

Feminine Wisdom Summit

The Female Shaman and the Role of Darkness

A Conversation with Gabriela Gutierrez



Cissi Hi Gabriela, thank you so much for being here. I have so looked forward to meeting you today. I have followed you for a while, and I love your writing on Substack – I recommend anyone to go there and read it. So thank you so much for being with us today.



Gabriela Thank you for having me, Cissi. It's a pleasure.

Cissi We're going to talk about a topic that is very, very close to my own heart – the female shaman and the role of darkness. So I'm just going to hand it over to you and see where it takes us.

What Did the Female Shamans Believe?

Gabriela I thought maybe we could begin with the question of what female shamans believed – what we can track, and then perhaps incorporate into our own lives, when we long for a deeper relationship with our spiritual life, with the land, and with the more-than-human world.

When I started asking these questions, I was very drawn to a spiritual reality, but throughout my twenties I was looking for it everywhere other than my own body, my own culture, and my own heritage. I searched all across the world, in all kinds of traditions, and I value every one of them – they've taught me so much. But where I found myself returning was to my own heritage. I'm part Welsh and part Spanish, and what I discovered is that the more I looked into Europe, the further back I was taken. I ended up in what some scholars call deep time.

We use the word prehistory so we understand the period better, but it's a slightly controversial term, because it insinuates that the time we're speaking of is pre-historical – as though it were before anything worth remembering, before the memory of human consciousness and sophistication and tradition and story. What I've found is that this period is in fact rich with myth and story and ritual and custom and folklore. But you do have to piece it together, because nothing was preserved as an unbroken lineage, nor as law or dogma or scripture. So part of my work has been to gather these very loose threads and try to reimagine the tapestry of women's religious experience in prehistoric Europe.

Three Pillars: The Land, Solitude, and Silence

Gabriela As I began this journey, I found there were certain approaches I could trust the most – ones that felt sturdy and robust. One of those is to study the landscape itself, and to develop a relationship with the living land. When we visit the archaeological and sacred sites that are so plentiful across Europe – the megalithic sites, the prehistoric cave art, the stone circles, the menhirs, the burial mounds – you begin to notice it has all been hidden in plain sight for sixty thousand years. Suddenly the landscape starts to speak. It's one of those things: when you start to pay attention to something and offer it your fidelity, it begins to speak back. And so the landscape spoke, and one site would lead me to another, and another.

This was part of my attempt to rebraid myself back to a spiritual experience of life through my own cultural heritage and ancestral traditions – in the absence of them, because the various waves of suppression in Europe did a very thorough job of wiping them out, or very nearly so. So much so that many of us have forgotten there were ever religious traditions or belief systems before the Roman Empire in Europe.

In practical terms, rebraiding myself back to the living land means spending a great deal of time in nature, in solitude, and in silence. These three pillars are a trustworthy, sturdy way of relating to something old and soulful – without the risk of being misled by the growing glamour of the wellness industry or the contemporary Western spiritual movement. There's greatness there too, of course, but it can be difficult to find amid all the smoke and mirrors. Sitting with the land, alone and in silence, has been one of the most useful and trustworthy ways of re-engaging with these old wisdoms.

The Body and the Womb as Gateways

Gabriela Another way in is through the body – developing a relationship with my own body and listening for the wisdom within it. It turns out our DNA hasn't changed very much since our earliest ancestors, the ones who painted the cave walls and held those extraordinary, mysterious rituals. We haven't

actually changed that much, and the body holds an enormous amount of wisdom, power, energy, vitality, and life force.

One of the most central gateways to these older ways of knowing is the womb. When I began to have a real relationship with my womb and with my cycle – this cyclical, storied way of living through my own body, letting my life be mapped by its natural limitation – I started to contemplate what this relationship would have been like for women, and for women in roles that were considered religious.

By religious, to be clear, I don't mean dogma or institutions. I mean religion as a system of shared values, symbols, and stories – a shared language for the sacred, agreed upon by individuals across communities. So when I speak of women in religious roles, I mean women who held a language for the sacred that was understood by their communities.

The further back I went, the more I found symbols for the womb, images depicting the womb and the female body. You find this in some of the earliest cave art across the world – and this is now beyond Europe. Throughout cultures, images of the female body and the womb appear everywhere from cave walls to clay figurines, spoken of in myth, carved into bone. I was led to the work of Marija Gimbutas and Merlin Stone and others – women who offered another version of history.

