



Axis Mundi by Aloria Weaver

Clinging to the Axis Mundi: The Poetry of Politics

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Introduction

Writing poetry is an essential and organic process for me. Jung writes “The creative urge lives and grows... like a tree in the earth” (CW V. 15, par 115). I know that feeling. Writing poetry is how I plant myself on earth. The leap of associations from conscious mind to unconscious and back that is the magic of a poem is how I find my way back to the center, to the archetype of orientation—the Axis Mundi—which we recognize in many forms, among them— the Tree of

Life or World Tree, the Seven Chakras, the Motherline, the ladder between the worlds, the sacred mountain, that old black magic that connects us to the cosmos, whose wisdom goes back to the origins of our kind. I believe it is the essential work of poetry to reach back to the roots of human consciousness and



Figure 1 Seven Chakras

retrieve our collective soul. I believe poetry is a way to bring ourselves back into relation with our old black magic—the sun, moon and stars, animals, plants, ancestors—the Axis Mundi.



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Figure 2 The Motherline



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Figure 3 Blake's Stairway



Figure 4 Mt. Kailas



Figure 5 Black Magic



Figure 6 Stonehenge

The great ash tree that holds together earth, heaven, and hell by its roots and branches in Norse mythology.

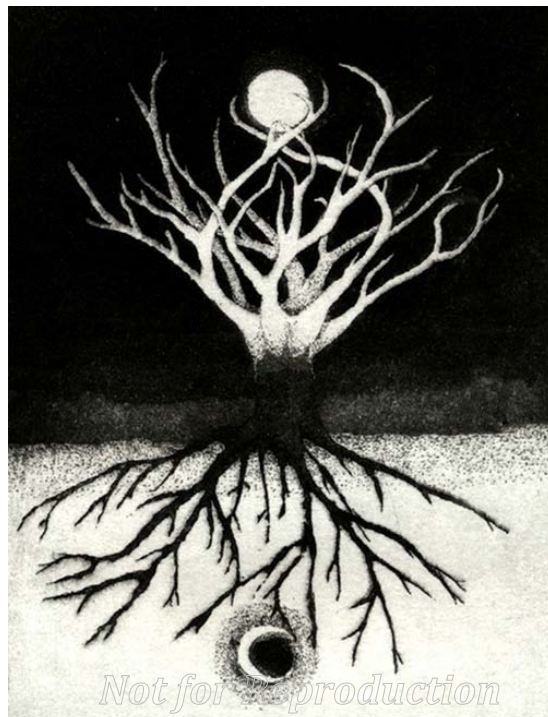


Figure 7 Yggdrasil

But how can poetry respond to the rancor, the bitterness, the extremism, the climate change deniers, the New Deal dismantlers, the Women's Rights plunderers, the hellish intensity of our collective moment? Poetry is no more than the flap of a butterfly's wings, the dart of a hummingbird—a strophe flung into the roar of the mob. Poetry does so little, dares so much. Poetry is the prophet down from the mountain, a gadfly on the body politic, a witness to the desecration; poetry sings our cultural myths, mourns what's been lost, praises the newborn day.

When the political leaps into my poems I am surprised and actually, grateful. As an introvert I mostly meet my muse in inner worlds. But sometimes she startles me with some iconic collective image, or jumps on me with fierce associations to the news of the day. Disturbing as the news may be such visitations from external reality feel numinous and strangely orienting. Something shifts in the imaginal realm. My spirit settles down; my soul finds the stairway between worlds.

I have chosen five poems that take very different slants on the political. I'll introduce the poem, then present it, accompanied by its images, and muse about it.

