The Way of Visions
Hildegard of Bingen

The visions were intense and often overwhelming, and they began invading the soul of a young girl named Hildegard when she was only three years old. As the tenth child of well-to-do German parents, she was dedicated to God as a tithe, entering a Benedictine monastery at age eight. But she kept her visions to herself, as was appropriate for a woman growing up in the Middle Ages. After all, everyone knew women could be weak and easily confused. They shouldn't be trusted to convey divine truths. That was a man's job.

Everything changed when Hildegard was about forty-five years old. God spoke to her in a vision and commanded her to begin recording her visions and sharing the fruits of her experiences with the world. Hildegard always tried to obey God's promptings, no matter how crazy other people thought she was or how much trouble she caused, so she began writing down everything she saw in her private reveries.

She was still receiving visions as she entered her eighties, and throughout the second half of her life she kept a series of secretaries busy as she dictated accounts of her hundreds of excursions into the extraordinary. In some cases, she was transported to the future. At other times, she was given a front-row seat for witnessing events of the past. She was shown both the glories of heaven and the torments of hell. She was empowered to see deep into the souls of other people, including some of the less-than-saintly leaders of the Catholic Church—an institution she served as a loyal member all the days of her life. She was given insight into the cellular structure of plants, the anatomy of animals, and secret healing remedies.

And her spiritual journeys took her deep into the creative worlds of art, music, and language.

Some of her visions inspired her to write words and music she would sing with her fellow sisters. Other visions included divine instructions she was obligated to pass on to others, and she duly relayed these messages, regardless of whether they were full of cheer or condemnation and regardless of whether they were intended for wayward kings or sinful popes.

Some of the visions were beautiful and comforting; others were shocking and frightening. But after her otherworldly encounters, she usually felt strangely alive and deeply connected to God.

"I have never felt secure in my own abilities," she wrote in a letter to a monk named Guibert around the year 1175, four years before her death. "But I stretch out my hands to God, so that like a feather, which lacks all solidity of strength and flies on the wind, I may be sustained by him."

There are many ways to connect with God. Some people say they hear verbal messages. Others find comfort and guidance in sermons, books, intuitive impressions, or advice given by loving friends. But God apparently chose to communicate with Hildegard through visions, some of which came complete with blinding Technicolor™ images and thundering 1,000-watt sound.

"I see things," she told Guibert, a trusted friend and secretary during the later years of her life, "and I do not hear them with my bodily ears, nor with the thoughts of my heart, nor do I perceive them through a combination of my five senses, but ever in my soul, with my external eyes open, so that I never suffer debilitating ecstasy."

At times, the visions overpowered Hildegard's senses. "I see and hear and know at one and the same time," she wrote. "And the words which I see and hear in the vision are not like the words that sound from the mouth of man, but like a sparkling flame and a cloud moved by the pure air."

At other times, Hildegard caught a glimpse of something she called "the Living Light." She found it impossible to describe this

image of the eternal God, but she sure knew how it made her feel. "While I behold it, all sadness and pain is lifted from my memory, so that I feel like a carefree young girl, and not the old woman that I am."