What I found really warming was that it wasn't only women speaking about this. Sir Arthur Evans, who excavated the Minoan site at Knossos on Crete, that Bronze Age civilisation, first described it as patriarchal and king-centric. Thirty years later he changed his argument. Thanks in part to the work of people like James Frazer, he came to realise that the civilisation was more likely centred on a mother goddess – that who he had thought was a king was in fact a queen – and he began to give real seriousness and attention to what his peers were describing. There's a great deal of study around this.

So the body became another trustworthy pillar, because the body knows. The more you fine-tune your relationship with it, the more you gather the ability to discern – and especially as a woman, I think, in our maiden years, that can be a hard thing to do. Life teaches you by stabbing you with your own sword of discernment until you're able to carry it. You hold it one way until you're able to properly wield it.

Then you carry that sword of discernment as you move into the next cycle of your life and enter the mother stage – whether or not one becomes a biological mother, the archetypal mother stage, roughly from the age of twenty-five, to forty-five, up to fifty-five – the creative middle years of a woman's life.

The body held me well and held me true as I waded through. I fell into all sorts of traps, don't get me wrong – I found myself in the clasp of charlatans and bad mentors, all the smoke and mirrors I was talking about – but I've waded my way through.

The Sacred and the Spectacle

Cissi There are so many threads in what you've just shared, so I'm going to start to pull on them a little. I loved your article on Substack about the sacred, and what happens when we make it into a spectacle. I teach shamanic trainings, and I tell my students we are not allowed to take any pictures of the ceremonies, as they are sacred. We take one picture at the very end, of everyone together – and I say this to them because it's meant to be sacred, and also because it frees your mind so you can go deeper. When we turn it into something to be shared out there, we're constantly in the mind.

A long time ago, I used to take a lot of photographs. It was when I was travelling around Asia in my twenties, and after a while I realised I'd started to think in pictures rather than living the full experience. So I put my camera away – I actually sold it so I could get to Nepal, which helped in its own way. But it was an interesting thing to notice, that it stopped me from being fully present. I feel that's what is happening when it is that constant sharing on social media – it stops you from moving into your body.

The Body as Landscape

Cissi And as you say, your body holds that wisdom. When my mum passed away, my body took me on a journey of grief that led me deeper and deeper into my roots, into the layers, into my ancestral lineage – witnessing all the wounding and trauma that was there, and, through healing that, all the medicine and power and magic that was there, that had been forgotten, was now rising within me.

It was extraordinary. The body is the portal into this rich landscape, because your body IS the landscape. That's the thing – your body is the landscape. And as you said, you have the maiden years and the mother years, and then perimenopause takes you into another gateway of discernment, and then the crone years. It's such deep wisdom.

It's like the Mothers – if we now look at the DNA, that was a big one for me – realising that my mitochondria were inherited from my mother, and her mother, and her mother, tracing it all the way back thousands of years. They've always been within us, waiting – until, instead of searching out there, which is also what the sharing on social media becomes, we turn within – and there they are.

Gabriela It's a beautiful image – the mother lines held within us, the body and the womb as a repository of knowledge that carries the wisdom of all the grandmothers, all the mothers who came before you. And there isn't a limit to when that stops.

Cissi Exactly. It goes all the way back.

Holding Our Own Torches

Gabriela There's a real wisdom in putting your ear to the ground and listening for that. And perhaps the only way we can do it sincerely is by being as present as we can. As soon as we move into "I'm being witnessed, there's an audience," or "I have to use this method someone else gave me," we lose it.

Of course, if one is part of a tradition with lineage and elders, that's another matter, and I can't speak on behalf of those traditions. But speaking for my own – as an inheritor of the Western wisdom tradition – we do have an inheritance, but we don't have elders through unbroken lineages who can take us there. So we've got to hold our own torches, and hold torches for one another, in the ways that we can. It's a fine line: between imposing our own experience of the sacred on the one hand, and, on the other, holding a torch – not trying to replicate the ancients, but seeking what the ancients sought. Holding a light towards experience, rather than towards our own knowledge.

Cissi Exactly. It's like giving them a map – like Inanna's myth, it's a map, and as you make this journey of descent you'll have your own experiences. But having the map you have an idea of the landscape – you still have to make the journey yourself – but it gives you like a deeper trust.

The first time you're thrown into your underworld journey... I had no map, and I had no idea what was happening – so I feel that, as we are awakening this within us and we are sharing these different myths, they become maps of the mythical landscape of our soul. And it awakens something in us, and helps us remember that we carry this in our bodies.

