

# Dancing with Words, Dancing with Wisdom (8)

## Ann Smith & the Divine Feminine

Dr. Janet: Today I have with me as a guest an absolutely amazing woman with a very common name, Ann Smith. She is past Director of Women's Ministries of the National Episcopal Church and Global Education Associates. She is the co-author of *Stories from the Circle: Women's Leadership in Community*, co-author of *WomenPrints*, bringing to life UN Platform for Action through stories — very interesting stories. Stories are a very powerful technique for teaching; co-edited Women's Uncommon Prayers, honoring the Divine Feminine. She is co-founder and Director of Circle Connections, Convener of The Millionth Circle, Regional Coordinator of Gather the Women, and Board Member of Earth Child Institute.

Ann, I am so thrilled to have you on this show. Welcome.

Ann: I just want to thank you. It's an honor to be on your show.

Dr. Janet: Ann and I chatted a little bit about what we would talk about, and Ann suggested, again I suspect using stories, the topic "Encounters with the Divine Feminine."

This is a sacred journey for each and every woman, certainly. I don't know where men fit into this picture. Maybe Ann can elaborate on that at some point, but it's a sacred journey where we recollect and we illuminate these gifted times.

Ann, what was your first experience or your first encounter with the Divine Feminine? Or the first one at least that you remember?

Ann: Thank you, Janet. I also want to just say that the Divine Feminine dwells everywhere and within us not only as women but as men. For so long, she's been kept hidden or forbidden.

For me, at three years old, you don't have any formation of what God looks like, because you're three years old. I was terribly homesick for my family, who had left me with my paternal grandmother whom I didn't know, as this was right after the war, for a six-month training program for my father who was going to be in the occupation of Japan.

So, I turned to who I call "God." They would find me in the dark singing away, rocking in this little rocking chair. They said, "Who are you talking to?" and I said, "God."

Now, I didn't know quite how to describe God, but if I would have, and I did later was "God was the moon and the stars. God was this presence all around me and took away my homesickness and made me feel just joyful." That was my three-year-old first encounter with the Divine Feminine.

Dr. Janet: Why do you view that or why do you conceptualize that as feminine rather than masculine?

Ann: Well, because when I was six years old, we moved from Seattle in the city to more of the country. I was fortunate to have this great house that was built for a concert pianist, and I got to be in the concert hall for my bedroom that had a little ticket office attached to it that had a door to the outside. So I could go out at night, unbeknownst to my family, and just walk along this path that was only lit by natural light of the stars and the moon to this beautiful pond. That became my sanctuary.

That became again where I would be talking to the Divine Feminine, which is very much nature. It's all nature. I watched tadpoles turn into frogs. I would see the moon, I would see the stars, and I felt totally safe and loved.

For me, the Divine Feminine is more of it's hard to explain but not a human being, like God in heaven has been described in most religions, but for me was this incredible loving presence that is in everything and was terribly soothing. But again, I would have not, at six years old, said the Divine Feminine. I would have just said this is a holy place.

I was raised in the Episcopal Church. You get this theology that God is in heaven. Then I was taught, "This is how you talk to God. You talk to God through Jesus." I said, "Well, I'm already talking to God." I had done this since I was three years old.

My theology -- and I, of course, wouldn't have used those words -- was very, very expansive, and it was never limited, and it was never narrowed down to not being connected to everything.

Dr. Janet: It sounds to me as if even as a three-year-old, you were bypassing all the doctrinal words and making a direct connection, whether you call it with God, with nature, with a sanctuary, with a soothing presence.

Ann: Right, right. I was also fortunate that my dad, when he came home from Japan, had fallen in love with the people, the culture and with Buddhism. Although he was raised Lutheran, he would not accept that limited theology. He had a

theology that also was expansive where Buddha and Jesus were both very holy people.

Again, when I was being confirmed, they said to me, "Well, do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" I said, "Well, I don't know." They said, "We'll give you a week to think about it."