A Complex, Controversial Saint

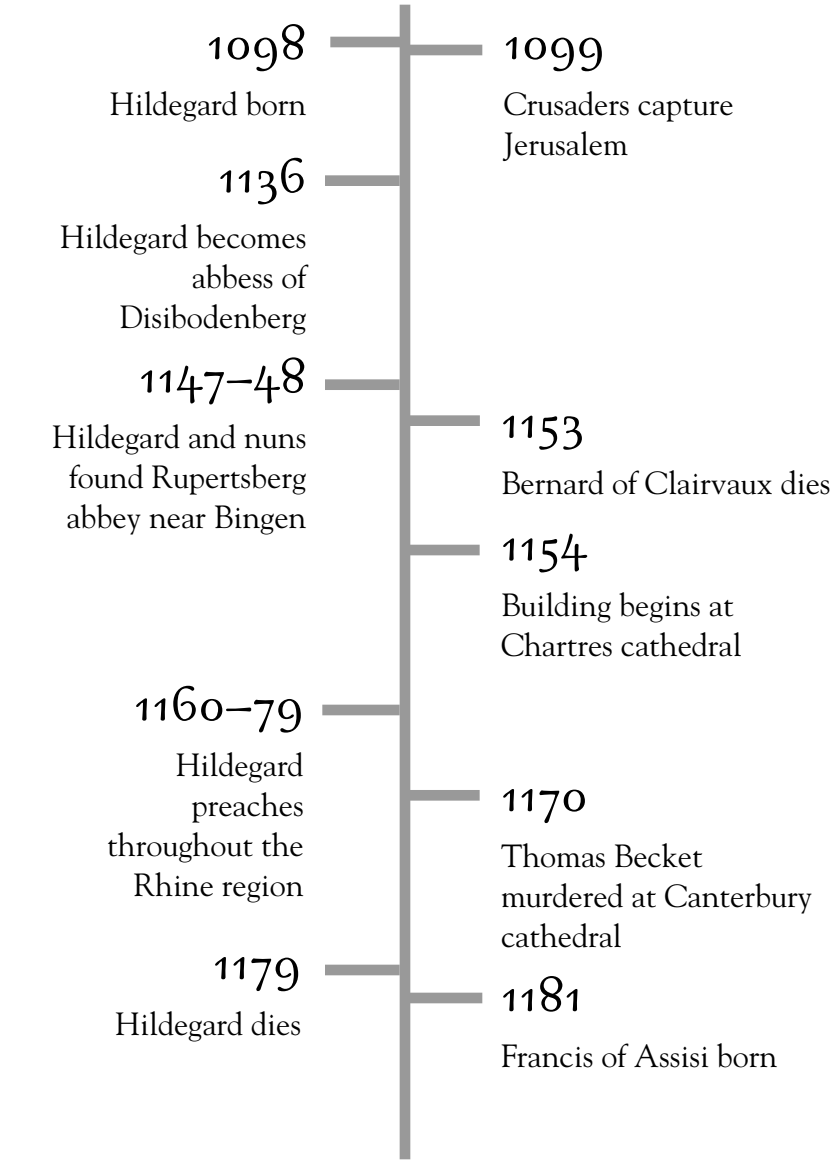
Throughout her troubled and stormy life, Hildegard did her best to use her gifts for the glory of God and the service of the world. And even though she called herself a "poor little woman," she wasn't afraid to defy the sexual stereotypes of her age. She served as an abbess at her monastery and later founded two new monasteries of her own near Bingen. Her numerous preaching tours throughout her native German Rhineland area attracted large and passionate crowds, making her a kind of regional religious superstar.

Her growing fame and influence made Hildegard an easy target for her critics, most of them male leaders who didn't like her "haughty" manner or were jealous of her popularity and power. Some called her mad. Others said she was in league with the devil. But friends in high places, including the influential Bernard of Clairvaux, helped her out. Bernard, who exchanged letters with Hildegard after hearing about her visions, appealed to the Pope, who gave his seal of approval to her writings.

At the time of her death, Hildegard was a celebrated seer. But after her death, she seemed to fade from people's memory and the historical record of her time. Perhaps it was because Germany was experiencing a mini-renaissance that witnessed an explosion of bold new thinkers and daring new ideas. Perhaps it was because her writings were so dense and inscrutable that few could figure out what she was saying. Perhaps it was because a charismatic young Italian mystic named Francis of Assisi, who was born two years after Hildegard died, would quickly turn Europe's religious scene on its head.

It would be centuries before Hildegard became famous once again. Interest began picking up again around 1979—the year

Hildegard and Her Time



many small but devoted groups of scholars and nuns around the world celebrated the eight hundredth anniversary of her death. Soon a growing number of people were rediscovering the Rhineland mystic and embracing different portions of her complex legacy.

In the 1980s, a defrocked Dominican priest and apostle of "Creation Spirituality" named Matthew Fox wrote books about Hildegard. Meanwhile, other spiritual seekers and disciples of alternative spirituality applauded Hildegard as a potent seer who transcended the narrow doctrinal confines of the Christian creeds. Feminists embraced her as a pioneer of women's equality. Natural health aficionados pored over her fascinating works on medicinal plants and healing techniques. And musicians dusted off her old musical compositions, combining her ethereal words with world beat rhythms and electronic musical accompaniments.