A Map in the Heart

Cissi One of the mind-blowing things for me was when I had a heart attack in 2019, just after my mum had passed away. It set me off on a journey into my body, and my heart took me on this journey.

One of the things it showed me was this: the heart has four chambers, and the way the blood flows through the heart, up to the lungs and back, actually follows the wheel of the year – the four seasons. It's extraordinary to see what it does.

Then there are the coronary arteries, and I'd had a problem there. As I journeyed shamanically into my coronary arteries, they showed me that their only function is to supply the heart – and you are the heart, it's like a metaphor of you. They showed me they were like the ancestral rivers, supplying me. And when there were unhealed wounds there, it was like a poison there. So as I journeyed into these rivers and started to clear it and heal it – I have a feeling that is what healed me the most – I could then tap into the medicine that was there, the wisdom – and all these mothers were there waiting.

I had no idea that this is what I would tap into before I journeyed in there, but once I saw it, and I found the map of that, my whole relationship with my coronary arteries – and with my body – changed, because it was a wisdom just waiting to guide me. Does that make sense?

Gabriela Absolutely. This idea that the body and the land speak. If you are courting something – to see where that thing lives in you, and if it is even in your awareness – and you give it your attention, it's probably because it's already looking back at you.

The world is alive, and we live in a soulful world. Just as we're courting life, life is courting us. As we said at the beginning, as soon as you place your attention on something – it's that idea that you take one step forward and the gods take twelve towards you. They've already been there, waiting.

Descending into the Darkness, into the Body, into the Feminine

Cissi Yeah, and I feel that, one of the ways, at least for me, was changing my relationship with the darkness. I love the darkness now – I absolutely love it. But before, it was always the light. And I feel that this is one of the fears I notice in my students: the fear of descending into the darkness, into the body, into the feminine – because of all the distortions we've been programmed with, to fear her, to fear the body, to believe the body can't be trusted, that it's shameful, and to run up into the mind and into the light instead.

You write about this so beautifully, so again I'm just going to hand it over to you.

Gabriela Thank you for bringing that in. Darkness is such an important technology, and it has been since the dawn of human consciousness. I think darkness was perhaps one of the – if not the – central bridge to the other world, to the sacred, and to direct revelation.

You find evidence, cross-culturally, of early humans seeking the deepest, darkest parts of the caves to undertake their rituals. Most of the time these inner cave sanctuaries were extremely difficult to reach – virtually impossible

without some form of light. It's extraordinary how they did it. It would have been far more convenient to make the paintings at the mouth of the cave, or wherever they were living. And interestingly, you often find a separation between the domestic ware – where these ancestors actually lived – and the cave art. Rarely do you find them in the same place. So these painted spaces were more likely used for ceremony, for ritual, for rites of passage. We don't know exactly what happened there, but we do know that much, and darkness would have played a significant role in whatever mysteries took place in those deep sanctuaries.

The cave itself is significant, because when you imagine metaphors and parallels for it, the closest is the female body and the womb. So there we are again, returning to the womb – and to birth itself as the prototype for initiatory experience. Across cultures, and to this day in indigenous traditions, birth is a central image for initiation. The journey between childhood and adulthood, whether for men or women, seeks to replicate the birth experience.

It's no wonder, then, that you find all these artefacts and images of the female body, and these myths, like Demeter and Persephone – the two goddesses, one giving birth to the other, having to lose her before she can have her back and enter into a relationship of equals, of sovereignty. It's fascinating to look at that story through the eyes of the mother, or the maiden, or the third, who lingers in the shadows: Hecate, the crone, the old woman, she of the thresholds.

These cave sanctuaries were really the first sanctuaries. Caves were the first temples, and it was there that they found the deepest darkness. And interestingly, this darkness seems to have illuminated something – something was revealed in it.

Darkness as the Revelatory Ground

Gabriela When you look at the significance of darkness through a comparative approach, you notice traditions that still use it continually. The Dharmic traditions, for instance, close the eyes to contemplate or meditate – to go into darkness. Even where there's a focus on light and on attaining enlightenment, it's still reached through the darkness, through the closed eyes. There's an interesting thread there that continues to this day, hearkening back to these deep-time ancestors and the old mysteries of darkness.

I think the relationship with darkness was understood as a relationship with the mother, with the womb of the Great Mother. Many images were used as comparisons – the labyrinth, the serpent, the earth, the beehive. Coming back to Europe, where most of my work is centred, you find these images that symbolised the womb of the mother, and darkness as the revelatory ground

where the great dreaming could happen – where we dreamt as we were being dreamt. Again, that old idea: the things you're looking at are likely glimpsing back at you, as interested in you as you are in them.