I thought this is so amazing because seventh graders, 12 years old, I get to think about this and make that decision for myself. That's why I fell in love with the Episcopal Church because it allowed me to have my expansive beliefs and also my Christian practice.

What was frustrating for me, for being in the church for so long, is the lack of expansive language. God is always called male, always father instead of mother/father. That is starting to change, and I can't wait for the change because it makes a huge difference for me.

Dr. Janet: It does for me as well. I often hear people talk about his story or history and her story. I think they are very different and both continue to evolve.

You talk about expansive beliefs. I think there's probably no end to the potential expansion and that it's infinite.

I have to ask you, Ann, the Episcopal Church gave you a week to think about that question that they had posed to you. Did you think about it during that week? And did you come up with an answer after the week? How did that play out for you? For me, there would have been a real tension between perhaps what I felt and wanted to believe, and maybe what I felt I was being directed to believe by the church.

Ann: Well, no, I didn't. I probably would have if I didn't have this wonderful relationship with my father and also understand and fell in love with Buddha as much as I did with Jesus.

For me, it wasn't a conflict. When they say, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" I can say yes. I didn't go on to say, "Yes and so is Buddha and so are we" because I didn't have those kinds of words until I got older. For me, it was good.

I love the mysticism of communion. I was raised in what they call High Church, sort of Anglo-Catholic. I love the candles and the music and the mysticism of the church. It's beautiful how it is all put together. I also love meditation and the whole concept of coming to greater and greater enlightenment of Buddhism. For me, they work.

Dr. Janet: They all work together, it sounds like.

Ann: Right.

Dr. Janet: There may be different ways of thinking about life. I don't know. How would you express it?

Ann: Well, here's another story. Working in the national church, we work for the Anglican Communion also on behalf of women, which is 82 million people around the world. They have a huge convention which they pass resolutions and everything else. It's really very political. It's just like you're feeling like you're in a three-ring circus.

The night before this conference was to start, I had this dream where I was asked to go up to the pulpit, which I have done a lot, speaking from the pulpit, and to describe God.

In my dream, I go up, and instead of finding the Bible, I found a book that was huge and it was pre-Genesis. I read these words that made no sense to me because it was not in our language. It wasn't Arabic. But the words were three syllables.

Then I describe God and the description I had for God was, first, you can see that it was Earth, the beautiful Earth. It was actually a mosaic of Earth, but there were no borders. It was gorgeous. It was like the image you have from outer space.

Then I said, "We now all need to go out to the beach and write our words and images with God, knowing that when the tide comes in, it will be washed away."

For me, it was the most frightening dream because it didn't matter what resolution. It doesn't matter what happened. What happens is that God is timeless. What we do on this little small time on Earth is significant, but is not the significance.

Dr. Janet: This is so interesting because this brings up a story from my life that I haven't thought about for a while. I have actually written about this, but I've never published it, the idea of being out on the beach and building sand castles — the sand castles, when I'm right there and with other people building these beautiful sand castles, paying attention to every detail. But as you say, when the tide comes in, the sand castles disappear and all go back into the ocean and into nature and into the tide. It often seems to me that that is a really good metaphor for life or maybe a spiritual life or a spiritual path.

Ann: I think you're right. The one other image I forgot, I don't know why I forgot it, but when I first described before I went to the beach what God looks like was first the Earth, but the second image was a beautiful white bird, and the bird, of course, is **[0:19:39] [Indiscernible]** of the great egret, is in Japanese, which I grew up **[0:19:45] [Indiscernible]** that I loved, the beautiful bird.

But again, like you're saying, Janet, it's nature. It is so expansive. It's like all of creation is the divine feminine and masculine, and we are nature.

Dr. Janet: Yes, and we are part of nature. It seems to me there are times when we try to control nature or fix nature, and the tide comes in and washes away all our great human plans to fix everything that nature is doing wrong.