By the time English author Fiona Maddocks finished her biography of Hildegard in 2001, the Rhineland saint was awash in "a flood of misappropriation and fabulous invention." Maddocks complained about those who transformed Hildegard into the patron saint of their pet causes. "As a quick look at the Internet shows, she has become the darling of crankish cults and New Age zealots, Creationists and Greens, women's movements and alternative doctors."

Always complex and often confusing, Hildegard is as little understood in our day as she was in her own. And I must confess that I find much of the recent Hildegard hoopla a bit off-putting. As a result, I had never read much about her until my coauthor encouraged me to do so. Since learning more about her, I have been inspired by her life and hope you will find her encouraging as well.

Sights and Sounds from Out of This World

"I was only in my third year when I saw a heavenly light which made my soul tremble," says Hildegard in her *Vita* (or official biography), "but because I was a child I could not speak out."

Visions were such a normal part of her life that it took her a while to realize that others didn't experience the same things she did. "I tried to find out from my nurse if she saw anything at all other than the usual external objects." But when the nurse reported she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary, Hildegard became even more committed to secrecy. "Then I was seized with a great fear and did not dare to reveal this to anyone."

Some parents pressure their children to be normal, but Hildegard's mother and father saw the big soul in the small child; they placed her in the Disibodenberg monastery where Hildegard would later experience one of the most profound visions of her life.

"I saw an extremely strong, sparkling, fiery light coming from the open heavens," she recalled later. "It pierced my brain, my heart and my breast through and through like a flame which did not burn. . . . And suddenly I had an insight into the meaning and interpretation of the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic writings of the Old and New Testaments."

Hildegard was later named the abbess of Disibodenberg, but physical ailments often left her weak and frail. She was nearly forty-five when a voice from heaven commanded her to go public with her private inner life:

> O frail mortal, ashes of ashes and dust of dust, say and write what you see and hear. But since you are fearful of speaking, artless at explaining and untaught in writing, speak and write not according to human words nor following the understanding of human intelligence, nor according to the rules of human composition, but according to what you see and hear in the heavens above and in God's wondrous works.

For the remaining four decades of her life, Hildegard and her loyal secretaries, including Volmar—a devout and devoted monk—wrote down everything she could recall of her life story and her many visions. Making her once-private inner life public was a major transition for Hildegard. And even though she could never

figure out whether to call her experiences perceptions, illuminations, or visionary insights, she shared them with the world.

> And I heard and wrote them not according to the invention of my own or anyone else's heart, but as I saw, heard and understood them in heavens, through the secret mysteries of God. And again I heard the voice from Heaven saying to me: "Proclaim and write thus."

Illuminating Manuscripts

Relieved of the obligation to remain silent, Hildegard started speaking about her visions. Her words would soon fill the pages of numerous theological and biographical books.

One of Hildegard's most popular works was *Scivias*, which means "know the ways" or "know God's ways." The book contains more than two dozen visions, including scenes of Satan being booted out of heaven, images of the three persons of the Holy Trinity sharing "the most sweet liquor of holiness," visions of the holy church bathing in the blood of its Redeemer, and premonitions of the Last Days, which Hildegard believed were right around the corner. As she saw it, earthly history was divided into seven distinct periods. "But now," she says, "the world is in the seventh age, approaching its end, just as it were the seventh day."

Another work, *The Book of Life's Merits*, records strange and fascinating visions that describe dozens of human vices with the help of images that blend features from the natural world with otherworldly scenes. *The Book of Divine Works* is even more complex and dazzling. It takes a cosmic view of the work of the Creator, who "established the pillars that uphold the entire globe." In one colorful vision, Hildegard sees a volcano. Her description is typical of those found in some of her more colorful works:

> And again I saw, as it were, a four-square apparition like a great city, walled alternately with brightness and darkness and furnished with certain mountains and figures. And I saw in the middle of its eastern

> region something like a great broad mountain of hard white stone, like a volcano in form, at whose summit a mirror of such bright purity shone forth that it seemed to outshine the sun. In it the image of a dove appeared with wings outspread ready to fly. And the same mirror held within many hidden mysteries and gave out a brightness of great breadth and height, in which many mysteries and many forms of diverse figures appeared.

