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• Hildegard von Bingen from a line engraving by W. Marshall (Wellcome images) and an illustration of herself from *Scivias*, one of her many works.

Green leaves of wisdom

Dominique Levack has often wondered how, way back in time, women coped on their menopause journey? Here she takes a whimsical look back over a thousand years to discover, Hildegard von Bingham, who during her menopause years suffered enormously, yet reframed this into wisdom and strength for women to be inspired by over 10 centuries.



I have been fascinated by women throughout history who have walked their own paths, → courted controversy and created change for their daughters, grand-daughters and generations of women after them.

Women that have bucked the system, run their own race, and won.

How was it for these women who faced the menopause with no Google, HRT or science to support them?

Our own mothers and grandmothers had it tough enough, but what of women born 200 years ago, or even more.

How on earth did women who were lucky enough to live beyond 40 years of age cope with the attitudes of many men and society from bygone centuries during menopause?

I shudder to think.

• Common herbs were cultivated in Hildegard's garden to help others.



← One such woman who has been a beacon of light to me since I discovered her is Hildegard von Bingham.

A woman of many parts

Hildegard was quite an astonishing human. The first, documented woman composer, she was a philosopher, a writer, mystic and visionary. She was the founder of the theory and science of German natural medicine living for over 80 years between 1098 and 1179. Hildegard lived her entire life as a nun.

The Roman catholic church lists Hildegard as a saint, and in 2012 Pope XVI named her a doctor of the church in recognition of "*Her holiness of life and the originality of her teaching.*"

There are more surviving medieval musical chants by Hildegard than by any other composer from the entire Middle Ages, and she is one of the few known composers to have written both the music and the words. Perhaps the original 'rock chic' of the catholic church?

Matthew Fox the American priest, writer and theologian describes her music as *Erotic Gregorian Chant*.

Her life story reads like a film, and what a blockbuster it would be.

Born into an upper-class German family she was gifted to the church as she was already seeing holy visions from a young age. At just eight years old she entered the Benedictine Monastery in Disibodenberg, near Frankfurt, and was taken under the wing of Abbess Jutta von Sponheim, Head of the order, from a similar aristocrat background, a daughter of a Count, and only 14 years old herself. Jutta and Hildegard formed a strong bond, as young girls devoted to God and their sisterhood became the bedrock of their lives together. While Jutta herself would have been going through adolescence with no parents to support her, she taught the young

Hildegard how to read and write, recite prayers and play the psaltery, an early zither like instrument.

Gutta also experienced visions and many visitors would come to seek advice from her at the monastery, so they lived like a young sorceress and her apprentice forming a community of young women devoted to the church.

This was amid a time where girls and women were not considered worthy of a voice, yet both were experiencing deeply profound messages and dreams; these brilliant young girls led the charge for the rise of the non-conformist spiritual religious intellectual female.

How interesting that the church provided women with an alternative to marriage and children, and welcomed those from affluent backgrounds as their families would donate generous 'dowries' to support them. The Church would house and educate them within their own walls and benefit from the donations but keep the upper hand and decide their fates.

A true pioneer

Yet Hildegard never shied away from standing up to the church and spent the majority of her adult life pioneering her right as a woman to live and serve as she felt so called.

Flying in the face of her time of birth, Hildegard never ever took no as an answer; if she felt it God's duty, she would not stop until she gained permissions. Imagine for a moment how strong she must have been in her purpose. What a will she possessed within her feminine power. She was divine and sacred yet still found time to be one of the most prolific creators of secular music and poetry!

One of the most incredible things about Hildegard is that she lived well beyond the average of any women from this time in history. Most women would be lucky to live into their forties but Hildegard lived to age 81. →



• Hildegard was knowledgeable about plant properties.

In fact, at 36 she took over the role of Abbess at Disibodenberg Monastery, when her dear lifelong friend, Jutta, died and her visions reportedly started to grow.

Perimenopause?

Around 42 Hildegard couldn't ignore them anymore and refers to them as her 'illuminations.' Through her perimenopause years, she called it her '*Awakening*.' She painted herself with flames coming out of her head and is quoted as saying: "The holy spirit awakens everything that is." She was so overwhelmed with these sensations she took to her bed, and got the message from God to start writing.

Could this have been hot flushes and a deeper calling to meditate and to allow her gifts of creativity and genius to pour forth? As we know during perimenopause we often feel the need to slow down, rest, and how best to do this with the use of creativity.

