years that I participated in liturgies for Brigid's Place that celebrated women's voices, there were many small moments of silencing, of compromise with ecclesiastical authorities. A

turning point for me was the suggestion by a member of the Cathedral clergy whose misogyny was particularly odious that perhaps we Brigid's Place women intended to sacrifice a goat on the altar. My eyes were opened to the truth of what the church is, and it was not what I had been trying to make it into. It became starkly clear, after my path opened in a different direction, that there was nothing for me there. I left with no nostalgia for anything except the music, but even that was not enough to fix me to an institution that is patriarchal and misogynistic, through and through.

The synchronicity that set me on a new path came about through my involvement with Brigid's Place, and for that I am grateful. The pivotal role that those years played in my journey seems to have been brilliantly orchestrated by the intelligence that steers the currents of our lives along their necessary trajectories. But when the inner impetus leads in a new direction, it is deadly to stay put. I had to go. All the writing that I had done about Mary Magdalen was put aside, but she was not forgotten. I had come to see her as a beacon for those who know that the truth is not in the external structures of an institution or authorized canonical texts. Jane Schaberg's argument that she was the one that Jesus would have chosen, over Peter, to further his teachings, seemed true to me. But the texts are unmistakable: that contest wasn't a fair fight. Peter played dirty, and he was willing to do anything to silence her. I came to recognize the archetypal significance of Mary Magdalen as the feminine spiritual power that Christianity rejected and demeaned. Above all, as the *Gospel of Mary* attests, she stands for the utmost importance of the interior way. And that was the way I chose, however imperfectly I followed it.

My journey with Mary Magdalen receded into the background as I followed paths of study that led to a new vocation as a breathwork practitioner and transpersonal psychotherapist. Years later, at a weekend workshop in New Mexico offered by a Jungian analyst, I encountered Mary Magdalen anew. On hearing some unknown music, I felt a bolt of recognition. I found myself suddenly back in the flames to which so many women have been consigned who dared to speak and act from women's wisdom. I knew this act of terror, intentional torture meant to silence and traumatize women healers so horrifically that none would dare remember their healing craft.

The music, I learned later, was a hymn of the Cathars. So came the call to enter into pilgrimage, to visit lands that knew the esoteric Magdalen.

In seminary, a dear professor encouraged me to pursue this line of inquiry. In those days I could not open wide enough to leave behind the safer path of scholarly fashionable anti-essentialist feminism or textually based Magdalenian perspectives. Goddess traditions were verboten, and the notion of a flesh and blood union between Jesus and Mary Magdalen met with disapproval in academic feminist circles. I neglected to open the door to the richer flow of how she has been remembered through the centuries in lands who felt and revered the energetic resonance of her presence and meaning.

But in the fall of 2018, off I went to southern France and northern Spain, on a mysterious and strange journey that left me porous to a deeper mystery. We visited the Languedoc region of France, Rennes-les-Bains where Jesus and Mary Magdalen were said to have taught and offered baptisms. We hiked to the ruined fortress of Montségur, where the Cathars were starved until they either jumped to their deaths or faced the flames at the base of the mountain. I recognized that place. To be there was eerie, disturbing, haunting.

In Catalonia we spent a day in Girona, a place so full of mystery that what transpired beneath the surface eludes still me. There is no concrete story, only the hinted mysteries of the Cathars, Templars, the “Lady of the Cup.” Unstated and ill-defined, beneath these ambiguities flowed the call to search deeply within. And this protective silence is as it must be to preserve the legacy of the Magdalen, whose name was maligned exactly because she knew too much and saw too deeply.

For patriarchal Christianity to survive, no remnant of women’s leadership or a gospel founded in the primacy of interiority could find a foothold. She was “harlotized,” as Jane Schaberg said, called hysterical, minimized. That she was not fully erased attests to her centrality.

She knew what really happened, what Jesus was really teaching. And perhaps it is even true that she survived, with or without Jesus or their daughter Sarah, to travel to France and preach. It doesn’t matter, really. What matters is her witness to the true meaning of Jesus, of love, of inner wisdom and perfection.

"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.

"Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it." (Gospel of Mary, trans. Karen King)

Meeting Mary Magdalen shocked me out of any possibility of staying within the church. My eyes opened wide with recognizing something I had known before, and it was impossible to unsee the egoic motivations, the hatred of women’s bodies and prevalence of the will to power and control that is the very heart of Christian institutions.

Mary Magdalen’s gospel of interior divinity will one day prevail. Her witness stands for the goodness, love, and courage that is the true heart of humanity.