

# WILD AND GREEN



Left: bronze Green Man door knocker, Venice, C17th

## Finding the Green Spirit of Creation

Evelyn C. Rysdyk

**H**ildegard von Bingen was a person of remarkable breadth and talent. She is remembered in history as a Christian mystic who, as a nun during the twelfth century, was able to become an renown herbalist, painter, composer, abbess of her order and confidant to the Pope. She also produced a great deal of written material and accomplished it all through a combination of her innate, visionary gifts and the fire of her spirit.

It is in her writings that she offered us a word; *viriditas* which literally translates to 'greenness.' This word was her effort to name the moment whereby the eternal, quantum world of Spirit becomes the visible, tangible world of

space-time. This is the word made flesh - the enlivening of the physical reality.

During Hildegard's lifetime there would have been a carved face looking down from nearly every cathedral in Europe. A shaggy, foliated head - part human and part growing plants. He is the Green Man. This archetypal image originated in prehistory, far before the Christian era, perhaps as early as the Upper Paleolithic. His face can be found across the Old World and the Americas.

He is carved into cathedrals, painted into architectural friezes and remembered in ancient folk rituals. Over two thousand Green Man images have been identified in England alone. They can be

found on any surface that's open to ornamentation: capitals, corbels, choir stalls, fonts, screens, or roof rafters. In South Asia, his plant-covered face looks down from Jain temples in Rajasthan and he is also echoed in the face of Hindu's green-skinned Rama, consort of Sita goddess of nature who springs from the ploughed soil.

He appears as Islam's Al-Khidir: the Green One, a former vegetative deity who was described in the Koran as a spiritual guide to both Moses and Alexander the Great. Due in part to this relationship, green is the color associated with divine wisdom in the Arab world.

In the Apo Kayan area of Borneo he appears with great wreaths of leaves and branches issuing from his head and is the guardian of the forest and a bringer of good fortune.

The Green Man represents many interrelated energies. For instance, his face can remind us of the irrepressibility of Life. In this aspect he represents the immutable force that allows grass to squeeze its way between the cracks in a sidewalk, tree roots to heave up city paving or split a stone and a weed's stubborn ability to demand its place in an orderly garden.

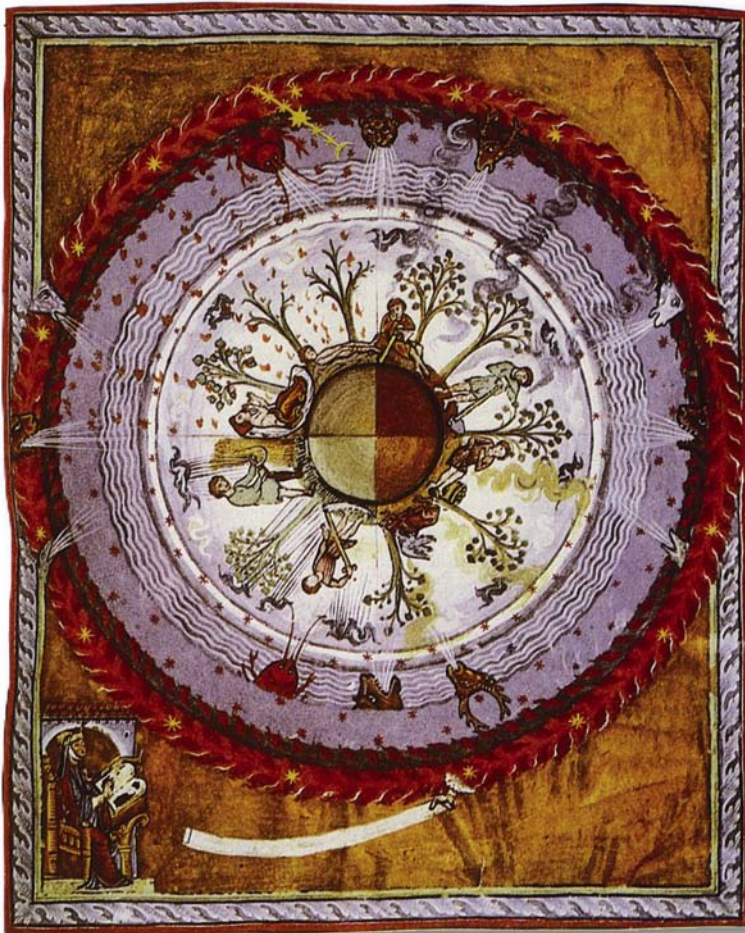
He also stands as a consort and partner of the Earth Goddess. As the son-lover of the Great Mother, he is destined to regenerate every Spring to watch over her fruitfulness and recede into darkness once again when she takes her Winter slumber.

