

...and I'll bring a song of love, and a rose in the winter time.

There was a time when a rose in winter was a paradox. A magical, mystical thing.

These days, they are flown in from Mexico, or Columbia, which is a miracle of another sort, so a rose in the winter time is now simply... unremarkable.

But in speaking to us from another time, the line reminds us that things were not always as they are now, that our history has layers, and depth, with mythical threads running through it.

And like all mythic things, it contains paradoxes and multitudes.

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When our country first began, it was primarily personified in the goddess-like figure known as Columbia. The name Columbia is a neo-Latin name in use since the 1730s for the Thirteen Colonies. It originated from the name of Italian explorer Christopher Columbus and from the ending -ia, common in Latin names of countries. There were many like her: the British Britannia, the Swiss Helvetica, and the French Marianne.

She was often called Lady Columbia or Miss Columbia. Her image was never consistent, but she was usually presented as a woman between youth and middle age, wearing classically-draped garments decorated with stars and stripes. Her headdress varied and sometimes included feathers reminiscent of an indigenous headdress while other times it was a laurel wreath, but most often it was a cap of liberty.

She was virtuous and compassionate. Sometimes she was sternly maternal, sometimes she offered a warm embrace. In her martial aspect, she wielded a sword and carried a shield. Sometimes she carried the flag.

The political cartoonist Thomas Nash used her to represent the nation's conscience. One illustration had her protecting a Chinese immigrant from an angry Irish mob; another had her

standing with an injured African American soldier and asking why he is not being given the vote for his sacrifice during the Civil War.

Like many national female personifications, her roots traced back to Athena – the Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare. And like all goddesses, her help is invoked in times of need, as in this 1775 poem by the African-American poet, Phillis Wheatley, entitled “To His Excellency, General Washington.”

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and veil of night!

The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel bind her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.

Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;

Uncle Sam and the Goddess

Rev. Munro Sickafoose

Unitarian Congregation of Taos

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Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,
The refluent surges beat the sounding shore;
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.
In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee, first in peace and honours,—we demand
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.
Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.

A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

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In the end, Washington rejects both crown, palace, and throne, but not the poem, or apparently the help of the divine feminine. In a letter to the poet, Washington addresses her as “Miss Phillis” and signs it “Your obedient humble servant.” Unheard of courtesies to a woman only recently a slave, but perhaps Washington feared offending the goddess in whatever form she took.

Columbia became a symbol of the women’s suffrage movement, and women dressed as Columbia accompanied many a demonstration for women’s voting rights.

Rivers and cities and ships and ultimately, spacecraft bore her name.

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The United States also has a male personification around during all this time. He first appears as Brother Jonathan – a young, cunning, uncultured trickster - who then takes on a dual identity as Uncle Sam after the War of 1812. But by the end of the 19th century, Brother Jonathan has disappeared, and Uncle Sam takes over – not as a male personification of America, but as the white and white-haired symbol of the US government.

Uncle Sam and Columbia exist side by side as complementary icons for many years. There is one famous Thomas Nast illustration from 1869 where they seem almost parental in their roles – at a Thanksgiving dinner with Uncle Sam at one end of the table carving the turkey, and Columbia at the other end. Joining them are Americans from all over the world: German, Native American, French, Arab, British, African, Chinese, Italian, Spanish, and Irish.

The placement of Columbia between a black man and Chinese man is significant, representing Nast’s consistent support of their civil rights and opposition to the violence and discrimination

inflicted upon them. The cartoon also has the specific aim of endorsing ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was intended to guarantee that federal voting rights could not be denied on the basis of race.

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Columbia does not endure.

With the French gift of the Statue of Liberty, Columbia begins her slow decline as the feminine symbol of the United States, which transforms that symbol from an active agent, from a dynamic role to a passive one, into a frozen figure of bronze who no longer wears the cap of liberty, but a crown.

Lady Liberty has her own classic heritage as a Roman goddess. From the very start, the founders had a fascination with things Roman – the imperial eagle as a national symbol, the use of the term Senate to describe the upper house of Congress, naming parts of the District of Columbia after Capitoline Hill in Rome. These are all deliberate uses of Roman precedents.

It is around this time that the US starts to flex its imperial muscles. In quick succession, America purchases Alaska, annexes Hawaii, starts the Spanish-American War, intervenes in the Philippines, and creates the nation of Panama in order to build the Panama canal.