First of all, one thing that occurs to me as we're talking about these stories and these patterns that both of us have experienced, they're almost archetypal patterns. Do you have any thoughts about that at all? Or maybe you just want to tell us another story.

Ann: Yes, let's do both. I do believe they're archetypal paths. I do think they're archetypal.

Here's what I believe. I believe everyone has, when they really look, when they really listen, when they really feel the Divine Masculine and Feminine every day everywhere. For me, the story is to be able to hopefully give people permission for themselves to free up their experiences, to see the Divine.

Dr. Janet: And experience it. I think it's more than seeing. It can also be hearing the Divine or feeling the Divine. All of our senses become very active, I think.

Ann: Right, right. The next story is one that I can only describe as the Divine Feminine Presence that some people would call angelic, but it definitely was something. I mean like everything. You have the unseen became seen or felt.

This was at a time where I was being challenged in the Episcopal Church about my support for women's ministry. The women were wanting to be more powerful, wanting more staff, et cetera. Being the messenger for that, I wasn't very popular.

Right before I was going to be confronted the next day about this again, which usually when that would happen, I would get tongue-tied a lot of times, **[0:25:51] [Indiscernible]** like a rabbit freezing.

But anyway, that night, we were in a beautiful setting in the countryside. I was in a room by myself, when I was woken up by this amazing light that came into the

room, and sound. The sound was like Mother Earth calling her child. It was not a sound I have ever heard. I can only say that it was truly mystical. It was truly holy. It came right over my right shoulder. I just laid there. I didn't look into the light because it was very, very bright.

Then, after a while, I looked at my clock radio next to me and it had stopped. So the next morning, I got up and I asked, "Was there a thunderstorm or a lightning storm last night?" They said no. I said to the powers of being, "I had this angelic, I had this visitation." I think they thought I was making it up. But, it doesn't matter, right? Because I experienced it.

When I was going into this room where I was going to be confronted, I was calm, I was peaceful, I could answer in a way that would just not allow this whole thing to be escalated.

I also then went from there to London. I was in the Mothers' Union, which is one of the largest Anglican women's organizations in the world. They have a beautiful headquarters. Queen Elizabeth comes once a year. It's very, very much an important organization.

I couldn't sleep. I was so filled with this incredible energy.

I was on my way to a preparatory meeting that was happening in Vienna for the UN Fourth World Women's Conference. I knew what I needed. When I got to the conference, I still couldn't sleep.

But when I left that conference in Vienna, I came home, I knew that the Noonday Prayer, which we do in the Anglican Church and we do certainly at the Mothers' Union when we say the Noonday Prayer, I know we needed to bring a Noonday Prayer to the Beijing Conference, which was going to happen in Beijing in July of 1995.

So I got others that were beyond the Christian Church to help me. It got translated in all of the official languages, put on a postcard, accepted by the Chinese government, which is totally amazing. It's totally amazing how that ever got accepted. It's just a little prayer. When Hillary Clinton finished her speech, she ended with that prayer.

Now, that was not me. That was me being infused with this incredible Divine Feminine Spirit that made it come about.

Dr. Janet: I can identify with that story. I have had similar experiences. It feels almost as if you have to let go of all of preconditioning, and then it's as if the energy flows through you in ways that you could never do on your own.

Ann was telling us in the previous section about her experience, and it seems to me so much of this is experiential of just this bright light and this sound visitation that she experienced and the fact that her clock stopped. All of that is so interesting to me.

I'll just talk from my own experience. There's a sense of when you are in that consciousness, that sacred space, whatever verbal terms you want to give to it, time collapses, time is nonexistent, and you are in a field of infinity where anything is possible if you allow that cosmic energy or God or whatever you want to call it, if you allow it to flow through you.