Hildegard also saw visions of a Cosmic Man, a Cosmic Egg, and many other puzzling entities. Some of the nuns who lived in her monastery and worked in its scriptorium attempted to translate some of her fantastic visions into paintings that were published along with Hildegard's texts. A surprising number of these psychedelic illustrations have survived, and they offer deeper insights into the saint's often perplexing visions, even if they fail to answer all the questions we might have about their meaning.

Australian scholar Sabina Flanagan has spent much of her adult life studying Hildegard's amazing and often baffling works. She even translated some of the saint's writings from Latin into English. But she still isn't sure she always grasped what Hildegard was trying to say. "I am not sure that I have always managed to capture her exact meaning," confesses Flanagan in her introduction to her 1996 collection, *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*.

Earthly Advice

Not all of Hildegard's visions were so otherworldly or so difficult to interpret. One vision that came to her often featured a group of virgins dancing together as they worshipped God. *Scivias* includes a description of one of these virginal visions:

> Among them I saw, as in a mirror, some who were all dressed in whitest garments; some of them had a circlet shining like the dawn on their heads, and their shoes were whiter than snow.

Hildegard's interpretation of this vision was straightforward. She believed God had given her specific guidelines about how she and her nuns should dress and worship. After she turned fifty and founded the first of two monasteries near the town of Rupertsberg near Bingen on the Rhine River, Hildegard and her eighteen sisters sewed clothing that resembled the garments she had seen in her vision and enacted some of the dances she had witnessed the heavenly virgins enjoying.

Her visions were not always so comforting. Hildegard spent much of her life in a state of perpetual anxiety and agitation. This, along with her strict ascetic practices of fasting and self-punishment, resulted in a lifetime of health problems and migraine headaches. It's not surprising, then, that some of the visions she received dealt with healing remedies that could benefit her and others who, when sick, faced two equally unattractive options: suffering in silence or going to a medieval "doctor" whose treatment might cause more harm than good. As God told her in *Scivias:* "I am the great Physician of all diseases and act like a doctor who sees a sick man who longs to be cured."

Undergirding Hildegard's health-related visions was the deep belief that there was a God-ordained harmony existing throughout all of creation. "God fashioned the human form according to the constitution of the firmament and of all other creatures," she said.

Many of Hildegard's healing visions were collected in two books that are avidly read today by all manner of spiritual healers and are readily available under a number of creative titles that reveal at least some of their contents: *Causes and Cures, Book of Simple Medicine,* or even *Hildegard's Apothecary.*

There's scant scientific verification of Hildegard's prescriptions, and many Western doctors dismiss her many potions and cures as the misinformed imaginings of a well-meaning but overly excited Dark Ages nun. But that hasn't stopped many from following her suggestions for using herbs like lavender ("it will soften the pain in the liver") or minerals like sapphire ("the stone of wisdom and

intelligence that gives a clear mind by its power"). Today, many alternative healers agree with Hildegard's claim: "These remedies come from God."

Even more controversial was Hildegard's dispensation of detailed advice on sex. Some of her male critics charged that she possessed more knowledge about the subject than was appropriate for a nun sworn to lifelong virginity.

But whenever she was under the gun, she deflected her critics' complaints, claiming she was not the source of her teachings but merely a messenger. "I am a poor earthen vessel," she said, "and say these things not of myself but from the serene Light."

Music of the Spheres

Hildegard's work as an abbess, an author, an adviser, a healer, a preacher, and a seer would be enough to guarantee her a place in the mystics' hall of fame. But one other fascinating aspect of this complex woman inspires curiosity and awe: Hildegard was a musical composer, which because of my interest in music intrigues me even more. Soon after she was elected abbess of Disibodenberg, she began writing songs for her nuns to sing. Nearly eighty of her compositions have survived the centuries intact, and now vocal ensembles around the world are performing her music once again, making Hildegard one of the most popular medieval musicians.

Just as Hildegard's healing visions illustrated her view that God was the Divine Creator who reigned supreme over the natural and supernatural worlds, her mystical music reflected her belief that God was the Divine Artist who first spoke the cosmos into existence and now sustains it with the sound of his voice.