I. When I'm Gone

Recently, while meditating on mortality—familiar turf among poets—the elegiac phrase, “When I'm Gone” brought an entirely unexpected visitation from Adlai Stevenson—a powerful figure in my childhood. Suddenly, in a short poem of 22 lines, I was off and running through the political firestorms those of us who

were children in the '40s and '50s remember well. The poem touches the hot spots of my being; it is a totem pole of my tribal associations. Here's the poem:

When I'm Gone

Who will remember a girl's crush
on Adlai Stevenson? The earnest precinct

walks, the beloved silver lapel
pin—a shoe with a hole in its sole—

meaning eggheads are loveable—Remember Einstein's
mismatched socks? Who will remember

the violet glow of Oma's eyes
telling tales of Erich, the dying tiger

in the Berlin Zoo—his throaty greeting
each time she came to paint him—before she knew

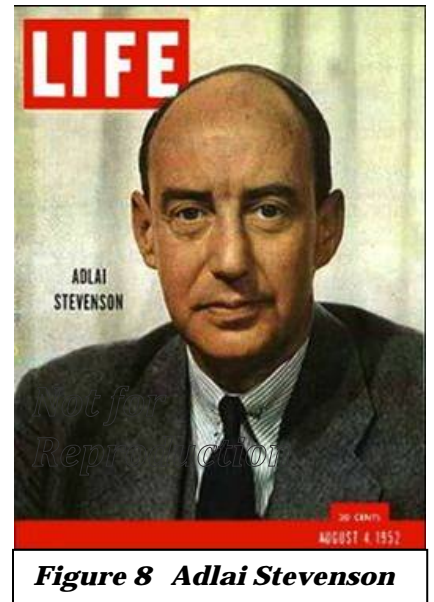


Figure 8 Adlai Stevenson

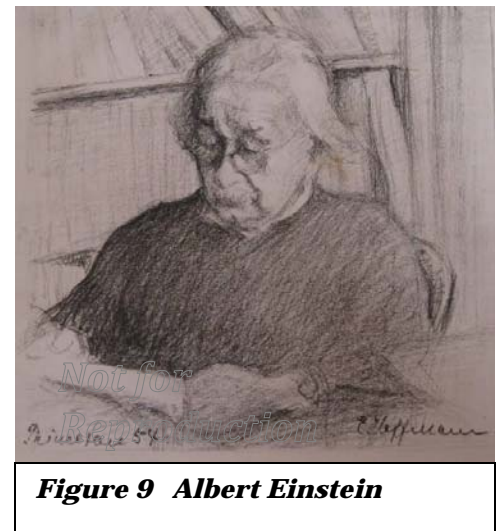


Figure 9 Albert Einstein



Figure 10 Tiger

she was marked a Jew. Who will remember
how safe it seemed in America? The war was won
the streets were calm, a child could play
cowboys and Indians all day until dusk



Figure 11 *Cowboys and Indians*



Figure 12 *Green lawns*

How green the lawns, how sweet the smell

of honeysuckle, before the House UnAmerican
committee, before billy clubs and dogs, before
four little girls in church



Figure 13 House Un-American Activities Committee



Figure 14 McCarthy hearings



Figure 15 Four little girls.

before Howl?



Figure 16 Allen Ginsberg

Who will remember her skinny
little girl's body, before breasts had their way

and nothing was safe anymore?

The poem above plants the totem pole squarely in my personal life and my projections on the body politic. When I was eight and nine, my family lived in Princeton and knew Albert Einstein socially. He was a member of our tribe of refugee Jews from Hitler's Europe. We were all aware that he was under surveillance by the FBI because of his courageous stands against racism, McCarthyism and war. My grandmother, whom we called Oma, was an artist. She taught me that making art is a way to stay connected to one's depths through treacherous times. She did the sketch of Einstein you see. She also did the painting of the tiger at the Berlin zoo. My brothers and I loved to hear her stories of how Erich the tiger—at the end of his caged life—would greet her with a soft guttural *grrrrrr* as she approached with her easel.

