



HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT MOTHER GOD

(AND WHY USING FEMININE PRONOUNS AND
METAPHORS FOR THE DIVINE MATTERS SO MUCH)

by Daneen Akers

My older daughter, 11, is teaching my younger daughter, 4, how to pray.

“You start, ‘Dear Mother God,’” she says.¹

Her little sister closes her eyes, and repeats this phrase, only in her four-year-old voice, it sounds like:

“Dear Mudder Dod.”



I smile and close my eyes along with the two of them. Not only are they adorable, but their vision of a Divine that fully encompasses the feminine is life-giving. It's going to sustain them and help them be part of changing our world for the better.*

I was in my 30s before I first heard God referred to as “She” in a church service. One verse of a song had been revised to include feminine pronouns, and just that verse was enough to break open a dam inside of me.

*I have a Maker
She formed my heart
Before even time began
My life was in Her hand*

*She knows my name
She knows my every thought
She sees each tear that falls
And hears me when I call*

Singing those familiar words to *She* made me weep in my seat. I didn't realize how much I had felt excluded as a woman from the concept that we are all “created in the image of God” until that moment amid my tears.

Sure, I'd been around many people who talked about how every person was part of the Imago Dei. But every song, every prayer, every work of art, every metaphor for God that any leader had ever used in my presence was decidedly and intentionally male. As a child, and even as a young adult, I assumed God was male because that was the stronger, better option. The historical Jesus scholar and author, Marcus Borg also affirmed my instinctual sense of being excluded from the Imago Dei as a woman when all references to God are masculine: “How can women be in the image of God if God cannot be imagined in female form?”²

That pervasive, patriarchal idea of *God equals male* has turned into *male equals God*, and that equation has damaged us all at every level from personal to societal. It needs to change.

The good news is that it is quite easy to start this change at home.

Why a Feminine Form for a Formless Divine?

First, let me share a bit of grounding for why this matters so much. If you're anything like me, you might need to understand the intellectual arguments. I realized how experiencing a Divine Feminine landed in my

* I would pray to a Divine Feminine if I had boys as well because they also need to see the feminine in the Divine image, and our culture's extremely narrow range of “acceptable” masculinity harms boys and men as well.



body. But part of patriarchy's long reach is that we've been taught not to trust our bodies (this is especially true for women). So let's start with a little theory as we prepare to loosen patriarchy's grip, eh?

"Why does God have to be 'She'?" is the most common objection that I've heard. "Let's just skip gender altogether and go just with gender-neutral terms and metaphors for God."

I agree with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg's statement that "God's pronoun is God."³ I also believe that the ultimate Being transcends our gender categories. Even some humans transcend binary gender categories.

Moving to Gender-Neutral Pronouns for God is a Start, but it's Not Enough.

We use symbolic language and images to gesture towards the Divine, and for thousands of years we've almost exclusively used male ones. We need equity for the Divine Feminine in our language, music, art, and metaphors.

In *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, author Sue Monk Kidd writes of waking up to the pervasive patriarchy in our culture and in her Southern Baptist faith. Her spiritual memoir is a compelling argument for an explicitly feminine form for the formless.

She asks herself "what's the big deal" if the Divine is ultimately formless and genderless?

"The bother is because we have no other way of speaking about the Absolute. We need forms and images. Without them we have no way of relating to the Divine. Symbol and image create a universal spiritual language. It's the language the soul understands."

*"And yet—and here was the crux—the images that have pervaded our speech, thought, and feeling about the Divine have told us the Divine is exclusively male...Indeed, the image, language, and metaphor about God as male has been used so exclusively, for so long (about five thousand years) that most people seem to believe God really is male."*⁴

She argues that we must "recover" a Divine Feminine that thousands of years of patriarchy have tried to repress. That repression of a Divine Feminine has also legitimized a power imbalance in our culture and led to violence against women and girls.

So it doesn't work to simply try to remove pronouns altogether and use "God" as a general term. "God" doesn't land in most people's psyche or soul as gender-neutral due to thousands of years of that title being



equated with exclusively male pronouns and images. Monk Kidd concludes there must be a feminine form for what is ultimately formless:

“As long as the feminine is missing in the Divine, men would continue to experience entitlement and women would be prey to self-doubt and disempowerment. It was that simple.”

