One Day a Goddess Spoke
Category : May 1995
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1995

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Tokyo, 1944. "I was four years old and remember being huddled in our air-raid shelter in the middle of the night," recounts Mayumi Oda-Japanese artist, peace activist, Zen Buddhist and worshipper of Goddess Saraswati. "I would watch the winking lights on the B-29s as they flew overhead. The lights in the dark sky looked like the devil's eyes and filled me with fear."

Then Hiroshima. "I was terrified by this news of hell-thousands of people evaporated or scorched to death. I did not know what to do. Later we folded Origami paper cranes, thousands of them, sending them to the Hiroshima Peace monument." War horrors finally faded into cherry blossom springtimes as Mayumi learned the three-stringed shamisen, carved horses out of twisted cucumbers for summer Obun festivals, listened to her scholar/father chant Buddhist sutras and talk about liberating the soul, read about the lives of extraordinary women and painted. "I can see myself sitting on the tatami mat floor with a new set of crayons my mother has just bought for me. The sliding paper doors to the garden stand open; the crayons are bathed in light. I begin to draw..." Passionately. She got into Japan's super-elite National Academy of Art, married an American, moved to California, had two sons, started meditating daily and painted blissfully. By 1988, she had earned world wide recognition, published a stunning autobiographical book, Goddesses, with silkscreened, frolicking female Divinities and dreamed of painting forever. But suddenly, by divine intervention, she stopped. Here is how it happened.

In 1991, Mayumi returned to Japan wanting to give back something to her land of birth. What she found saddened her. "My country has been quite a spiritual country. But I found the people drunk with material things. I also found out that my country was deeply committed to the use of plutonium for electricity and that we were about to ship 1.7 tons of plutonium (150 nuclear bombs worth) from France to Japan. I was dumbfounded. How could the country which experienced the atomic bomb do this? What could we do to stop this? So I visited Tenkawa Shrine on Omine mountain to pay homage to Sarasvati, Goddess of prosperity, creativity, art and

music. The shrine is surrounded by a deep green cedar forest. In front of the shrine stood a huge ginkgo tree planted by Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi 1200 years ago [he installed the Deity here and also brought esoteric worship of Ganesha to Japan from China.] All its golden leaves were gone and the gingko stood completely naked with trememdous dignity.

"I went to the tree, opened my arms and hugged the tree. I could feel its pulse-zum, zum, zum. Amazing energy was coming from the roots which spread deep underneath my body. I felt so small and yet so connected to this tree and through this tree to the whole world. So I asked the tree, "What can we do?" Then on New Year's Day, 1992, meditating in front of a Saraswati figure, She appeared to me in a vision. She was sitting on a sail boat holding the globe in Her belly, surrounded by many kinds of wild animals and plants. I also heard a voice saying, "Stop the plutonium shipment." It seemed to come from the Goddess. I asked, "Why me? I am an artist." The Goddess said, "Help will be provided." The voice had irresistible power, so we formed a group called Plutonium Free Future."

For the last three years Mayumi has toiled indefatigably working with non-governmental organizations to ban the trade and use of an asuric substance so hostile to the earth and far too dangerous for a war-prone planet. Her otherworldly artist is now hibernating. Days are filled with business chores-faxing, phoning, petitioning, organizing and lecturing, especially to women. She tells them to claim their goddess-like strengths and become the new peacemakers and earth stewardesses, each in their own way. But still, "Once in a while I really want to be in my studio, by myself painting. A tear comes down my cheek and I say, `I am being asked to do this.' When I find someone else who can do this, I'll come back to my studio. People need art to soften their hearts." Address: c/o Inochi, P.O. Box 2589, Berkeley, California, USA 94702.