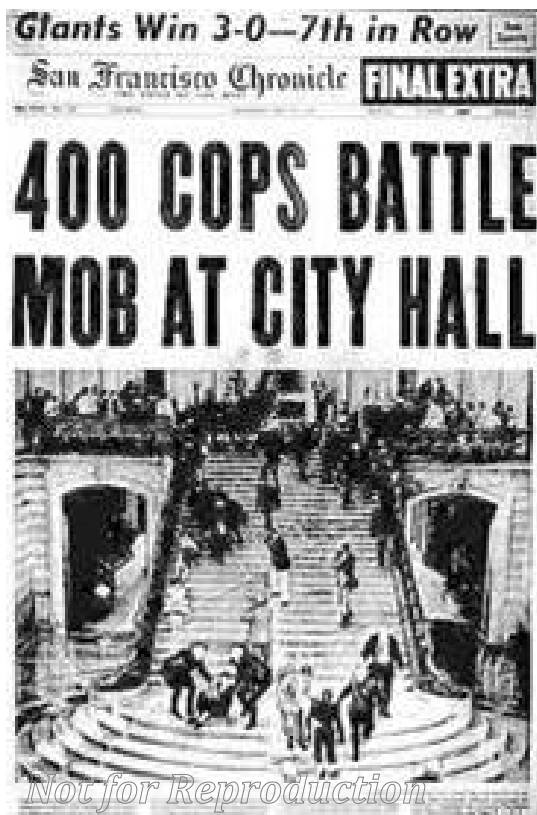


Figure 17 San Francisco City Hall

When I was thirteen and my family lived in Berkeley, my best friend Cathy and I were passionate precinct walkers, wearing the beloved silver lapel pin, in love with Stevenson who was our good father, the kind and thoughtful egghead, unlike our own rageful and dangerous egghead fathers. Stevenson was the egghead's culture bearer—he spoke for our tribe of intellectuals. When he lost his second election it seemed as though the world had collapsed around our young ears.

Cathy and I were also passionate

protesters against the House Un-American Activities Committee. We were among those in the iconic photo, being hosed down the steps of San Francisco's City Hall. (You can see us on the left, being washed down the stairway. Cathy is the young woman halfway down and I'm just below her.) It seemed as though our America was being lost. Alan Ginsberg, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, howled our collective rage. Who carries that voice today?

II. Emanuel

In the runup to the Iraq war I had a "Motherline" moment at an anti-war demonstration. The Motherline is the connection between women over generations, which I wrote about in my first book, *The Motherline: Every Woman's Journey to Find Her Female Roots*. The Motherline, as I envision it, and as my friend Sara Philips Spaulding has painted it for the book's recent reissue, is another form of the Axis Mundi. It is called the Mother Tree of Life by the Makonde in Africa.

On that day, in January 2003 my daughter was going into labor, and I kept in touch with her by cell phone during the demonstration, so I could participate in this outer world event, and still make it to my grandson's birth.



Figure 18 *The Motherline*



Figure 19 *Mother Tree of Life*

Suddenly I was rocketed back in time to another demonstration, this one against the Vietnam war, with my daughter in a stroller. Here is the poem:

Emanuel

on the day you descended into our world circles within
circles opened one hundred and fifty thousand
people marched up Market street to protest a wrong war
not in our name not in your name Emanuel they chanted
and the drag queens of the city came out beautiful in their highest
heels their sleekest black velvet and they thanked us so much

for coming out to say “no blood for oil” “war is not healthy
for children and other living beings” and an old man on roller blades
gave yellow roses to the little girls and a woman bared her very pregnant
belly with a peace sign painted upon it and i spoke every hour
on my cell phone to your mother to find out how close
were her pains it was a few hours before your dark head
would crown your broad shoulders twist out and that glistening coil
of your cord from the other world which your father cut
while your mother cried out to behold you old wisdom
still clinging about you Emanuel it was the day after the full moon
in Capricorn and the people had awakened to the gathering armies the gulf
upon which we all teetered and returned to the streets as we had
when your mother was my baby girl and we walked up Market street
to protest a wrong war



Figure 20 Peace march



Figure 21 War protest

Emanuel you have descended and the world is so new your first poop
is big news and your good latch upon your mother's breast you are
so sweet so calm a being released from forever to sing among us

little house of God
may we deserve you



Figure 22 *Young Mother Nursing Her Child* by
Mary Cassatt

The collision of a birth and a war is a story I trace back in my life to when I was a very young woman, newly married, beginning to realize that I was pregnant. It was in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis, when it seemed that human life itself hung in the balance. My own birth, as the first child born to my family in the New World after the Shoah—the catastrophe that befell my people and many in my family—holds those opposites as well. I'm sure that my political fixations have much to do with this aspect of my destiny—this culture complex. I grew up among people who were constantly scanning the horizon for the next Hitler. That I should live to have grandchildren, who would have believed it?

