

# She Walked Before Me

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When I arrived at the Helfta monastery, I instantly burst into tears. I had been dreaming of visiting this place, where the thirteenth-century mystic Gertrude the Great lived and wrote, ever since I began studying her in my PhD program eighteen years before.

I had finally arrived here in the small city of Eisleben in Saxony-Anhalt Germany, after two days of travel. It was a cold day in December.

As I took in my surroundings, I instantly recognized the fishpond about which she wrote. It felt surreal to be in the place where she sat over seven hundred years ago carving words into a wax tablet which she strapped and draped over her monastic habit. I had retyped those same words on the laptop in my backpack that was slung over my winter coat.

I could have stood in that spot for days and stayed at the monastery for months, but I only had time to visit for a couple of days. I had another week of activities scheduled around Germany to research for my second book on Gertrude.

After walking in the courtyard where she walked and praying where she prayed, it was time to leave.

I texted my mom: "I don't want to leave her."

My mom's wise words appeared in response: "Take her with you."

I just can't seem to get enough of this medieval German nun.  
What is it about her?

First, I admire her image of God.

Gertrude describes God both as Mother and Father. In doing so, she avoids associating God with characteristics that the dominant culture dichotomizes as male/female – i.e., rationality/emotionality, justice/mercy, honor/intimacy. For example, when writing of God's promise to be present with her at the time of her death, she compares God's "paternal care" to that of "a consoling mother": "I will hide you under my paternal care, as a mother would cover and caress her beloved child when terrified by fear of shipwreck. And as the mother would rejoice in the joy of her child when they had reached land in safety, so will I rejoice in your joy when you are safe in paradise."<sup>1</sup> In another passage, which lacks a mention of "paternal" motherhood, God describes God

as stern yet tender mother, who even scares her children back to her affectionate embrace:

I . . . am like a mother who has a little boy whom she loves so dearly that she wants him to be with her all the time; when the boy wants to run off to his friends because of a secret game, she sometimes puts scarecrows or something terrifying in certain areas so that the frightened boy runs back to her bosom. . . . Just as a kindly mother is accustomed to kiss fondly



*Photo by Ella Johnson*

anything that troubles her delicate child, so I desire to soothe away by the blandishments of loving whispers all your troubles and contrarities.<sup>2</sup>

As a young child, my image of God was the all-powerful Godfather image. He looked something like Gandalf from the Lord of the Rings writ large, with a grey beard and the whole bit. God was big in my mind as a child. I associated him with what I saw in the sanctuary at church so I pictured him to look exactly like my parish priest, a large man who appeared even larger when he donned his clerical vestments. The only difference between my parish priest and God, in my mind, was that God was floating somewhere overhead, above the clouds in the sky. He was distant. He didn't know about my thoughts or feelings, just my prayers. He was a rule maker. He got angry if people broke his rules, and he punished them with damnation.

The priest wasn't the only person I saw in the sanctuary at church, though. I also saw my grandma, my mom's mom. As the director of the religious education program at my church for almost fifty years, I often saw her at the ambo giving announcements and teaching children about God. But Grandma wasn't the stereotypical church lady. She wasn't soft-spoken, reserved, or proper. Nor did she look like the Virgin Mary, who I remember being depicted as thin and bowed down in seeming deference to Joseph. Grandma was a badass. She chain-smoked Salem 100s, drove with a lead foot, and wore a bandana around her forehead when she push-mowed the lawn. She converted to Catholicism when she was a teenager because she was pregnant and wanted to marry my Catholic grandfather. Apparently, the priest who confirmed her had some doubts about her intentions for converting, but this only strengthened her resolve. "I'll show him," she said. And she did. She attended daily Mass, regularly recited the rosary, and helped my grandfather build a new church building when the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council demanded it.

Actually, Grandma was visiting Rome on a vacation during the

Council. I used to love talking to her about it. She would tell me about how she couldn't get into St. Peter's because it was blocked off for the bishops' meetings. She said she knew they were talking about changing things in the Church. They would allow the priest to turn around during Mass and speak in English, rather than Latin. I asked her if she thought they were going to allow priests to get married or women to become priests. She told me if I asked those questions in public, I'd get in trouble. But she went on to say that before the Council, the priests used to do everything in the parish. After it, nuns came in and started doing some ministry. Eventually, lay people like her were distributing communion, proclaiming the readings, and doing youth ministry.