Not too many years later, the United States enters the Great War, and posters featuring Columbia exhort young men to enlist, the public to buy bonds and plant war gardens.

And after the war, Columbia's presence in American life almost completely disappears.

Historians debate the reasons. Perhaps it was the horror of that war that caused people to turn away from Columbia. Perhaps the Statue of Liberty took her place. Perhaps it was a reaction to the success of the woman's suffrage movement.

I think it is because an empire cannot afford the luxury of a conscience, or to be reminded that virtue is a desirable thing. Whatever the cause, there is no doubt that between the bloody Civil

War and brutal World War One, we could no longer make a claim as a nation to any innocence at all.

In the years that follow, Uncle Sam dominates as the personification of the United States, as both a figure of some nobility and a figure of ridicule.

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What we see in all this is the way that symbol and myth change over time. In a sense, both Columbia and Uncle Sam are relics of a bygone era.

The modern masculine personification of the United States seems to be a portly businessman smoking a cigar. I'm not sure if there is a modern feminine personification of the US. Lady Liberty still stands, but her reputation is tarnished of late, no doubt due to the bad company she's been keeping.

Why is this important? Because how a people see themselves, how they portray themselves, is critical. Because without unifying myths and symbols, they are not one.

Can a people can thrive without a goddess or goddesses?

I think not. It's a question of balance, and wholeness.

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I find it significant that the feminine personification of our country had many aspects of a goddess, or at the very least a demi-goddess, and the male personification is largely a caricature of the apparatus of government or business.

There's a deep discordance there, one that is still reflected in our political divide. I suppose we could reduce that to the patriarchy vs the nanny state, but it is more complex than that, and not easily resolved via politics or intellect.

Not a problem to be solved, but a riddle to be answered.

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Let's return to that rose in winter.

In ancient Greece, the rose was closely associated with the goddess Aphrodite. In the Iliad, Aphrodite protects the body of Hector using the "immortal oil of the rose".

The second-century AD Greek writer Pausanias tells us that the rose is red because Aphrodite wounded herself on one of its thorns and stained the flower red with her blood.

Book Eleven of the ancient Roman novel The Golden Ass contains a scene in which the main character, Lucius, who has been transformed into a donkey, must eat rose petals in order to regain his humanity.

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Let's unpack that last story. Lucius has turned himself into an ass. It wasn't done to him. In his youthful desire to practice magic – which is to say, wield power – he attempts to transform himself into a bird. The spell goes wrong, and poof! He's a beast.

Many hijinks and diversions ensue, too many to relate here, but Lucius the Ass is variously stolen, sold, stolen again, and finally escapes to a beach on the Aegean Sea, where he beseeches the Queen of Heaven in all her names - Venus, Ceres, Paphos, Proserpine, Minerva, etc. – for a return to his human form.

The Queen of Heaven, manifesting as Isis, appears in a vision and explains to him how he can regain his original body by eating the crown of roses that will be held by one of her priests during a religious procession the following day. Which he does, and so regains his original form. In return for his deliverance, he vows to serve Isis and become initiated as her priest.

Lucius must take the goddess – in the form of rose petals – into his animal body so that it becomes part of his own being and makes him whole again.

The lesson is rather heavy handed. Without the moderating influence of the divine feminine, men are animals. (Let's not forget that the reverse is also true.)

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Where are the rose petals Uncle Sam must eat to restore balance and humanity to our nation?

There's our riddle.

And of course, you can lead Uncle Sam to roses, but you cannot make him eat. He must want to eat them. He must feel a different hunger, a hunger for beauty and virtue, not power.

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These myths and symbols, these personifications, have great influence. They are not easy to manipulate or manage, either from the grassroots up, or the top down. They have lives of their own, lives we can starve and deny, or nurture and affirm.

It seems clear to me that the divine feminine is stirring in the soul of our nation once again. Young women are leaders in the climate movement and other justice struggles. More women are running for - and winning - political office, and we have the largest number of women ever sit in our House of Representatives. We need more to restore the balance, from city councils to the Capitol.

Perhaps Columbia will rise again. Perhaps She will take another form, another name. Or take many other colors and shapes and garments, and many names, as in the ancient world.

However She manifests, let us strew her path with flowers.

And let's keep offering that crown of roses to Uncle Sam. He desperately needs to change his diet.