Emanuel, better known as Manny, is now a thoughtful nine year old who seems firmly planted in his own axis mundi—which to my bemusement takes the form of a golf club!

III. Madelyn Dunham, Passing On



Figure 23 *Follow the Drinking Gourd*

This is the cover image of a children's story book by the same name. It is written and illustrated by Jeannette Winter, published in 1992. It tells the story of how what seems like a simple folk song is actually a map to freedom.

Nov. 4th, 2008—Barack Obama's election—was a peak experience in my political life, maybe in yours as well. All my childhood Einstein and Adlai Stevenson yearnings came out of the closet and sang. It was as if we'd followed the drinking gourd all the way to freedom, as if the stairway to heaven was illuminated, as if the chariot had come to carry us home, as though we'd made it



Figure 24 *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* by John McCrady

out of Egypt and were on our way to the promised land. (This marvelous painting, 1937, is by John McCrady- 1911-1968, an African American painter from New Orleans.)

The muse came to me in the guise of Obama's

white grandmother, who had helped raise him in Hawaii and who died just before his election. The poem is in her voice:

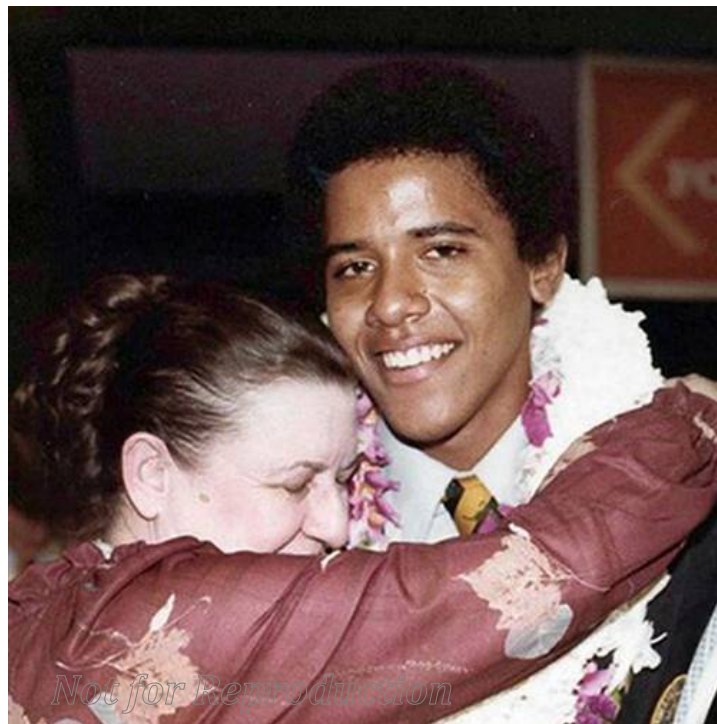


Figure 25 *Barack Obama and his grandmother, Madelyn Dunham*

Madelyn Dunham, Passing On

A wind blows when we die

For each of us owns a wind (/Xan poem)

I never knew I'd be wind, when I died—a warm wind

on my way home from the islands—a light breeze

off the lake—breath in my grandson's lungs

as he speaks to the crowds on this—



Figure 26 *Obama Family on election night, 2008.*

his election night. Does he know this is me—

touching his face and the faces of those who never believed

they'd see the day. Who'd have thought I'd be breath
in the bodies of so many strangers; who'd have thought I'd be music,
sweet as the sound of the slack key guitar, or that I'd become



Figure 27 Barack Obama and Kenyan relative

an ancestral spirit in the land where they know how to feed
the dead—they're roasting four bulls, sixteen chickens,
some sheep and goats, to feast the one
who belongs to us all—to the Kenyan village
of his grandmother Sara, to the spirits of his father and mother, his black
and white grandfathers, to the ones who are laughing and crying in Grant
Park.



Figure 28 *Tears in Grant Park. Election night, 2008.*

In the land of the dead— nothing is over—we still wander, still worry

take pleasure, make trouble, demand our portion

of beer, of drumming, of dancing all night. I say to you living—

though I've drifted away, though I'm only a sigh—an ex—

halation—I can feel your whole world shift—

though I'm only the faraway sound

of a slack key guitar...



