

GRANDMOTHERS OF THE LIGHT

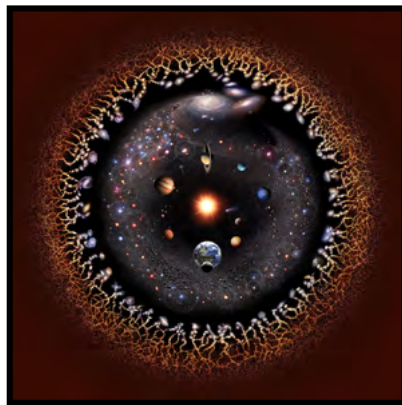
Paula Gunn Allen, PhD

At a time when academia still denied the existence of Native American literature, Paula Gunn Allen (1939 - 2008) recognized its importance and dedicated her career to proving its merit. The daughter of a Lebanese-American father and a Laguna-Sioux-Scottish mother, Paula Gunn Allen was raised in New Mexico on the Laguna Pueblo where she was deeply influenced by matriarchal Pueblo culture. She offered that many Native tribes were “gynocentric” - with women making the most important decisions - while other tribes stressed a balance between male and female, rather than domination. This article is the Introduction to a section in her book Grandmothers of the Light, a collection of goddess stories from Native American civilization across North America. In it, she shares myths that have guided shamanesses and shamans toward an understanding of the sacred for centuries.

Cosmology is the study of the ordered arrangement of the universe, and in an arcane sense this section is a cosmology. The cosmogony that unfolds is essentially laid out in the eight stories that compose this section, and they combine to provide a multifaceted picture of concepts the preceding stories introduced, knitting them to ritual as the mediating principle between human and supernatural. As we have seen, in the void there is energy, and it is an energy that is self-aware. It is thinking. Nor is it a singular phenomenon, but multiplicitous, for intelligence cannot arise from the absence of intelligence, nor can variety arise from uniformity. The singular can no more give rise to the many than the many can become the singular. However we look at it – the multiverse that surrounds us, there is no such thing as only, no such thing as one. That we think otherwise is testimony to the depth of our patriarchalization. Snowflakes, leaves, humans, plants, raindrops, stars, molecules, microscopic

entities all come in communities. The singular cannot in reality exist.

The void, or the Great Mystery (Great Mysteries would be more accurate), is not an object but a period; it consists of events.

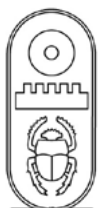


A logarithmic scale conception of the observable universe with the Solar System at the center, by artist Pablo Carlos Budassi.

The events that transpire have neither beginning nor end. They simply are always and everywhere. (Location or place is also event, verb, not noun, process not product.) The events of the void have names or intelligence-locations (processes) and action. All is mind – or perhaps it is more exact to say everything is intelligence-bearing. But that can't be said in English, a monotheistic

language structured in terms of hierarchy, individualism, objectification, and stopped motion. “Everything is intelligence” is ungrammatical, nonsense. Yet however ungrammatical the construct may be, it is accurate.

The essential nature of the cosmos is female intelligences, that is, goddesses. There are several rather than one,



indicating that multiplicity is a fundamental characteristic of all that is. The primacy of relationship is also expressed in the kinship of the creatrix intelligences, pointing to the basic organization of the multiverse or cosmos. As the multi-intelligences think in relationship contexts, ritual magic operates. Out of the particular mode of thinking – the primal, the cosmogynological, the ritual magic – all that are continue to exist enduringly, continuously. What changes or transformations occur are simply vast energy/intelligence fields doing what they do, doing it in concert, in harmony, and in significance.

The fundamental order of the multiverse thus is ritual, magical, transformative, and it is enduring because change is a basic characteristic of thinking. Further, relationship and thinking are basic characteristics of change. You might say that ritual magic is a three-way street, a three-legged process, a journey along a three-pronged road, and that three-part structure is eternal and infinite.

With the goddesses, the sacred twins or brothers are entities and expressions of this tripartite process, and they remind us that the masculine expression of multiversal energy/intelligence is movement of a dual, but not oppositional, nature. The duality

that the masculine (which is a special case or subset of the feminine) embodies is complementary in essence, though that complementarity sometimes takes a form that appears adversarial or polar. The most notable characteristic of masculine intelligence is its periodicity, especially when considered against a background of endurance which is feminine. The warrior sings: I die, but the earth continues forever. Beautiful Earth, you alone remain. Or the Anishinabeg claim: Woman is forever, eternal. Man comes from woman and to woman he returns.

Thus male energy is a certain kind of movement, as divine or mysterious in nature as female energy, but arising from it and returning to it. It is that kind of motion. Movement, motion, is all that is (all that are); matter is a special case of motion, and all motion is material because verbs are *names* at base. The Lakota say “God is moves.” They characterize the Great Mystery as Skan, Sky That Moves, Wind. White Buffalo Woman is She Who Sends and Calls Back the Winds. The Navajo put Wind into the tale of creation and Wind, (Nilch’i) who moves, is the intelligence-being of Changing Woman, who is herself of the Air Spirit People.



Native American symbol for wind.



Dignity of Earth & Sky, a statue in South Dakota honoring the Lakota and Dakota peoples.

