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Our Lady: Untie the strong woman

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El Rio Debajo del Rio

My grandmother said that if you listened to stories about Mother Maria for nine weeks straight without interruption ... or if you said the rosary for nine days straight without your mind wandering once ... or if you walked to one of Mama Marushka's shrines in the woods for nine nights in a row -- nine being the number of months Blessed Mother carried the living Christo before giving birth to the Light of the world -- that if you would do any of these, that Blessed Mother would appear to you and answer any question you might have about how to live on earth fully ensouled.

But my grandmother also said there was a shortcut. Need. That any human being needing comfort, vision, guidance or strength was heard by the Immaculate Heart ... and thus, Blessed Mother would immediately arrive with veils flying ... to place us under her mantle for protection, to give us that one thing the world longs for so: the warmth of the mother's compassionate touch.

I know you and I have seen many statutes of Our Lady, lovingly made, erasing all her Semitic features or her Asiatic, Inuit, Nahua, Polynesian, tribal European, Celtic, African, indigenous ones.

I don't believe this was meant as a racial preference. Perhaps in the beginning, "whitening," as in ancient alchemical poetics, was merely an attempt to show that whiteness and purity are often associated in much "Western" imagination.

So white-skinned. Blonde-haired, and our Mary Maria, Mir-yam, Guadalupe, over the eons became spoken about in more and more hushed tones too:

She's pure, you know. Demure.

As they say, so content, so gentle, so quiet, so passive, so submissive.

Yet, I must say No. I say instead: Fire.

I know, and I hope with deepest love that you do too, know the Mary, Maria, Mir-yam, Guadalupe of wilder heart, of long journeys with a blurred map, of night fires at the far encampment. Our Lady who, when all the apostles ran away ... she stayed. Blessed Mother, she who is renowned as the one able to wear the flaming, exploding fire lakes of the Sun.

No demure little cabbage, that woman. No paltry, well-behaved carbon dot. No follower of worldly orders. Quite the contrary. Our exemplar.

I've a little white porcelain Mary that some good soul hand-painted carefully in a factory of thousands of porcelain Marys on a conveyor belt ... tiny gold curlicues on the selvage of her mantle. And lovely.

But the Mother I carry with me everywhere is the woods-woman La Nuestra Señora, Guadalupe, she whose green mantle is fashioned of moss from the north side of trees ... and star shards caught in her wild silver hair ... and her gown is soft, coarse woven cloth with the thorns and flowers of wild roses caught in it, and she has dirty hands from growing things earthy, and from her day and night work alongside her hard-working sons and daughters, their children, their elders, all.

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La Guadalupe is no symmetrical thing with palms equally outstretched and frozen, but she is ever in motion. If there is emotion, she is there. If there is commotion, she is there. If there is elation, she is there. Impatience, she is there. Fatigue: She is there. Fear, unrest, sorrow, beauty, inspiration: She is there.

And she is demure in a sense, yes, but different from those who would fade her essence into an anemia: Yes, she is demure as in demurring to be contained and made small.

And she is calm, yes, but not without will to rise again and again. Instead, yes, she is calm as the mighty ocean is calm as it moves in enormous troughs and pinnacles, its huge waves like a heartbeat: easy, intentional, muscular.

And she is pure, yes, but not as in never going dark, never having doubt, never taking a wrong turn for a time, but rather pure, yes, as a gemstone is cut into a hundred sparkling facets ... that kind of pure, meaning gem-cut by travail, adventure and challenge -- and yet fully without a streak of dead glass in any facet. By the cutting, by means of the emery cloth and the finest polish ... instead of deadened, and despite all: still pure-fire bright.

Were I asked how one just coming to truly be with Our Lady might think about our Maria, Nuestra Madre Grande, I'd say, Think of her not in the ways you've been told/ sold. But, rather, seek her with your own eyes without blinders and heart without shutters. Look low instead of high. Look right under your nose. The exotic locale is not necessary. She is found in a shard of glass, in a broken curb, in a hurt heart, and in any soul knowing or unknowing, yet crazy in love with the divine mysteries ... and not quite so in love with mundane challenges. Yet, she is there. Everywhere. Do not accept vacuous, vapid words or images of her. Untie the Strong Woman. She's been waiting for your special touch.

I often think of Guadalupe, Blessed Mother, with regard to an illustrated novel by Jonathan Swift that carried a picture of Gulliver, the traveler, pinioned to the ground. Gulliver had become a quasi-prisoner of the Lilliputians, a tiny people only 6 inches high. They critiqued Gulliver, among other things, for being in several ways "too big." So, they tied him crisscross over all his limbs, and took him down with ropes then wrapped around brass nails and driven into pallet and ground.

The tiny Lilliputians stood on Gulliver's chest and felt they had tied down the leviathan, the behemoth. But Gulliver just simply sat up ... and all his bonds burst, and all the tiny Lilliputians fell off, tumbling into the grass.