Figure 29 *Hawaiian sunset*

It happens that the Jungian International Congress was held in Cape Town, South Africa, in August preceding the election. My husband Dan and I had been there and were steeped in the politics of South Africa and its rich lore and culture. I had read wonderful poetry based on Bushman legends, and been fascinated by the notion that we become wind when we die.

Africans were so excited about Obama. Dan brought some Obama bumper stickers and they earned us a free pass at the airport when our luggage was overweight. Celebrating the election of a president who had both American and African ancestry was a transformative moment in the life of the country and in my personal life.



Figure 30 *Swing Low* by Ruth Star Rose

This is a lithograph by Ruth Star Rose, 1887-1965, a white artist with a social conscience. She was moved by the power of religion in Black people's lives. This is one of a series of lithographs illustrating spirituals.

It is typical of my muse that even in a moment of elation she shows up in the form of a ghost. Like Jung, who writes "Take pains to waken the dead" (Jung 2009 p.244) relating to personal and collective dead is an essential practice for me. I saw this in another light recently, when I went to see the remarkable exhibit "1968" at the Oakland Museum with my husband and son. We stood, tears in our eyes, with a young black man whom we did not know, watching a film of Robert

Kennedy's casket passing through the American landscape, greeted by mourners of all races and ages. The young man said he was two when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, that RFK was his hero. I reflected on how Obama's election tied us back to that unbearable year when not only Robert Kennedy but Martin Luther King were killed. I hope their ghosts were dancing on election day, 2008.

IV. Because the Mountain is My Companion



Figure 31 Mt. Kailas

A Himalayan peak in modern day Nepal

As we all know those moments of delight and joy after the 2008 election did not last long. We were soon plunged into a period of bitterness and disappointment for those of us who had big expectations for Obama's presidency.

We thought we had climbed the mountain. Suddenly we found ourselves lost in the valley of the shadow; the voices of the climate change deniers, the women's rights plunderers and other extremists filled the air waves and confused our sense of direction. Who are we as a nation, where are we going? What happened to the wisdom of Einstein and Stevenson?



Figure 32 *Oma's watercolor painting of mountains.*

The
 mountain spoke to
 me one winter day,
 in the midst of the
 rancor and
 frustration.
 Mountains have
 always been
 sacred to me—
 they are the form

of the Axis Mundi in which divinity reveals itself, to Moses, to Martin Luther King, to my grandmother who painted them beautifully, mostly in Switzerland. Jung says of the mountain, that “it stands for the goal of the pilgrimage and ascent” (CW 9i, par 403 n). I live near a mountain I love, Mt. Diablo. The mountain gave me this poem:



Figure 33 *Mt. Diablo with snow.*

Because the Mountain is My Companion

Because it meanders from coyote yellow

to occasional green

Because we know that temperatures are rising—

we never expected this sudden freeze—

Because the mountain reached into cold wet skies this morning

And gathered itself a celestial garment of snow

as though it had ascended

become an Alp

a Himalaya

Because my tawny old Devil Mountain
is a suddenly wild thing of snow and of ice
I try to put these things together: how green
the hills glow along the freeway
On the news the leaders of nations gather
to argue about carbon footprints



Figure 34 San Francisco Santas

while in the city dozens of red and white Santas—
mostly without umbrellas—
are gathering in United Nations Plaza

Because the North Pole where Santa
makes gifts
is under water

And the Great White Bear has walked to the end
of his melting world



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Figure 35 Polar bear

Because all our lives there's been some catastrophe

just behind us

just before us

You could hide under your desk—protect

the back of your neck...



Figure 36 Duck and cover

or you could get in your car and drive back

to the mountain

which has descended

to its essential coyote yellow

its occasional splashes of green

Because the mountain knows the eons in its bones

it is a patient, broad shouldered bearer

of wind, sun, rain, change...

I ask it to teach me the long slow way...