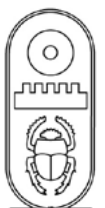
Yellow Woman is taken by Whirlwind Man to his mother's home where she grinds corn as is the duty of a bride, to make a gift of her skill to her groom's mother. Whirlwind takes her and so she is possessed of power; not that he gives her power, but that he recognizes her power and therefore takes her home. Yellow Woman is ritual magic, and the story, like its companion tale, explores some of the meanings of her identity, as well as that of her sisters and their four-way relationship as it pertains to the working of magic and the place of ritual in magical operations.

The Yellow Woman stories and the other stories in this section explore the significance of ritual magic as a female identity, and they do so in a sacred manner. They explore sacred thinking, demonstrating that to think in a sacred manner is to participate in the ritual that is the time or location of a magical event. The story of Yellow Woman and Whirlwind Man, like the stories of how Grandmother Spider brought the light, Older Sister and Younger Sister, and the rest included here, is a magical event – not only as told but simultaneously as enacted. Both, not either, are necessary if the exploration is to bear the fruit of intelligence, if its significance is to be adequately conveyed. The stories

in this section are all ritual-magic-stories (ritual AND magic AND stories). They are not stories about pretend beings such as populate children's literature, cartoons, and popular films. They are stories for pilgrims along the path, for those who are students of the woman's medicine way. When these stories are entered as a room is entered, as wilderness is entered, as the surf (and self) is entered, one moves into mythic space and becomes a voyager in the universe of power.

This section is concerned with the roles supernatural female intelligences play as mediators between the mortal and supernatural worlds. These goddesses and demigoddesses are agents of negotiation and as such inhabit the borderland between the purely supernatural and the purely mortal, two energy-modes that are connected at certain points along their respective spectra. When Yellow Woman mates with Sun Man, the twins result. It is fairly evident that this story is about planting. It is less evident that a connection between planting seeds in soil and planting seeds in Woman have analogous results: the bestowal of supernatural life that provides nourishment to the people.

The arcane implications of the story (of which my rendition is a fragment of



a long cycle) are clarified in the story that follows. Yellow Woman who in the first story is an outcast who lives with her mother outside the community is in this narrative one of four sisters. The energy of female intelligence takes on many guises, reminding us that identity is formed by context and is a function of ritual purpose rather than of self-will or individuation. As an abductee, captive of holy forces, Yellow Woman effects the ritual her sisters devise to find her. Her return is contingent on her familial connection, which is the intelligence that renders the ritual the story embodies potent.

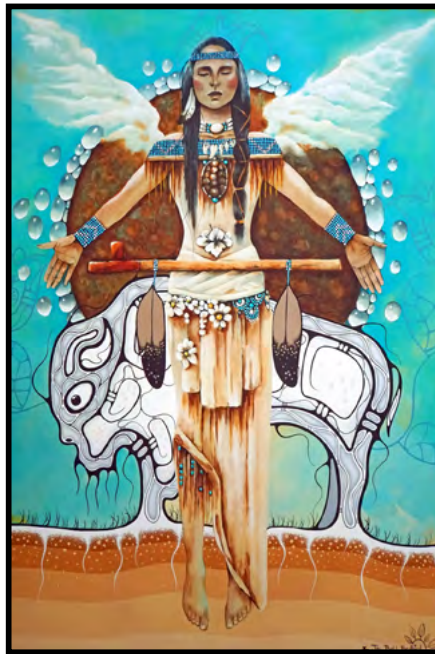
Community imparts power to Grandmother Spider's magic in the next story – one in which she operates as a supernatural or immortal rather than as a goddess or creative principle; while in the story of Oiyó Kepi we see the creative power of a full-fledged medicine woman at work. In her hands, water is a sufficient curative because her powers are enormous. She can shake her moccasins and populate the terrain with a variety of creatures.

White Buffalo Woman is a priestess; she is *wakan*, that is, sacred, powerful. The magic she manifests is not as important as the power of the teaching she brings. Rather, magic underscores the teaching, contextualizing the nature of right relations between the people and the mysteries, enabling them to navigate the borderland path that runs along the boundaries of the mortal and immortal domains.

Another kind of ritual magic is addressed in the story of Older Sister and Younger Sister, despite its echoes of the stories of Yellow Woman and Whirlwind Man and Oiyó Kepi. Like the former, the abductions result in a gift from the immortals to the people, though the gaining and giving of the gift necessitates the transformation of the women into immortals and entails their final separation from their community.

Each of the stories speaks to the isolation of the sacred women from their human communities in one way or another, indicating that the pursuit of sacred power requires the sacrifice of belonging, the loss of the familiar, and the attendant loss of identity and place. In a number of regards, the stories and the rituals they embody tell us that sacrifice of deeply personal needs is required of all who walk the path of power. The stories of Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis, which I wove together for the story that appears here, contain the poignancy of sacrifice but also much of the humor and balance that accompany experiences of the sacred.

With Clear Sky and Fair Maiden, the poignancy of transformational operations, manipulations whereby beauty and sorrow combine, becomes the empowering agency of creative ritual magic. In this story the creative prowess of female intelligence becomes once more the theme, drawing this section to a close that mates it with the section preceding it.



White Buffalo Calf Woman, by Jay Bell
Redbird and Halina Stopyra. Image via
Dennis Jarvis/Flickr.