In this aspect, he has kinship with Adonis, Attis, and Osiris whose deaths and resurrections symbolised the regenerative powers of the Earth.

Sir Gawain of the Arthurian stories even encounters the regenerative Green Man under the guise of The Green Knight. When the Green Knight's head is severed by Gawain, he calmly picks it back up and rides off to Gawain's utter astonishment!

The Green Man's circle of death and resurrection reminds us of the cyclic rhythms of the world which are paradoxically both eternal and transitory. Life will reassert itself, even as individual beings die. As the protector of wild nature. He is a blended being





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*Left: 'Cultivating the Cosmic Tree', a painting by the C12th mystic Hildegard von Bingen*

exhibiting a body that is at once human and plant. Part green himself, he keeps an careful eye over every aspect of the Mother's green body. Being a guardian of the plants and trees also ultimately makes him a guardian over all living things.

As we learned in school, all life on earth depends on the photosynthetic ability of the plants, algae, trees and shrubs to capture sunlight and water and miraculously transform them into usable nurturance, while exhaling essential

oxygen into the environment.

By guarding our 'green relations' - those who give us our breath and the stable foundation for the planet's food chain - the Green Man supports the continuance of all of nature.

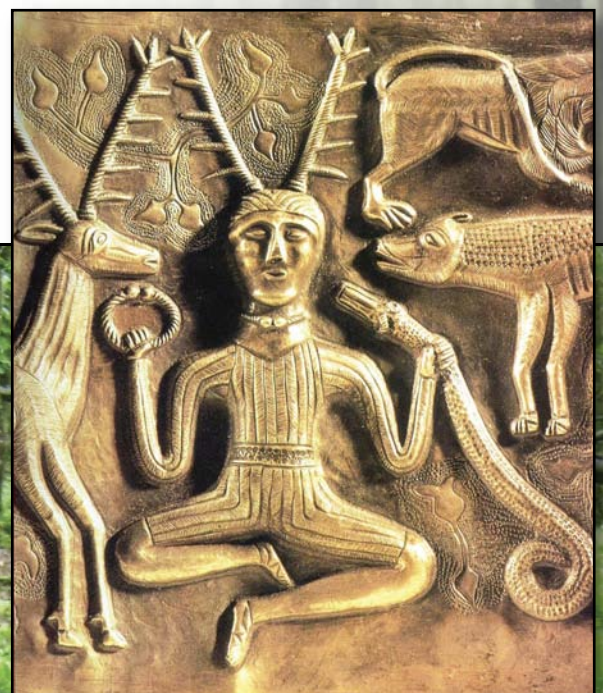
Spirits who function in this role are often depicted as shape-shifters, caught in a state of partial metamorphosis. They are seen as part one being and part another - merged into a blend of the two.

For instance, Cernunnos, the Celtic lord of the forest and

protector of the animals, has an antlered head, while the Greek demigod Pan - guardian of woods, pastures, and other landscape features - strides through the world on goat legs.

In the shamanic world view, the merging of spirit bodies in this way produces a new energy that incorporates the powers of both beings. A shaman may merge with her or his power animal to be able to 'see' with the animal's senses. However, she or he doesn't *become* the animal but a kind of spiritual hybrid. In this hybridised state it is as though the shaman belongs to two 'families', the human and animal, and so develops loyalties to both.

*Below: the figure of Cernunnos from the Gundestrup cauldron - a richly-decorated silver vessel, dating to the 1st century BCE, found in 1891 in a peat bog near the hamlet of Gundestrup, Denmark*





The Green Man has literally become a part of what he loves and protects. As he cares for each leaf, he reminds us of the preciousness and vitality of every part of the whole, and that he - and we - are inseparable from the earth.

It is perhaps this aspect most of all that holds a power for us today. The Green Man has reappeared in our culture to offer us a spiritual archetype for a new way of being. His leafy head may be seen peering out from the covers of books, on CDs, paintings, movies; and even carvings of Green Men are once again being made available.

We have called this spirit into being again to remind us of what we must do. Following his lead, we can step into our place as Her protectors. One only has to read the story of Julia Butterfly Hill, who defended the forest by living in the branches of a 200-foot tall redwood tree, to know that the warrior energy of the Green Man is actually genderless.

While often seen as bearded with leaves, a Green Man is sometimes also depicted with leaves pouring from his mouth. We can imagine this as a metaphor not only for embodying our love for the



Earth, but also speaking or taking action on behalf of Her, as well.