It always surprises me, how the associative leaps of a poem, combining conscious and unconscious—not unlike those made in an analytic hour—make deeper sense of things than can the conscious mind alone. Those of you who know San Francisco, are likely familiar with the strange winter ritual in which folks dress up like Santa Claus and go bar hopping. The sight of San Francisco’s charming eccentrics, leapt like a mountain goat in my imagination to Santa at the North Pole, to melting ice caps and the fate of the Polar Bear, to the “duck and cover” terrors of my childhood.

When I was looking on line for images of kids getting under desks in the ‘50s, I was horrified to run into “Bert the Turtle,” an official Civil Defense film directed at children, which informs us that “children need to learn to ‘duck and cover,’ get into their shell like Bert the Turtle, because the Atomic Bomb, like fire, is very dangerous...There’s a bright flash, brighter than the sun, brighter than anything you have ever seen. The flash

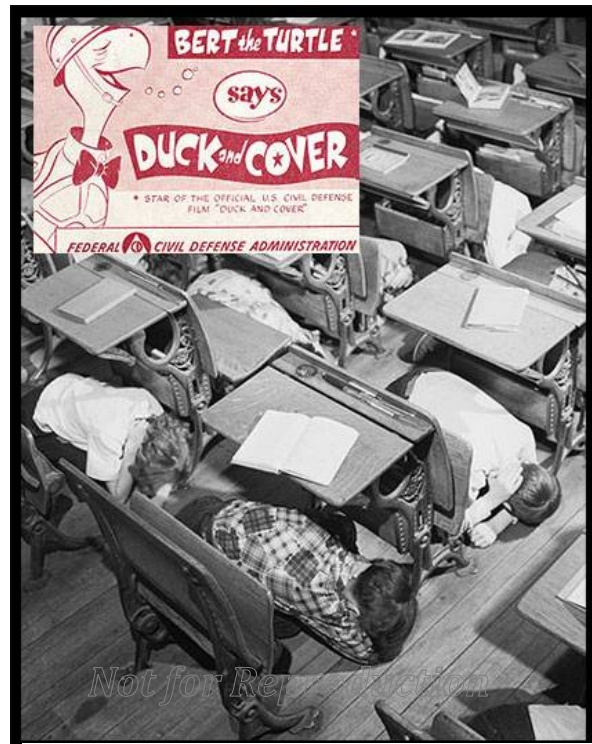


Figure 37 Bert the Turtle

of an Atomic Bomb can come at any time. But if you “duck and cover” you’ll be much safer.”

Really? I remember how absurd it seemed to put a wooden desk between me and an Atomic Bomb. I remember how terrified we were doing those drills,

and how our teachers and the “duck and cover” propagandists seemed monstrously inept at best, and liars at worst.

These days, as I listen to my grandchildren, I realize they have their own version of these terrors. Growing up in California they are lucky to learn about ecology and the biosphere in school. But they live with a sense of impending disaster; they worry about the polar bears and about the warming oceans. They hear the grown ups rant about the climate change deniers, the lack of political will to address the terrifying issues our planet faces. They wonder, as we all do, about their futures. My hope is that their amazing technological and ecological intelligence will find as yet unknown ways to protect and bless our Mother Earth and the Sacred Mountain. I pray they will have patience for the “long slow way.”



Figure 38 Kundalini

V. Sisters of My Time

I am a member of the generation of women whose lives were transformed by the women’s movement and by the goddess. They emerged together—the spirit of the women of our times and the spirit of the forgotten great goddess ripped us out of our narrow domesticated self images,

opened all seven of our chakras to the wild worlds within us. But as the myth tells us, eating the forbidden fruit of the tree has unexpected consequences. A lifetime later I look back on all this and marvel. This is the poem that came:



Sisters of My Time

What became of our fierce flowering? Don't you remember
how that Old Black Magic revealed Herself to us—gave us the fever
the crazy nerve to burn bras, leave husbands, grow animal hair?
We knew Her belly laugh, Her circle dance
Her multiple orgasms—It was Our Period.



Figure 40 Women's movement



Figure 41 Bra burning

What became of us—Our Period long gone—stuck
in traffic jams, eaten by Facebook—gone stale
amidst the unwept unsayable? Some of us burst
our vessels. Some of us descended into cellars—
ghosts among the apricot preserves.