I had a similar experience with men trying to intimidate me and push me down to be less than I was capable of being. This came in the context for me of an EST workshop where one of the things we were asked to do was to do whatever we were told. I had a real problem with that instruction because I was very aware that human beings had instructed other people to murder, rape, abuse, rip apart, and I wasn't willing to be part of that. But I was also very afraid and the facilitators of the workshop wouldn't continue with the workshop unless everyone agreed, which meant I was pretty much standing alone by myself, surrounded by very stern facilitators and a horde of other very angry participants.

The first time, I caved in. I made excuses for myself. I said, "Okay, I'll agree and then I figure I'll watch and see what comes down the road and then maybe I'll change my mind." But I felt so out of integrity all week. I struggled with this.

Unlike you, I was reared Unitarian, which is also a very intellectual religion, but at least it didn't, when I was reared there, recognize things like mystical experiences. A lot of Unitarians consider themselves either agnostics or atheists. I didn't have a very clear idea of what this God thing was either. I was really clear it wasn't an old man sitting up on a cloud with a thunderbolt in his hand waiting to strike people dead, but I didn't know what it was. I was so tormented.

There was another workshop the next weekend, and I knew I would be faced with the same choice. Was I going to say, "Yes, I'll do what you're telling me to do" or was I going to say, "No, I will not"?

Now, what's interesting is I went into that workshop to conquer fear. I was so terrified that week that I was down on my knees on my living room floor, tears streaming down my face, pleading, "God help me." As I spoke those words, just like with you, this huge calm descended around me and I was okay. It was as if, together, we could do this.

I went into the workshop to deal with my fear and dealt with it in a way that I never expected to deal with it. I think I mentioned that the clock stopped. Time collapses.

Ann, you have, I believe, one or two more stories.

Ann: I have one more of a recent dream, and then I want to talk about how a circle truly helps us to feel empowered. We can take that energy when we go into places that are really difficult.

This prophetic dream was I'm at this kind of country fair. At first, I thought I had left my purse behind. Actually, I did. So, I said to my daughter, "Did you see my purse?" and she said, "Oh, Mother, I think you left it there." So, I thought, "Oh, well, there goes my money. There goes all my IDs." I went back and it was right there. It was "Okay."

So, I pick up my purse and I start going home. This is supposed to be my home. I'm going through a field that actually has weeds in it, has some wildflowers in it. It's so high it's above my head.

Then, what comes with me is a little white cat and a little blue bird. The little blue bird isn't even flying. She's hopping along with me. I'm sort of doing zip-a-dee-doo-dah. We're just walking down the path.

I walk into my garage that has nothing in it, and then the entryway to my house, which is all marble. It's all white. The stairway is incredible. It turned from a house to a temple.

The little bird and the little cat were really tired. They couldn't walk up the stairs. I thought I'm going to put this magic net over them so nobody steps on them and they can rest.

I walk up into and open up this room, and in this room, in the center is a circle of women. The colors that everyone is wearing are beautiful. We have this white, marble, big room, but in the center there's a sacred center to the circle.

Then the women are there, they greet me, and we all begin to dance. The dance is really free-flowing. It is joyful. It is powerful. And then I wake up.

That dream for me, because I call myself a circle evangelist, which I am, is in a setting where we're all equal and equally share, and it's safe, and we have a sacred center. Everyone feels empowered. Everyone feels loved, cared for. It's amazing when we take that energy collectively and go out and do something on



behalf of the greater good, or we take that energy and those images and ourselves, in places that are difficult, that sustain us.

These circles can have men included. But for women, exactly because of what you talked about, Janet, and how we've been put down, how our voices have been silenced, how violence is scary for us, that's why it's also very, very important to have circles that are made up of women and girls.

Dr. Janet: Yes. As you probably know, I've done some circle work, too, in many different contexts.

Ann, let's talk more about circle work and the principles of a circle. What makes it such a safe and sacred space that supports every individual in the circle?