The giant lumbered off with the trivial rope-strings trailing behind. The Lilliputians shook their heads -- as usual -- trying to make sense of the Gulliver figure that was, in form, similar to themselves in body ... but in an entirely other way, so very unlike themselves.

I think many can understand this push to pare down the numinous, the unfamiliar, the unknown. What is truly divine mystery can be overwhelming at first. Yet it would seem in a culture that likes to minimize true magnitude of talents, for instance ... and to magnify the minimus, "the little man," that is, the flimsiness or meanness or not well-formed qualities of matters ... that it is not only our calling, but our troth, our sacred promise given from the very first moment we ever saw the soul be assaulted in anyone, by anyone ... to untie the Strong Woman now. And forever.

Way too often, the only relationship we've been taught/told/offered to have with Blessed Mother ... is either none, through silence about her rich bloodline with us ... or else one in which we must agree to bind her down into a small and handle-able form ... diminishing her, by making her be the quiescent "good girl" ... in phony opposition to having another woman, The Magdalene, be the less quiescent "bad girl." These are distortions of both women's origins and gifts. Untie them both, then.

I have listened to some few theologians talking about Our Lady as though she is an appendage to a group of historical facts. Neither is she, as some charge, a superstition. She is not an obedient building made of cement, marble or bricks. She is not to be used as a length of holy wire to bind us all into docility, severing the other hundreds of traits given by God for being beautifully and reasonably human. She is not meant as a fence, but as a gate.

Who Protects Whom? An Ironic Story

I remember a *New York Times* book reviewer scorning an author who had urged readers to ask Blessed Mother for guidance. I have never come closer to getting on an airplane immediately, flying to New York, pouncing on that so-called critic's crate-for-a-desk, and calling for a plague of frogs to take over her entire everything -- including, as the old fairy tale "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes" told, that whenever the criticizer would speak from that day forward, lizards and toads and snakes would drop from their lips.

Ai! I was almost more horrified by my own horrible reaction than by the critic's crummy take on supplication and Blessed Mother. Almost. Yet, I'd understood Guadalupe to say into my heart at that moment, something like this: "All are mine whether they know me or not, practice a devotion or not." And that too, that oceanic generosity of the Mother -- so unusual in a culture that uses war and death terms for most everything -- that turned most of my ire into better understanding of the attitude I must try to take. For knowledge, for peace, for mercy. And this too, I believe, suddenly being inspired to strive to do/ be grace, not just receive it, that kind of sometimes startling intelligence, can occur when the Strong Woman is untied.

I feel I was called to the priesthood as a little child. A priesthood that perhaps does not exist for me in this world, and that was/is to take her and her works and through her that of her precious Child into the world. So I take mi Guadalupe to various gatherings, retreats and churches, some of which are, but some of which are not Roman, and who are kind enough to ask me to give the sermon or make space for me to heal and bless others with my hands during that set-aside time in a temple or *temenos*.

I tell about her world, her life, her daughters and sons, and always there is at least one someone who says, "We don't believe in her." Or, "How can you believe in her?" And I say I do not believe in her. I know her. Face to face, skin to skin. Mi madre. She is my mother."

This is the Guadalupe I think you know of, or sense, or want to know, or are very close to for years now; one who is joy-centric and sorrow-mending, one who is present in every way. And in so understanding that pull to the Holy Woman, we do untie the Strong Woman.

I pray strength into your hands and heart ... and inspiration and daring -- and fire -- to lift the Great Woman away from whichever Lilliputians have tied her down into more manageable form ... on any of the pathways you travel. No matter which dissertation or diminution she has been tied down by, she, greater than any Gulliver by far ... the moment we ask for her, see her, converse with her, love her ? she gracefully rises up, pins flying in all directions.

With much love, some levity, and certainly deep longing, together, let us all sit up too, let us make all the pins fly too ... untying ourselves as we untie the Strong Woman.

May it be deeply so for you.

May it be so for me, also.

May it be so for all of us, ever.

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"One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes," an idiosyncratic folk tale told by the Magyar people of my families, is about seeing the world without seeing the soul (one eye); seeing what everyone else sees with no amazement attached (two eyes); and seeing in uncommonly brave or insightful ways, that is, seeing the worlds of soul, spirit and matter all interwoven (three eyes).

In the tale, people are tested by an angel in the disguise of an old woman who asks merely for a drink of cool water from the farmers' ?deepest wells.? Those who scorn her plea experience sudden negative changes to their bodily functions and to inanimate objects nearby ... thus revealing how those who scorn are, in fact, put together inwardly. Those who willingly fetch water for the ?angel in disguise? are rewarded too, by sudden changes to voice, senses and surroundings ... these revealing outwardly how those who serve are also in fact put together inwardly at heart.

The transformative aspect of the tale is found in the characters who failed to recognize the angel/old woman the first time, but who plead to be given another chance to care for her more generously, more consciously, this time. Unlike many 19th-century tales overwritten into reward-punishment tales only -- "what's done is done and no more chances for you?" -- in this venerable tale, more chances are ever given ... for the old woman is the angel of generosity and love for the soul.

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