Thankfully Hildegard had the friendship and support of a monk called Volmar who assisted her, as a secretary, taught her Latin and encouraged her to write about her visions.

Hildegard was reluctant to do this before, possibly because she felt it would evoke suspicion, ridicule and perhaps even accusatory and dangerous retribution from other areas of the church. In fact, she is quoted as saying: "I refused to write for a long time, because of doubt and erroneous thinking, and controversial advice from men."

It took her ten years from this point to write her first book, *Scivias* (Know She The Ways), which she felt, healed her and was a best seller. The book contains science, theology, poetry, paintings, and the oldest documented opera.

This inspired generations of women to study her ideas, and caused many women to enter the church. So, we can identify that her menopause years were her most prolific, yielding works that are revered today as

masterpieces and the bedrock of European intellectual spiritual teachings, The Divine Feminine at work!

*"Human being why do you sleep?
Wake up! Search out the house of your heart."*

Post menopause

I love to think of Hildegard spending her post-menopause years fulfilling what she felt was her true soul's purpose. Seeing the strength of her menopause as wisdom and pursuing her divine right to express herself. Seeking peace, hearing angels and the voice of God. The original 'Green Goddess' perhaps!

Hildegard also practiced what is known today as 'holistic healing' and cultivated a herb garden in the monasteries where she lived. Knowledgeable about the properties of plants and herbal remedies, through reading ancient Greek medicine. She wrote *Physica*, which details the healing powers of plants, animals, metals and crystals, and *Liber Subtilatum*, *The Book of Subtleties of the Diverse Qualities of Created Things*.

She advised hot baths, proper sleep patterns, a healthy diet, and a positive attitude to keep one in balance or to bring the sick back to a balanced, healthy state. It is truly quite an incredible life she led.

Did she medicate herself through menopause by immersing herself in creativity, singing songs, taking plant-based medicine, self-care and following her soul's purpose? It certainly looks like it!

She termed the phrase 'Greening Power' which is her expression of earthly life bringing forth joy, love, spirit and energy. She used to tease the abbots, bishops and her learned male counterparts and say: "The only sin in life is drying up" encouraging them to get out of their libraries to: "Stay wet, green, moist and juicy!"

I love Hildegard von Bingham for her complete disregard for protocol, class and status. She was a time traveling prophet whose words and music have guided us through centuries. She went on speaking tours across Germany expressly to deliver sermons to predominantly male audiences in spite of St. Paul's injunction against women speaking in the presence of men, having authority over men, or teaching men.

Corresponding with kings, queens, ecclesiastical authorities, and many others, she exchanged letters with medieval luminaries, Roman emperors and even the Pope at the time. Miraculously all her work has been preserved by foresight of the nuns at Bingham who sent the originals to a safe place over the war years.

Even into her eighties she did not stop in her pursuit for defending what was right and found herself in a quarrel with The Archbishop of Mainz about the wrongful burial place of an excommunicated man.

Hildegard pleaded that he had received grace and be left, but the stubborn Archbishop refused and placed her convent under *interdict*, which forbade them to sing or recognize mass or celebrate any religious day. It was only when the Archbishop died that it was lifted and Hildegard died soon after at the age of 81.

Imagine being locked away, not being allowed to sing despite being the most prolific composer of choral music in your lifetime.

There is no question in my mind that Hildegard von Bingham has earned her place in history as a high priestess. She single-handedly brought us music, art, poetry, philosophy, medicine, teachings and an insight into the spirit of a women determined to follow their own path.

We could all take a green leaf of wisdom from Hildegard, and honour her memory and our own self-care by singing, meditating more and looking into herbal remedies for symptoms and wellbeing.

Hildegard would make one hell of a guest on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* talking about menopause!

Dominique is a composer, songwriter and music specialist.

She has recently started hosting retreats in the Alpujarra mountains of Granada, Spain where she spent 10 years as one of the first female DJ's playing under the name DJ Aquarius, fusing Flamenco and world music in the early 2000s.

September saw her host a retreat for women over 50 aimed at those going through menopause and she is planning more in 2024.

Dominique is also a fan of Hildegard Von Bingham and is hoping to plan a tour to Germany to visit the monastery at Disibodenberg and Bingham.

Please contact her for more details at:
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