Darkness as a principle upheld our religious imagination for the largest part of human history. Then, as cosmologies and worldviews changed – and there are many theories as to how – we moved away from a matristic, earth-centred, life-affirming way of living. Not a perfect one; I don't personally believe there was a golden age of human civilisation. I think we've always carried complexity and fear and doubt and jealousy and anger. That's precisely why we needed such strenuous rites of passage, and ceremony, and story – to hold us true, to keep us together, to dispel illusion and fantasy. Darkness, I think, was one of the primary technologies used for the largest part of human history to see more clearly. Paradoxically, it was in the darkness that we could see.

The Consequence of Disconnection

Cissi Absolutely. Whenever I do shamanic journeys, and even on my courses, we don't have light – I make it really, really dark, because it opens up your psychic gateways and your inner sight. It's much easier to witness when you're held in that sacred darkness. So what do you see as the result of us disconnecting from that deep trust in our bodies, in the mothers, in the sacred darkness that births new life into being?

Gabriela Great question. I think we're living the consequence of it very intimately. The separation from our own body's wisdom, and from our direct relationship with the sacred and with the land, has made us really unwell – and this sickness is a soul sickness, a spirit sickness. It ripples out into mental-health imbalances like anxiety, depression, and addiction.

The more you turn your attention outward, into the wellbeing of your culture – wherever you live in the West – the more you find it's actually rare to meet individuals living a balanced, harmonious, contented life. More often we meet people on antidepressants, who have had serious underworld-descent experiences that went unheld, and who must live with the consequences: a growing, shared sense of isolation and lack of belonging, the living imposter in one's own life, the loss of access to one's genius, to the creative spark we each came here with – the spark that gives our lives meaning.

I love learning from people, asking about their lives and their dreaming – I've done it for years. I prefer to listen than to talk, and I ask a lot of questions. As a writer you need that curiosity, otherwise it could get a little boring – you'd end up only writing about your own thoughts and probably drive yourself mad. You need those dialogues.

What I've found is that there's an absence of a cosmology that is somatic and storied – in this case, storied through myths that tell women of themselves in generative ways. Not just in relation to heroes' quests, in whatever narrative, from the Odyssey to the plight of Jesus and anything in between. Women's stories in and of themselves – women as sovereign beings in need of their own initiations and rites of passage, not merely here to initiate heroes on theirs.

The lack of that has left such a vast absence in women's lives that we no longer look to our own inner wisdom, to our wombs. We look for wisdom outside ourselves, and lean on systems that are often not very generative, not very life-affirming or earth-centred. So the more we can uncover these old stories and these simple ways of re-engaging with a more generative way of being – time in nature, re-relating with our wombs and our bodies – the better.

And this is regardless of whether a woman has a physical womb or not. Even if she has had a hysterectomy, she can still reach that central seat of power and wisdom in her body. Regardless of her age, whether she's menstruating or not, there's a wisdom there that is accessible to all women. And then there's darkness as another technology to return to – spending time in contemplative darkness, whether simply with the eyes closed or in actual darkness, in caves or at night in a room with the curtains drawn. Again, seeking what the ancients sought, not seeking to replicate the ancients.

I think that's where we've become a little stuck, particularly in women's reclamation. Reclaiming our spiritual traditions is an absolutely noble and necessary trajectory – I spend my life doing it, and I celebrate anyone who does. And many things can be true at once. But I think we sometimes lose credibility, because a fantasy-esque, almost infantile quality creeps into the reclamation. Which is interesting, because that's partly what happened under patriarchal cultures too – an infantilising of women: the removal of body hair, the allure of the innocent, virginal maiden, the fear of widows and of women who could own land in the Middle Ages. The sacred and the profane.

Seidr and the Root System

Cissi But then you go back to where the wounding is, whilst if you go further back – so my experience with Seidr (Norse shamanism), which of course largely died out, because of the patriarchy and the Church and all of that – but as we've reawakened it within ourselves, what I discovered was that the more I connected with the roots of Seidr – that root system – it didn't work through me, the way it worked through my teacher. It worked through me in a completely different way. And I see the same in my own students. It works through each and every one of us in a unique way, because we're meant to bring it up in our own way. It's as though we're connecting with a well, with the source, and we're meant to bring it up into this modern world. They know

who we are, so they use us in the way that we're each meant to express it – for ourselves and for those we serve.

