

Hildegard: A Fiery Force
Service given by Patti Borneman – 3/12/06

In 1998, the year Hildegard of Bingen turned 900 years old, I took a summer course at Carroll College entitled “Christian Spirituality: The Women Mystics.” Hildegard was one of seven women mystics we studied and she has stayed with me all these years. I was majoring in English and writing a thesis about Rachel Carson, who wrote lyrically about nature and science and geologic time, and the need to acknowledge and protect the ecological web of life. Perhaps I thought of Hildegard as a mystical Rachel Carson, since they both wrote about the interconnected web of life, and studied and wrote about natural history. They were both deeply spiritual and feisty, socially outspoken women, so perhaps that’s why Hildegard resonated with me. And despite her absolute devotion to a god I do not believe in, she is one woman from long ago whom I appreciate and find inspiring.

As a child growing up UU, I was taught to have an open mind and nonjudgmental heart ... except when it came to Christianity. Consequently, I was quite ignorant about religion and didn’t follow a spiritual practice, but there remained a nagging void in my life. I remember at the age of 19, with eastern religions starting to infiltrate our culture with the coming of the New Age, I realized that I had no clue what spirituality was or how it felt. Much later, learning about Hildegard and the other women mystics gave me a better historical and cultural understanding of spirituality even if it was in the Christian tradition, but it also hit a chord within me that, I think, had been suppressed for too long. A chord that needed to resonate with something mysterious, eternal, and, yes, divine.

So today, I'm taking the bold step of offering this Christian mystic as a subject for our fellowship this morning. I'll never be a practicing Catholic, but sometimes I imagine that if I existed in Hildegard's time and place, back in the twelfth century, I might have joyfully joined her cloister of nuns. Who wouldn't want to study the cosmos, sing her beautiful haunting hymns, perform in operatic plays, paint meditation mandalas, and have the rare opportunity to freely express my, as Hildegard believed, God-given creativity?

The film we're going to see is about Hildegard of Bingen and starts with an excellent description of who she was and her historical significance. Since it's 40 minutes long, I'll have to fast forward to sections of her meditations and visions where her writings, paintings, and music are depicted together. The film has many references to God, for instance, God as a kind of intelligent designer of the cosmos and the earth. Please try not to be offended by the overt references to the Christian god. This is not an attempt to convert anyone, only an attempt to appreciate the timelessness of the creative urge, and the spiritual need to tap into and develop our creative selves.