Ann: Well, one thing I do believe is that when we sit in circle, they truly are not hierarchical. I will say when two or three gather together, you can either be a circle or a hierarchy. The circle is that we're all equal, that we're all learners, that we all share, that we're all teachers. No one is better than the other, and we all have gifts to offer.

One other circle principle is we usually use a talking piece or what we call a talking stick from the Native Americans. When you hold that stick, you're not speaking from your mind. You're speaking from your heart. Others are listening with their heart without judgment. We share experiences like I'm doing on your show—sharing experiences from my wonderful encounters of the Divine Feminine.

There are many circle organizations. Mine is The Millionth Circle. Jean Shinoda Bolen wrote a book called *The Millionth Circle* that started this to gather the women. It's worldwide. Both of these websites have a lot of videos and resources on this.

What we're dreaming together as a collective of many organizations is a worldwide event on November 1st that will connect to a women's circle of about 200 women right before The Parliament of the World's Religions begins in Toronto, Canada. It will be live streamed.

The title is "The Alchemy of Women's Collective Wisdom and Power." I think that's the other thing. We go from the "I" in a circle, not liking our "I" very much, to the "we." That collective "we" of this wisdom that is heard in the circle, that we can all use, comes with the collective power that is the "Power With," is the power of love.

We see that on November 1<sup>st</sup>—circles of men, men and women, youth and women, around the world, connecting to us for a huge infusion of this wonderful force of energy.

Dr. Janet: Tell us a little bit more—for people in the audience who have never actually experienced a circle. Can you give us some information, using words, of course—which is different from the actual experience?

You mentioned that at least in the circles you have worked with, you use a talking stick as they did in Native American cultures. I have done circles with Joanna Macy where they used a talking stick. There are other circles where they use a little different structure.

But let's talk specifically about the circles that you have been involved in and your own personal experience. And in terms of words, too. I notice that much of your language is first-person singular language, which expresses itself as your unique perspective, your unique experiences, which, in a sense, are gifts that you're offering out to the world and to other people.

Ann: Thank you. Because I got to work in the Anglican Communion and got to work in the United Nations, I had truly been around the world, and not as a visitor, but as someone who would sit in circle with the women in very rural areas, sometimes no electricity. Sometimes. I would give them permission to be back in circle, which is innate in them, which is natural for them before they were colonized.

The leadership training program that we would bring that would get women to begin to take this and to add this was really just giving women permission to be themselves in a sacred circle, where, then, their stories are heard, where they began to work with one another for empowering their stories, for the community to be empowered to do something. It's really women-led, which is quite unusual in Africa and in many other cultures in which women were not allowed to be leaders.

Dr. Janet: Thank you, Ann. Ann, we don't have much time left. Where would you like to focus these last couple of minutes that we have together?

Ann: On where people can get more information about circle. Two websites I'd like to be able to have people who want to know more go to are [www.millionthcircle.org](http://www.millionthcircle.org) and [www.gatherthewomen.org](http://www.gatherthewomen.org). Those have resources, books. Gather the Women—any woman who wants to know what circles are, they can go there and they can start circles. They have a lot of video.

The other thing I would like people to know about is the November 1st event which we will have a Facebook group called The Alchemy of Women's Collective

Wisdom and Power where they can connect their circle. We haven't done that yet, but it will be up. We will put the information on the [www.circleconnections.com](http://www.circleconnections.com) website and also on The Millionth Circle.

I think just with that kind of information, people can begin to start their own circle. It's not that hard. We make it easy. For me, it is the archetype of the Divine Feminine, the circle. Our shape there is like a circle. It's round, it's full, it's inclusive, it's loving, it's collaborative, it's cooperative—all of the principles of the Divine Feminine leadership.

Dr. Janet: It seems to me that all the women are equidistant from the center. The center is more or less the guiding energy for the entire group, but supporting each and every individual in the circle in the way that person needs to be supported.

Ann, I want to thank you so much for being my guest here today. It's been a very interesting conversation with lots of fascinating stories.