So we've all had to let go of the mind saying "it should be this way, or that way." No – this is how it wants to move now. Once it starts to move through you, you can't stop it. It's like a birth; you just have to let it move you. I feel that what you are saying is that there is such a longing, such a yearning in us women to connect with it, and maybe initially we go back a little bit, to where the wounding is – but after a while, it will take us deeper.

Gabriela That's the thing. If you have the fidelity – if there's a real, sincere longing – then that which you look at looks back at you.

Cissi Exactly. And it will take you deeper.

Getting Out of Our Own Way

Gabriela So the question, and this is the simplest and yet the hardest thing – which tends to be what mysteries are made of – is whether you can keep getting out of your own way. That's really all we can do. If you feel it to be true that there is a soulful reality, an imaginal world, a spirit world alongside this one; that there is intelligence and agency in all living things, some of them invisible, perhaps visible in the darkness – then all we have to do is move out of the way, so that that which is soulful in us can remember that which has forgotten in us how to reengage and participate with that living reality, with that spiritual reality.

Cissi I love that.

Gabriela So it's: oh, all we have to do is get out of our own way. And yet – what we have to do is get out of our own way. It's one of those things...

Cissi To me, that's one of the themes of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate. I do a shamanic tracking exercise where Demeter is like our mind, not letting go; Persephone is us, meant to set off on our journey; and Hecate is that ancient wisdom, guiding and accompanying her. We have to let go of the mind's need to keep control, to keep an eye on everything, so that we can set off on our soul's journey – and be like Persephone, become that queen who moves through it.

Rites of Passage and the Melissae

Gabriela That's a beautiful image, and I think it truly reflects what it means for women to have rites of passage – which have always been different from men's. Even though Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries were open to all genders – which I find fascinating, that men and women were initiated into

the mysteries of the mother goddess together – there were still mysteries of Demeter, like the Thesmophoria, a festival held a little later in the year, around October and November, whereas Eleusis was around September. Those rites of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate were for women alone, and interestingly, for mothers only – for women who had given birth.

I find that fascinating. What was it about the ancient Greeks that, for nearly two thousand years, they held these mysteries at the Temple of Demeter at Eleusis – one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in all of antiquity – and alongside them held this festival for Demeter and Persephone and Hecate, but only for women, only for mothers? I write about this a great deal in a book I'm currently working on, on the Melissae – the priestesses of Demeter, known as bees. This was the initiation of women who had just become mothers, participating once a year in this festival through the mythos of Demeter and her lost daughter – the lost maiden within her, as she becomes mother.

I love the image you brought up, because it's so relevant to this conversation on female shamanism and women's spiritual experience. What I think could be really helpful in recovering these traditions isn't so much attempting to replicate the ancient priestess – wearing the clothes we think they wore, acting the way we think they acted – but moving towards that which they themselves may have been moving towards, remembering that they were as human as we are. They were probably also trying to get out of their own way, disturbed by their own insecurities and doubts and fears and jealousies and angers and heartbreaks and griefs and losses – all those very human experiences that have been felt since the beginning of time. There's a real generativeness, a real redemptiveness, in going: oh yes, they were trying to figure it out just as we are. They didn't know the answer – and that's why they called it the mysteries.

And there's this acknowledgement that mysteries are meant to remain mysteries. You can be initiated into the mysteries, but that doesn't mean you're suddenly a knower of the answers. You're an initiate of the mysteries. You apprentice yourself to the great mystery.

Cissi I love that. Wow. Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Rebraiding Ourselves Back into a Living Cosmology

Gabriela I don't know if there's anything more noble or worthwhile, at this point in the era we're living in, than attempting to rebraid ourselves back into a cosmology that may well be the thing that saves our species and our planet – one that encourages more joy and more meaning, more community and more compassion, and a relationship with the living world, which includes each other, held with more care, more attention, more presence.

I hope that the worldviews we're trying to recover as women are focused more on the goodness we can bring than on the glamour we can become. What can we return through what is gifted to us in the darkness, in that dreaming velvet black of the mother's womb? As beneficiaries of the time spent there, and recipients of its wisdom and beauty and healing and creative possibility – how can we shape that into something that becomes a healing balm for our communities, our world, and our lives?

Cissi Thank you. This has been amazing – truly amazing. I'm so grateful for this conversation.

Gabriela Thank you, Cissi. The questions you asked were the big ones – the questions whose feet are worth sitting at. Thank you.