As we embody the Green Man - Woman's desire to protect Mother Nature - becoming green warriors - we can reclaim and remember our own wildness.

Peruvian spiritual teachers from the Andes refers to our wild energy as *salka*. It is the non-domesticated part that lives inside each of us, and all other beings of this planet. Domesticated beings are overly rational and materialistic, whereas the wild parts of us live more in our hearts, and therefore harmony with Mother Earth - Pachamama.

Living in harmony with Pachamama and more fully residing our hearts, we can feel our own preciousness and the fundamental holiness of all beings. From this wild, heart-centered place we can perceive beauty in all things. We can feel the interconnections interlacing our biosphere and therefore approach each part of the larger world with a deeper reverence.

When we then allow our actions to flow from this wild, heart center, we naturally make more respectful choices for ourselves and the earth.

## AWAKING THE WILD

Try this breathing exercise to awaken your wild, green, self.

With your eyes closed, stand up or sit in an erect posture. Now, focus on your own heart beat. Listen and feel, as it pumps blood through your body. This is your center - where you are tethered to all that is. Now, outstretch your arms. Take a sharp breath inwards while bringing your fingertips toward your heart. Hold it for just a heartbeat. Then exhale fully and extend your arms again. On the in-breath you may see your arms gathering in all of the earth's love - bringing it to your heart. Allow your energy to mingle with nature's.

Inhaling, you are drawing the vitality of the plants, the surge of the tides, the perspective of the soaring hawk into yourself. When you exhale and extend your arms again, feel yourself giving energy back to the earth.


As your breath leaves your body, feel the blessings it holds flow over the landscape like the wind - like Spring rains caressing a leaf. You are giving the gift of your breath to your 'green relations', which they can in turn breathe back to all the world.

Continue in this way for at least ten breaths. If you start to feel a little dizzy, take more gentle breaths. Please remember to exhale fully, so that you don't experience hyperventilation!

As you approach your tenth breath remember a time that you felt grateful. If you can, it is especially useful to remember a time that you felt this gratitude during an experience you had in nature.

For instance, you can remember the feelings of a cool breeze on a very hot day, or how welcome rain feels during a drought. Recall the leap of joy you felt at the swoop of a hawk over your car, or the sound of foxes barking, or coyotes howling on a desert night. Remember your childhood excitement at discovering that a storm that raged while you slept provided a deep enough blanket of white for a snow day! Perhaps you remember an encounter with a deer that watched you without moving.

Give yourself permission to remember your own special memory of of nature's wonder-filled blessings.

A woman in a pink dress standing in a field with her arms outstretched. She is looking up and smiling. The background is a lush green field.

*With your eyes closed,  
stand up and focus  
on your own heart  
beat. Listen and feel,  
as it pumps blood  
through your body.  
This is your center -  
where you are  
tethered to all  
that is.*



Now allow the memory of that time and the feelings of gratitude you had then fill you up again, as you begin to breathe more gently.

Allow your breaths to move now like ocean waves, grasses waving slowly in the wind or the elegant beating of an eagle's wings. Let the gratitude you feel flow out from your heart and extend from your fingertips.

With this simple action, you are now radiating healing energies through your body and out into the world. This energy pours from your body like an endless, regenerative fountain of light. Imagine this light energy saturating the awakening plants and rising with the sap in the trees. It glitters along the surface of the waters and illuminates the bright plumage of the returning birds.

The newly-awakened bear squints as the light pours over its sleepy head, and the stones - bones of the Earth Mother - grow ever warmer with your heart's loving touch.

When you feel complete with this experience, gently bring your awareness to the place where you are standing or sitting. Smile - if you aren't already - and wiggle your toes and fingers in celebration of your wild, aliveness! When you are ready, open your eyes and look at this world with your newly refreshed 'wild heart.'