Glennon Doyle stated this idea simply on social media (and in her newest book, *Untamed*) when someone asked her why she referred to God as “Her.” Did Glennon really think God was female? She answered:

“I think it’s ridiculous to think of God as anything that could possibly be gendered. But as long as the expression of God as female is unimaginable to many while the expression of God as male feels perfectly acceptable—and as long as women continue to be undervalued and abused and controlled here on earth—I’ll keep using it.”⁵

Womanist scholar and divinity school professor Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney also teaches through her books and online presence how crucial it is that we restore the feminine to our language and concepts of the Divine. “As long as a masculine God remains at the top of the pyramid,” Gafney says, “nothing else we do matters.”⁶

Our concepts of God determine what we value. As a scholar, Gafney knows Biblical Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic. And she knows that biblical translators and editors have often hidden the feminine that is in the grammar of the biblical text:

“Feminine language for God occurs in the text repeatedly. This means that feminists and womanists advocating for inclusive and explicit feminine God- language are not changing but restoring the text and could be considered biblical literalists.”⁷

I hadn’t thought of myself as a biblical literalist, but this perspective from Dr. Gafney about how feminists and womanists advocating for the grammar that’s actually in the text is an intriguing angle!

So, how do we start recovering the Divine Feminine in our homes?

My children and I have tried a few practices long enough now that we can share.



1) Start praying to Mother God or another explicitly feminine term for the Divine.

When my older daughter was three, I challenged myself to go beyond just gender-neutral titles for divinity and use an explicitly feminine one. I simply started with Mother.

God as a counter to all of the “Father Gods” she already was hearing. I grew up in a denomination that, to this day, does not officially ordain women equally to the ministry, so I had lots of unlearning to do. An unconditionally loving, Mothering Divine has been an incredibly healing metaphor for me.

Biblical references for a Divine Mother abound. God is said to gather Her people like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings (Matt 23:37), God gives birth and nurses us at Her breast (Hosea 11:3–4 and Isaiah 49:15). In fact, one of the titles for God is “El Shaddai,” which can be translated as, “The Many-Breasted One,” a reference to God nourishing and sustaining Her people like a mother nursing her baby. (Try listening to Amy Grant’s *El Shaddai* again through that lens and just try not to tear up!) The spirit of God that resides with the children of Israel in the tabernacle in the wilderness is called *Shekinah*; She is feminine. The Greek word for God’s Wisdom or Spirit is *Sophia*.

2) Embrace Feeling Awkward for a Season.

At first, praying to Mother God and using feminine pronouns felt very awkward. When we step into naming the Divine as feminine and therefore recognize the feminine as part of the Divine, we are undoing—one small step at a time—approximately five thousands of years of religious patriarchy. Of course it feels awkward as all get out!

But as so many of the great spiritual teachers remind us, WE CAN DO HARD THINGS!

The awkwardness will lessen with practice and repetition. A visual and mental trick I learned from Leslie Foster, one of the holy troublemakers I’ve written about, is to write “Godde” instead of “God.” It’s pronounced the same, but the different spelling is a reminder to him to consciously imagine the Divine beyond the traditionally enforced Western Christian ideas that have made maleness (and whiteness) holy.⁸

If your children are old enough to notice your language changes, let them in on your process as you’re practicing. This can be as simple as saying something like, “I grew up only using male pronouns and images for God, but I’ve learned that this is incorrect and even harmful. So, I’m beginning to change my language.



This might feel awkward at first, but I believe it's important. What names and images do you have when you think about the concept of God?"

Their ideas will likely begin a whole series of wonderfully rich conversations. And, most importantly, they'll learn that it's okay to question long-assumed ideas and to change our habits when we encounter better information.

If you are someone who also leads prayer in front of other people, it will take some time to transition your new awareness to your public self. That's okay! Start at home first and give yourself grace and space to get comfortable with a new paradigm.

For years when I prayed in front of family members who are likely to be quite upset with Goddess or Mother God language, I sometimes used "Mother/Father God." Even now, I sometimes use broader concepts that are not gendered or associated exclusively with maleness as the title "God" often is.

Some examples of broad terms are *Loving One*, *Holy One*, *Spirit of Love and Peace*, *Source of Life*, *Great Love*. Sometimes I'll start with, "Thank you" or "We are grateful..." and skip an address entirely (this also is what my humanist spouse does).

3) Edit Books as You Read Them & Songs as You Sing Them.

One of the main reasons why I wrote *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints* was because I couldn't stomach reading most of the faith-based children's books that I'd grown up with to my own children. As you may know from your own bookshelves, there are few children's books that use feminine language and imagery for the Divine.

Even now, I change the gender pronouns frequently while reading aloud. My older daughter now realizes that I'm doing this, but she gives me a little smile or nod and helps keep these edits up when she reads to her little sister.