Gertrude also sought to serve God in the ways that were open to her. She wrote theology in the genres available to women: visionary narrative and devotional instruction. Her sisters say that she worked quickly and with pleasure,<sup>3</sup> and that she

tirelessly ruminated on the books of the Bible which she could obtain. The basket of her heart she packed to the very top with the more useful, and honey-sweet, texts of holy Scripture, so that she always had at hand an instructive and holy quotation. Hence she could give a ready answer to anyone who came before her, and turn aside any kind of error with scriptural witnesses so appropriate that almost no one could refute her.<sup>4</sup>

Gertrude was not only a theological scholar, but also a teacher:

Elucidating and clarifying what lesser minds found obscure, she made compilations from the sayings of the saints, gathered as a dove gathers grain, and committed to writing many books filled with all sweetness, for the general profit of all those who wished to read them.<sup>5</sup>

For the same reason, if she found anything useful in holy Scripture which seemed hard for the less intelligent to understand, she would alter the Latin and rewrite it in a more straightforward

style, so that it would be more useful to those who read it. She spent her whole life in this way, from early morning until night, sometimes in summarizing lengthy passages, sometimes in commenting on difficulties in her desire to promote God's praise and her neighbor's salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Gertrude's teaching was steeped in the (male) tradition but departed from it in insightful and original ways. Some of Gertrude's female contemporaries, who wrote too boldly, were burned. But Gertrude seemed to have a knack for writing in a way that would both honor and protect her voice.

When crafting her *Spiritual Exercises* in Latin prose Gertrude made the deliberate choice to use female pronouns and feminine grammatical endings. This perspective is different from that of the Psalms and liturgical prayers, which address God from the viewpoint of a male devotee, with male pronouns.<sup>7</sup> Even when she refers to biblical parables with male protagonists, like the prodigal son, she replaces masculine nouns with feminine ones. For instance, she writes about the "prodigal daughter" (*prodiga filia*)<sup>8</sup> and the "adopted daughter" (*filiam adoptasti*).<sup>9</sup> She connects this feminine grammar in the meditations she prescribes with the actual experiences of women religious by drawing from different rituals in the life of a nun (i.e., the sacrament of Baptism; the rituals of clothing, consecration, and profession of a cloistered nun; and the Divine Office).<sup>10</sup> This allows female monastic readers to contemplate significant experiences in their life and to understand those as sacred, as a gateway to God. For example, she writes a prayer for them to remember their clothing in the habit: "O Mary, Mother of God, very close to my heart, clothe me with the fleece of Jesus, intrinsically the Lamb. May he, foremost love, through you, receive, nourish, possess, rule, and perfect me. Amen."<sup>11</sup> Gertrude clearly makes her point: women can and should have a theological voice.

But Gertrude didn't explicitly talk about biological sex and women's capacity to do theology. For her, it wasn't about being female, but rather about being human. No human being, male or female,

could fully comprehend and adequately express God's ineffable characteristics. In other words, standing before God, men and women were on an equal footing.

Fairly early in my career, I remember sitting in a room surrounded by about forty theology professors at an academic conference. We were listening to a panel on the sacrament of ordination. All four of the panel participants were white men, none of whom were ordained. I was one of only a few women in the room. I was happily seated by one of those women, who leaned over to me at one point and asked me if I had a cigarette. She needed one. When one of the panelists ended his presentation on Thomas Aquinas, she nudged me: "Isn't he dead?" I stifled a chuckle. The presentation was focusing on the places where the Second Vatican Council documents affirmed church hierarchy. Why weren't they looking at the places that discussed community and the priesthood of all believers, as well? The question kept nagging me. When it came time for open discussion, I prepared my comment carefully. I cited a well-known, conservative female theologian, who had been publishing about communal images of ecclesiology in the Vatican II documents, and she had suggested that they might be instructive for our theology of the sacrament of ordination. I was suggesting that there were other ways to perhaps think about the sacrament itself. Still my comment was dismissed, "That theologian is talking about something different." Of course she is, I thought, "My point exactly." Later at the cocktail hour, my dissertation director found me. He had been at that panel too. "Your intervention was important," he said. "Too bad they couldn't hear it."

Gertrude would have heard it. She would have also deeply understood my struggle (not only this one but countless others I've had) of being a female Catholic theologian in a room full of men.

That's why I was so eager to visit Helfta. I wanted to be in her presence. The burial site of her body is unknown, but the place where she lived still carries her spirit.

When I walked into the Helfta chapel for the first time, no one else was in there except for me and Gertrude. It was silent. I walked over to the statue of her and the votive candles underneath. I struck a match and I lit a candle. Our spirits were still separated by time but no longer space. Physical remains of the same walls that surrounded Gertrude's prayers seven centuries ago surrounded mine.

*Hi Gertrude! I can't believe I'm here!*

*Thank you for your words and for your theology.*

*You've taught me so much.*

*Thank you for your voice.*

*Thank you for your resilience. Your love of God, the church, and liturgical tradition inspires me.*

*Thank you for showing me and others a better way for this love. Your way is freer than so many before you. Your way overcomes the traditional dichotomies between male/female, and you overcome them by using the tradition. You negotiate so many tensions so well.*

Eventually, I left the chapel and walked over to the fishpond in the center of the monastery grounds. Indeed, it was beautiful, just as Gertrude had experienced



*Photo by Ella Johnson*

it. Surrounded by old, grey stone buildings, nothing around the pond detracted from its beauty. The air had a slight chill to it that December morning, and the sun was bright. The cold and sun together created a crispness in the air. It wasn't too cold, just cool enough to heighten my senses. The bright sun, unobstructed by clouds that morning, warmed my skin. The cold and sun together created a glistening frost on the blades of grass, which crunched under my tennis shoes when I walked on it. I found a bench to sit down. There was grass, some quite long, which encircled the pond that stretched out around five hundred meters before me. There was no wind that morning so the water was still, creating a mirror for the sun to show off its beauty clearly. Birds sometimes interrupted the stillness, with their chirping, calling attention to their song, formed by different ranges, tempos, and pitches.