Figure 42 *Black magic with skull*

Meanwhile our bones thin, our skin loosens, our hands
can't handle a mason jar. And our Red Queen, what of her?
Her rain forests are bleeding out. Her corn won't tassel,
Her cattle are dying of thirst, Her Ivory Billed Woodpecker—
that God Almighty Bird—has not been heard for a generation.



Figure 43 Ivory Billed Woodpecker

Our Lady of Ripening's gone
 on a rampage—She's hot flashes
 in the heartland, fire in the forest, flood
 in the bayou, weeping ice caps. Our grandchildren starve
 for Her belly laugh, Her circle dance.

It's our time, Sisters, to gather
 what spells we know, what seeds we've cultivated
 what Oracle speaks in our dreams, for the root cellars
 of memory, the mason jars of prayer—emergency rations—
 for the daughters of the daughters of our daughters

long after that Old Black Magic
has spirited us away...



Figure 44 Gaia



Figure 45 Hathor

Things haven't exactly worked out the way we thought they would in our young goddess worshipping days. My generation has had to face the dark side of the goddess, her rages, her fire and flood. Perhaps she has come back to our consciousness now, because we need the depth and breadth of all she is in order

to hang onto the Axis Mundi. We need to remember our ancient knowledge, our seed gathering Motherline knowledge, our tree goddess serpent knowledge, our body knowledge—the wisdom of the chakras—that old black magic of the forest, the moon, and of Stonehenge.

My generation of women opened the floodgates to female creativity. It is our task now, late in life, to bring the arts we've cultivated as offerings to the work of retrieving our collective soul.

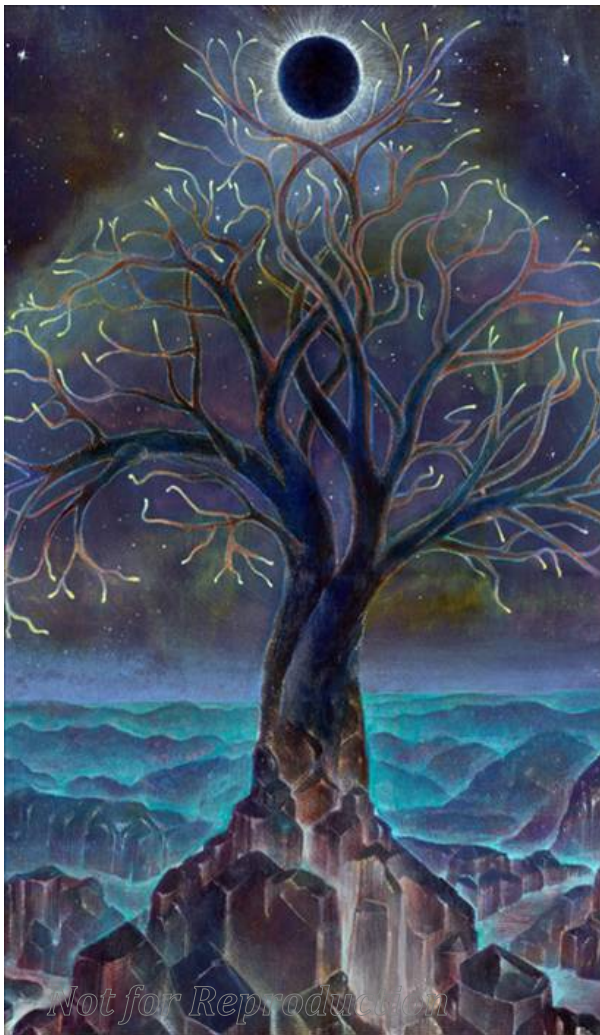


Figure 46 *Axis Mundi* by Aloria Weaver

I want to close with the image with which we began, a luminous Tree of Life crowned by an eclipse of the sun. It is by Aloria Weaver, a contemporary visionary painter, and a member of a new generation of artists whose work we all need to bring us back to the center, to the roots of our humanity, to the Axis Mundi, the Tree of Our Lives.

References

- Jung, C.G. (1960-1979). The collected works of C.G. Jung. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- _____ (2009). The Red Book. Sonu Shamdasani. ed. Philemon Series & W. W. Norton & Co.