I used to do the same with songs in church—as we sang together, I'd whisper in my older daughter's ear the missing or repressed *She* and *Her* pronouns. This empowered me, and I gradually started singing my revisions more loudly. At some point, my daughter realized her mom was the only one singing this way, but by then she was old enough for me to explain why. We've had an ongoing conversation for years now, and now she can point out sexist assumptions or make her own edits. Sometimes when she shows me an egregious



example, I sigh and say, “Patriarchy” with a shake of my head. “We’ve still got work to do.” She’s in on this work with me now.

I haven’t had to do as much editing with my younger daughter. One reason is that she’s still just four, but another is that we’ve now finished a painful but necessary spiritual migration to a new church where the musicians and speakers already use more expansive language. They do a brilliant job, and I still find myself tearing up at times at the wondrous beauty of feeling included in the Divine Image.

The first time I sang with our congregation to “Sophia-Christ,” I definitely had tears, but they were the nourishing kind of tears that come from being seen and accepted. I sat there hugging my youngest on my lap and with an arm around my eldest, feeling deep healing for myself and deep hope for my children that they won’t have to do as much healing as I’ve had to do to their image of Goddess. (If the term Goddess makes you squirm, please sit with that. It’s simply the Divine in feminine form, and patriarchy has trained us to find it particularly unacceptable. Ask why!)

4) Find Divine Feminine Art and Images.

A huge challenge we’ve faced in recovering the Divine Feminine is finding art and images that remind us that the Divine is also *She*. But we’re finding that this step is also a lot of fun.

Dr. Christena Cleveland is writing a book called “God is a Black Woman,” and her public essays and the artwork she shares are about how she’s learning to de-throne what she terms *whitemalegod* are an incredible learning experience. I and my older daughter followed Dr. Cleveland’s pilgrimage through France where she visited many of the Black Madonnas, and it was such a fantastic opportunity for my daughter and me to talk about how patriarchy has made the Divine male and how racism has made the Divine white.⁹

In a similar vein, Kate Christensen-Martin, a pastor at a progressive church, teaches about the “gender-full” concept of mothering as a force that can change the world. To Kate, mothering is a fully gender-inclusive concept. She defines it as an act of nurturing someone else and fiercely protecting that person’s core essence so they can flourish.

[Kate’s portrait](#) in *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints* shows the incredible tattoo she has on her arm of a tree that is clearly a powerful and deeply rooted feminine presence. She says she needed a reminder on her own body of the loving, mothering presence of the Divine. At first this painting was on her wall, but

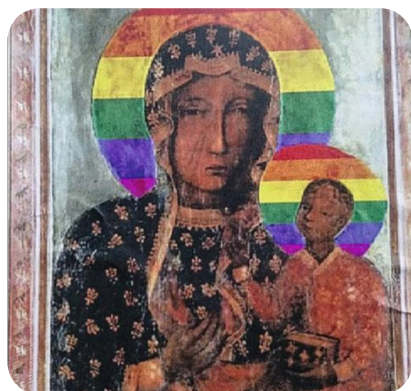


when that wasn't quite close enough, she had the painting tattooed on her arm. "I needed Her to be closer," Kate says. "I grew up having patriarchy ingrained in me, and I needed an image of the Mother ingrained on my body too."¹⁰

I urge you to start looking for Divine Feminine images and artwork to put up and share with your children. I found a beautiful calendar a couple of years ago with incredible paintings of feminine deities from various religions. A few months ago, when I had been gone for a few days, my eldest made it into a welcome home collage. In the middle, she wrote, "My Mom is a Goddess. Always." That's an experience I wish for all mothers! Mother's Day comes once a year but your children seeing God in you is forever!

My daughter also painted a series of Mother God images when she was eight and nine years old that I absolutely love. One shows Mother God holding the universe. She is painted in rainbow hues because, according to my daughter, "She represents all people." Another image shows Mother God breathing the soul into a new baby. Lately, I notice my daughter drawing Mother God with dark skin.

Here are a few Divine Feminine images I especially love just to get you started on your own search.



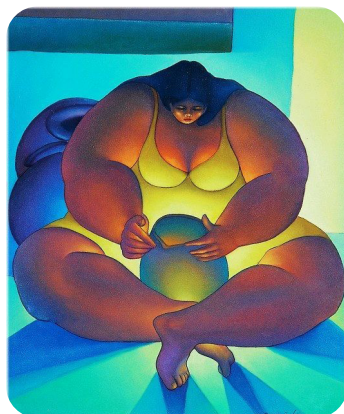
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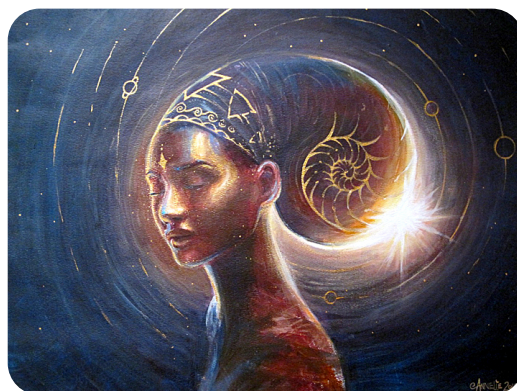
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5) Stay Open in Your Journey to Recover the Divine Feminine.

