

The Desert Mothers: Spiritual Practices from the Women of the Wilderness, by Mary Earle

Q&A for The Desert Mothers

By author Mary C. Earle

Who were the desert mothers?

These women lived in the fourth and fifth centuries, C.E. Their way of life came into being after Christianity had become legal and Christians were no longer under persecution. Some had deep questions about an expression of the faith that was taking on the trappings of the Roman Empire. The "red martyrdom" (sacrificing one's life rather than recanting faith in the resurrected Lord) was no longer possible. So the practice of the "white martyrdom" began to appear--women and men going to the deserts of Egypt and the Holy Land, and seeking to live out the Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27, Dt. 6:5, Lev. 19:18) As scholar Roberta Bondi has pointed out, the desert mothers and fathers are remarkable for their daily practice of seeking to "love as God loves."

What do we know about these women?

For one thing, we know there were a lot of them. One historian of the times tells us that there were twice as many women as men in the deserts. Another scholar said that there were so many Christians who sought to live this life in the desert that "the desert became a city." There were even accounts of "tourists" going out to the deserts to observe the ammas and abbas.

We know the names of four of these women whose sayings have been preserved: Amma Matrona, Amma Sarah, Amma Syncletica and Amma Theodora. And we know a little about their lives. We know, for example, that Amma Theodora was what we might call a spiritual director to bishops and other men in public position. We know that she was clear in her teaching and strong in her rebukes. We know that Amma Syncletica and her sister sought the life in the desert after their parents died.

Yet surrounding what we know is a vast silence. We have very little record of the thousands of women who lived this life of simplicity, silence and stillness. We have stories of others, such as Mary of Egypt (one good reference for that is Harlots of the Desert by Benedicta Ward).

What does "amma" mean?

The word means "mother." It came to refer to those women who were spiritual mothers to many. They were wise teachers who were sought out for guidance in living the Christian life.

The book is structured around nine concise sayings from the desert mothers. How did we receive these?

The desert tradition was an oral tradition which was then later written down. It was often the case that someone seeking to live a more faithful life would go to an amma (or an abba) and seek guidance with a decision, or a state of confusion, or the life of prayer. The sayings are pretty terse, and sometimes seem completely odd to us. We are inevitably reading them out of context; it helps to imagine two women sitting together, one asking the guidance of the other.

We have many more sayings from the desert fathers. In fact, we have a whole book worth of sayings (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers). The sayings of those four known ammas are included in that collection. Thanks to the work of scholars like Roberta Bondi and Mary Forman, we are beginning to see the ammas in their own light, and to reclaim women's history in this period of the life of the church.

What do these desert mothers have to offer to us today?

I tell students that when we study the desert mothers and fathers, we have to remember that we are looking at a galaxy far, far away. I think it may be beyond the capacity of our imaginations to conceive of their time and culture. That said, it is also true that their sayings speak to deep human yearnings and to perennial human difficulties. We still judge one another constantly, thereby anointing ourselves as if we were God. We still stumble in the practice of living faithfully, and we need support. We still have difficulty being honest with ourselves and with God. The ammas know intimately these movements of the heart and soul, and they encourage us, they confront us and they guide us.

I also find their insistence on practicing silence, solitude and stillness a kind of medicine for our over-heated, frenetic culture. Many women today are trying to balance work, family, volunteering, and participation in a faith community. Our lives are harried, and we have no sense of being able to rest in the divine silence, the Source from which we come and to which we will return. When I am teaching this material, I always begin and end the class with simply sitting in silence. Inevitably, participants remark that it is like getting a drink when you are really thirsty, so thirsty you had forgotten what water tasted like.

The practices that the desert offers us are down to earth, simple ways of allowing ourselves to be reminded that we are always living in the Love which creates, redeems and sustains us. The ammas draw us away from the assumption that technique is what matters. They remind us that this is a way of life.

Do you mean we should all go to the desert and become solitaries?

Certainly not. I mean that the human dimension of life in the desert is common to all of us. We are made for relationship with God and one another--one of the gifts of the Great Commandment is that it calls us to remember that basic truth. Knowing that in the abstract is one thing. Living it out in the nitty gritty of daily rounds is another. The ammas help us to find ways to gently pay attention to God's presence with us in all places and through all things. And they teach us to grow in the awareness that we are each unique, remarkable parts of a vast, vital, interconnected cosmos. We are reminded that we ARE one--that is reality from God's perspective. Our task is to align our lives and our loves in such a way that we participate in that reality. Most of us think we have to make the oneness. The desert knows the fallacy of that perception.

What have you personally learned from the ammas?

First, I have learned to experiment. When these women decided to leave their lives--some of them were learned, some were fairly wealthy, some were prostitutes--they made a choice to try to create something new with one another and with God. There were a variety of models. Some were solitaries. Some were living in community. Some were solitaries who lived in huts, yet came together regularly for worship and meals. Initially, there was no single monolithic pattern. At midlife, I know that many women are trying to find patterns for living that are congruent with their experience and their faith. And sometimes we need examples from women's history to help us find what fits.

Second, the ammas have taught me to set aside time for quiet. There are so many pressures that lead us to be fragmented. The tradition does not deny the pressures. The ammas tells us that God is present even in those daily struggles. I can remember that more readily if I have taken time for quiet.

Third, the ammas take me back to basics. We live in a time in which so much polarization has happened in both the national political arena, and within the church. The ammas invite us to look beyond all the divisive fussing--not to deny it, but to see it as surface reality. They invite us to gaze more deeply, especially in the most tense of circumstances.

And lastly, the ammas tell me that from the beginnings of the life of the Church, women have been initiators of new patterns and teachings, opening the way for knowing the wholeness that God offers in Christ. When I am reading the stories and sayings of the desert ammas, I am struck by their utter confidence that no matter what, this world belongs to God, is loved by God, and that each person, each creature, each aspect of the created order, is an expression (some would say a theophany, a showing) of God's love.

About the Author

Mary C. Earle is a poet, author, and spiritual director, who taught at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. She has written ten books about spirituality. Her titles include *Marvelously Made*, *Days of Grace*, *The Desert Mothers*, and *Broken Body, Healing Spirit*. She resides in San Antonio, Texas.