LECTURE REVIEW: WRITTEN BY JOY FISHER – SEPTEMBER 2014

Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen set an intention to awe her audience of at least 120 on Sept. 26 in Alix Goolden Hall with a lecture entitled “The Meaning We Make of the Numinous.” Judging by the enthusiastic response of her audience, she succeeded.

Sponsored by the C. G. Jung Society of Victoria, Dr. Bolen, an internationally renowned Jungian analyst, writer and speaker, defined her terms precisely. “Numinous”, she explained, comes from the Latin and refers to an experience that awes us. She expressed the hope that her talk would remind her audience of such experiences in their own lives that had opened a sense of wonder in them.

As a personal illustration, Dr. Shinoda recounted an experience she had had in her youth. Sleeping out under the stars at Girl Scouts camp, she could see the Milky Way. One night, while looking for shooting stars, she experienced an “altered state of consciousness.”

“I got the connection that I was part of the beautiful universe—not separate from it,” she recalled. It was a moment when she experienced the “natural appreciation” that human beings have for the sacred, a moment of numinosity.

The sense of oneness and its attachment to beauty comes back to us through the “sacred feminine”, she asserted. Sensing such preciousness is what makes us want to save the Earth from destruction.

Cautioning her audience not to be daunted by such a task, Dr. Bolen recalled the words of Helen Keller: “I am only one; I can’t do everything, but I will not refuse to do the one thing I can do.”

“We can’t grasp numinosity with our minds,” she insisted. Rather, it is a kind of wisdom that we “know in our bones,” even when we can’t prove it. But, she cautioned, there are many ways in which this sense of wonder can be suppressed. What if you are in awe about something and someone else says you’re crazy? “If you speak of wisdom from this place, the intellectual, patriarchal world may well laugh at you,” she cautioned.

But hanging on to the sense of wonder is only the beginning. It’s necessary to think about the meaning of it for one’s relationship to the world, Shinoda insisted. She encouraged her audience to “bring back the feeling and think about what it might mean.”

The idea of what is awesome often leads to a sense of humility, Shinoda said, illustrating with another personal story. In high school, she admitted, she thought she was pretty “hot stuff,” but she had a handicapped brother and eventually she realized it could as easily have been her. As a result, she had the “deep intuition” that whatever talents she had were gifts.

This understanding helped Shinoda decide to go to medical school to help others. It was her way to say thank you for the gifts she had been given.

Shinoda, speaking of transcendent spirituality, insisted that the “Goddess is not God in drag.” “Matter” comes from the word “mother,” she explained, and spirituality derived from the Goddess is more grounded than patriarchal religion. Combined with “synchronicity,” it can provide strength that can help us benefit from the experiences of others. We might think: “If that person could survive, so can I.”

Even when the other person doesn’t survive, experiences derived from them may provide us with strength. Shinoda related a “visitation dream” her husband had after their son died at age 28. In the dream, her son said: “Hey Dad, I’m fine. Tell Mom.”

“What do you do with experiences like that?” she asked rhetorically. “Stay open to them!” she encouraged her audience. Even if we are ridiculed, she asserted, the part of us that has had a numinous experience remains unsubdued, untamed.