I've noticed when I'm beginning to integrate a new awareness that I can be tempted to become rigid about my new understanding. This is especially true for any of us who came from religious systems that rewarded binary thinking with clear labels for what is "good" or "correct" and what was "incorrect" or even "heresy."

I'm finding that learning to have comfort with subtleties and nuances is part of unlearning *whitemalegod* (again, see Dr. Cleveland's brilliant work¹¹). And it's a long unlearning process. But sitting with Mystery along the way is part of opening ourselves to Goddess. No doubt my own journey with Mother God will be profoundly different a decade from now, and it's crucial that I hold grace for myself and others as we unlearn and learn.

My own children keep calling me into new learning, too. We've recently moved, and there's a big billboard we drive past every few days that reads "God is real and He loves you." As billboards about God go, that's not too bad: many are far more fear-mongering in nature.

But after seeing it a few times, my older daughter has an idea that is 100% holy trouble. "Hey, what if we sneak up there and paint an 'S' so it'll be 'She loves you.'"

I tell her I love how she thinks. Then a couple of weeks later, we drive by the billboard again. She's says: "You know what, Mom? Actually, I think it should be 'They' because God is probably genderqueer."

I love that my daughter has the permission to think, question, inquire, and to critique even me. Teaching our children to pray to Mother God might just lead to them questioning our carefully built foundations, but if they do, they'll also be ready to question the cultural assumptions they're being taught every day too. And that's what we need to heal our hearts and rebuild our world.

I'll end with a beautiful prayer written by Kaitlin B. Curtice, an Indigenous woman, Christian author, and truth-telling poet and prophet whose story is part of the *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints* book.

Mother Mystery,

*Teach us to be like goddesses,
unwavering in grace,
love and kindness,
being fixed so tightly to beauty*



*that we become fierce truth-tellers
against every injustice.
Make us holy as we reach
For the divine in ourselves
And those around us.
May we long for your presence
and linger in the spaces where
sacred solidarity and
tender wholeness meet.
Amen, amen, amen.*

Kaitlin was recently a guest speaker at a conservative Christian university and spoke some difficult truths about colonial Christianity and its record of atrocious harm against Indigenous people. A conservative student group falsely accused her of being pagan and praying to “Mother Mystery.” At that time, Kaitlin had never prayed to Mother Mystery before, but by that weekend, she had written and shared this incredible prayer.¹²

May we live into that prayer for “grace, love and kindness,” for beauty, truth, and holiness, and may we be inspired to bring the Mother into our hearts as we help spark revolution at home and in the world beyond.

Art Credits

- A. *Black Madonna of Czestochowa with Rainbow Halos* by Elzbieta
- B. *Sophia with Dove* by Sue Ellen Parkinson
- C. *Holy Trinity* by Kelly Latimore
- D. *Mother God with Cosmic Vase*
- E. *Feminine Divine* by Annelie Solis
- F. *Madonna and Child* by Tamara Natalie Madden
- Cover art: *Mother God Holding the Universe* by Lily Akers Eyer



Endnotes

- 1 “As truly as God is our Faith, so truly God is our Mother.”—Julian of Norwich
- 2 Borg, M. (1997). *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion To A More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. HarperOne.
- 3 <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1205206671057981441>
- 4 Monk Kidd, S. (2016). *Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (2nd ed.). HarperOne.
- 5 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bz-roCoBocG/>
- 6 Zauzmer, J. (2018, April 3). *Is God Male?* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/07/03/is-god-male-the-episcopal-church-debates-whether-to-change-its-book-of-common-prayer/>
- 7 Gafney, W. (2017). *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- 8 Akers, D. (2019). *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints*. Watchfire Media.
- 9 <http://www.christenacleveland.com/>
- 10 Akers, D. (2019). *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints*. Watchfire Media.
- 11 <http://www.christenacleveland.com/>
- 12 Miller, E. (2020, February 20). *Potawatomi Christian Chapel Speaker Kaitlin Curtice Draws Ire of Baylor Student Group*. Religion News Service. <https://religionnews.com/2020/02/20/potawatomi-christian-chapel-speaker-kaitlin-curtice-draws-ire-of-baylor-student-group/>