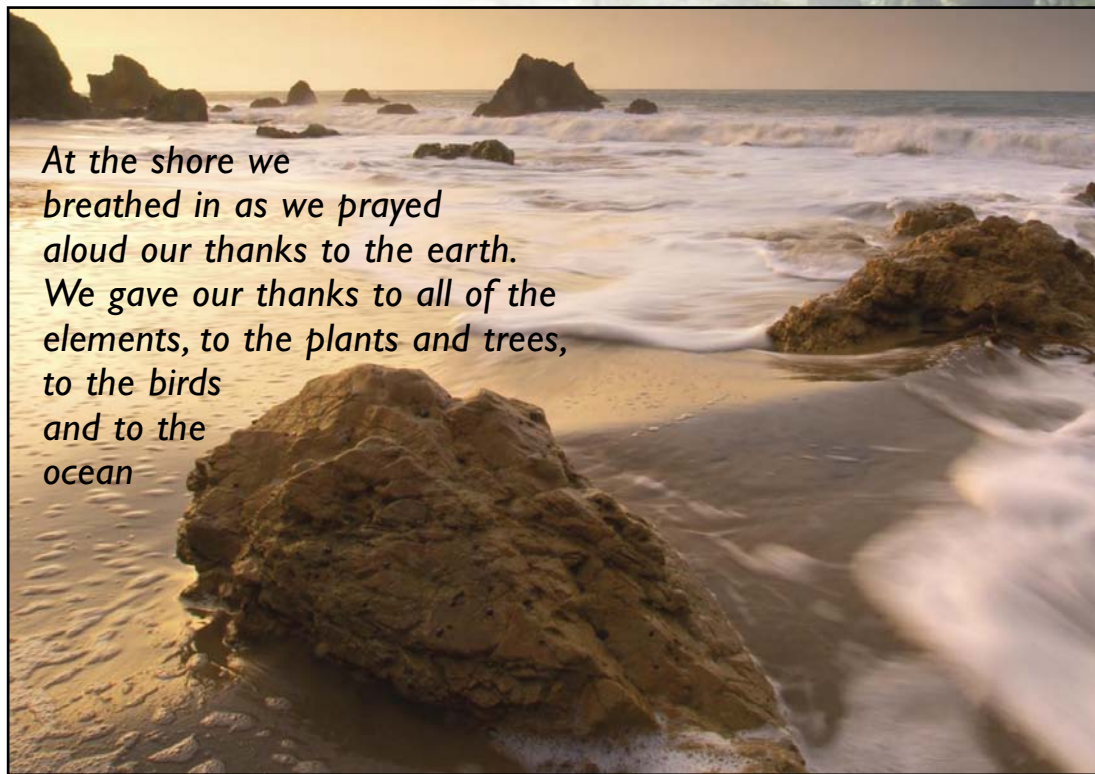
Through the eyes of your heart, look to where you can make a change that will benefit the Earth and her children.

It can be very simple to start, but as you practice the above exercise and continue strengthening your wild heart, you will naturally feel that you are a part of everything on earth.

From that deep understanding you will effortlessly develop a stronger and stronger desire to be more of a loving force for Her nurturance and protection.

You don't have to have a lot of money or time to be of service. Let me give you an example.

On a recent evening, at sunset, my partner and I were going to the ocean's edge to place a ritual offering of gratitude. Just a flower, two apple slices and a piece of unwrapped hard candy to 'feed' the earth spirits and to say 'thank



*At the shore we  
breathed in as we prayed  
aloud our thanks to the earth.  
We gave our thanks to all of the  
elements, to the plants and trees,  
to the birds  
and to the  
ocean*

you' to the Mother for the gifts we felt that we had received during what had been a very long week.

On the road leading to the ocean, there was a very young man walking along carrying a black garbage bag. We had assumed at a distance that he was picking up bottles, but upon getting closer could clearly see that he was picking up the paper and trash that had lain hidden until recently by the snow.

Once at the shore, we breathed in the manner described above as we prayed aloud our thanks to the earth. We gave our thanks to all of the elements, to the plants and trees, to the birds and animals, to the ocean, and so on - even including our thanks to the young man on the roadside.

As anyone who does this can attest, the act of speaking out one's gratitude can quickly become a long heart-song, as one remembered moment of gratefulness easily leads one into another. This time was no exception as during the course of our prayers, the sky turned from red-orange to a twilight indigo.

As darkness overtook the beach and the stars began to shimmer to life, we left our simple offering in a crack between the rocks for the tide to swallow up and returned to the car.

The return trip found the young man walking home in a spritely

manner with a bag, now stretched into a bundle as large as his torso, thrown over his shoulder. As we imagined how splendid that roadside was going to look in the morning we cheered, tapped our horn and gave him a 'thumbs-up.'

As a living Green Man that night, his prayers for the earth had simply manifested in a different, physical way from our own!

So allow the Green Man to whisper the energy of regeneration into your life. Listen to the wildness that lives inside of you and connects you to this wonderful earth. Begin thinking more with your heart instead of your head, and let your beautiful heart guide you into again being in reverent participatory relationship with our mother.

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[www.spiritpassages.org](http://www.spiritpassages.org)

*Left: the famous head of the Buddha grown into a tree at Angkor Wat, Cambodia*