I was experiencing the same thing as Gertrude, when she wrote to God:

I . . . was sitting beside the pleasantness of the place. The crystalline water flowing through, the fresh green trees standing around, the freedom of the birds, especially the doves, wheeling in flight, all gave me pleasure. . . . I trust, my God that it was you – you who produced pleasures beyond price . . . <sup>12</sup>

O eternal solstice, safe dwelling, place containing all pleasure, heavenly garden of everlasting delights flowing with streams of pleasures beyond price, coaxing forth the blossoming spring-time of all kinds of loveliness, soothing sweet sound . . . bringing refreshment with the perfumed breath of life-giving scents, intoxicating with the melting sweetness of inner savors, bringing transformation with the wonderful caresses of intimate embraces! . . . What sights, what sounds, what scents, what delicious savors, what sensations!<sup>13</sup>

The pleasure of this physical sensation is, of course, prayer.

Gertrude's insistence about the spiritual value of sensual pleasure is perhaps, what I love most about her.

Rather than regarding the body and its senses as obstacles to holiness, she sees them as gateways. In a blessing over each of the sensory organs she declares:

Blessed the eyes that see you, O God, love... Blessed are the ears that hear you, O God, love, Word of life.... Blessed the nose that breathes you, O God, love, life's most dulcet aroma ... Blessed the mouth that tastes, O God, love, the words of your consolation, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.... Blessed the soul that clings inseparably to you in an embrace of love.<sup>14</sup>

I walked around the monastery grounds, taking everything in. Behind the chapel was a large open field.

I walked around and found the labyrinth I had read about. It was built around twenty years ago by the Catholic Women's Association of Germany with local diocesan support. They made a 350-meter-long path lined with native medicinal and perennial plants, often found in medieval monastery gardens. The path has seven circuits that lead to a shelter in the center, a place that symbolizes divine mercy.

I walked slowly around the paths, choosing my circuits spontaneously and delighting in the living art. I began to reflect on the many different choices and paths I have taken in my life. Were those choices all leading me to a center point like this labyrinth? I wasn't sure, but I couldn't miss the point that the path my life has taken was blazed by women before me, just like the one I was walking on then.

As I made my way closer to the center, I felt tears on my cheeks again, just like I had the day before when I arrived at Helfta. The pull to the shelter in the center of the labyrinth was both strong and calming. It led me into deeper communion, not with Gertrude's spirit, but with my own.

The shelter was a small hut, covered in vines, with an opening. It had a bench inside. I sat down and looked outside from within.

I understood more deeply, then, some of Gertrude's teachings (and my own). Our physical senses lead us in trusted, certain ways to our inner world. The inner world offers peace and rest from the "hustle and bustle" of the outer world, as Gertrude put it, right in its midst. The spirit and the body are not mutually exclusive or pitted against one another. The spirit is not better, but it's distinct. It's always there, eternal, at one remove from time and space.

Time and place are important. They carry with them physical memories and sensory experiences necessary for the embodied spirit to find its way, while paving one for others.



*Photo by Ella Johnson*

## Notes & Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 5.25.3 (SCh 331:206, 208). My translation. Source abbreviations included in bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 3.63.1–2 (CF 63:177–78; SCh 143:250, 252).

<sup>3</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 1.11.9 (CF 35:74; SCh 139:178).

<sup>4</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 1.1.2 (CF 35:39; SCh 139:122).

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 1.1.2 (CF 35:39; SCh 139:122).

<sup>6</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 1.7.1 (CF 35:57–58; SCh 139:152, 154).

<sup>7</sup> Gertrud Jaron Lewis, "Introduction," in Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:6–9).

<sup>8</sup> Gertrude, *Exercises* 4.184 (CF 49:63; SCh 127:126).

<sup>9</sup> Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.510 (CF 49:91; SCh 127:196). In the *Herald*, she also replaces the popular image of John leaning on Christ's breast at the Last Supper with a young girl (*puella*). Gertrude, *Herald* 5.32.2 (SCh 331:256). See also Lewis, "Introduction," in Gertrude, *Exercises* (CF 49:6).

<sup>10</sup> Gertrude parenthetically remarks that readers outside of the religious state of life should make the appropriation to their own life circumstances (Gertrude, *Exercises* 3.21 [CF 49:41; SCh 127: 94]).

<sup>11</sup> Gertrude, *Exercises* 2.68–70 (CF 49:37; SCh 127:86).

<sup>12</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 1–2, 2.3.1, 105; SCh 139:

<sup>13</sup> Gertrude, *Herald* 1–2, 2.8.5, 123; SCh 139:268.

<sup>14</sup> Gertrude, *Exercises* 5.468–87, 90–91 (SCh 127:192, 194).

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