Barbara Thornton is the director of Sequentia—an ensemble that performs and records medieval music. *Canticles of Ecstasy*—Sequentia's 1994 recording of some of Hildegard's music—includes an essay by Thornton on the theology reflected in the saint's compositions. "She called them *symphoniae harmoniae celestium revelationum*," wrote Thornton—"a title meant to indicate their divine

inspiration as well as the idea that music is the highest form of human activity, mirroring as it does the ineffable sounds of heavenly spheres and angel choirs."

Or as Hildegard herself put it:

> Every element has a sound, an original sound from the order of God; all those sounds unite like the harmony from harps and zithers. Those voices you hear are like the voice of a multitude, which lifts its sound on high; for jubilant praises, offered in simple harmony and charity, lead the faithful to that consonance in which is no discord, and make those who still live in earth sigh with heart and voice for the heavenly reward.

There's even a legend that papal investigators researching whether or not Hildegard should be canonized interviewed three of the nuns in her community after her death. The nuns reported seeing their abbess after she died. She was moving through the cloister late at night chanting "O Virga Ac Diadema" (Praise for the Mother), one of the songs she had written. The sisters said that as she chanted, she gave off a heavenly glow.

Hildegard's songs, which were inspired by her visions and composed for the sisters' corporate worship, cover many of the key themes found in other liturgical music. In addition to numerous songs dedicated to the Virgin Mary, there were compositions celebrating the incarnation of Christ ("O vis aeternitatis"), the ministry of the Holy Spirit ("Spiritus Sanctus vivificans vita"), and numerous songs about her blessed virgins. One song about the virgins ("O noblissima viriditas") includes concise references to some of the visual elements of her visions:

> *You glow red like the dawn,*
> *and you burn like the sun's fire.*

Though the lyrics often came first, Hildegard said the compositions weren't complete until this basic structure was clothed with

celestial music. "When the words come, they are merely empty shells without the music," she says. "They live as they are sung, for the words are the body and the music the spirit."

Throughout much of Hildegard's music, certain musical themes appear time and time again. In some of her improvisations, these

Loves Human and Divine

Rules governing monastic communities have long warned against developing "particular friendships" that lead members to favor some people over others. Benedict's Rule addresses this matter in simple but direct language: "Let him not love one more than another."

Although some people might find such warnings archaic or puritanical, they illustrate a deeper truth I have observed in our own community—The Brothers and Sisters of Charity. To enter fully into communal life requires that we must make a clean break from flawed patterns of past relationships. And commands about "particular friendships" are designed to inspire authentic community relationships and true spiritual friendships by removing the obstacles that result from "exclusive" approaches toward relationships.

Hildegard followed these simple commands for most of the seven decades she lived the religious life, but her deep affection for a daughter of nobility named Richardis von Stade violated this principle and at least temporarily threw Hildegard's life into confusion.

After being a member of Hildegard's monastery and working with Volmar as a secretary, Richardis decided to leave and serve as the abbess of another monastery. The decision shocked Hildegard, who had grown closer to Richardis than perhaps she had realized.

Hildegard responded by condemning the younger nun's decision, telling others that it was the result of devilish pride, not godly

central musical motifs can be demanding for contemporary singers. For example, one piece featured an elaborate melisma extending over seventy-five notes. Such cases show why these compositions often sound like an ethereal hybrid of Gregorian chant and Joni Mitchell.

submission. "She did not seek this however, according to God, but according to this world's honor," she wrote.

When Hildegard's archbishop wrote and instructed her to let the girl go, the saint responded in the most unsaintly manner. "Your malicious curses and threatening words are not to be obeyed," she wrote to the archbishop. "These legal pretexts brought forward to establish authority over this girl have no weight in God's eyes."

Ultimately, Richardis left, with Hildegard predicting her imminent doom for doing so. About two years after her departure, the younger nun died very suddenly. Scholars have had a field day with the whole episode. Some have even declared that the two women were involved in a homosexual relationship—a conclusion that is dismissed by most researchers.

Still, there may be valuable lessons to be learned from this friendship gone sour. One lesson is that St. Benedict's admonition against favoritism in faith communities may be a wiser piece of advice than many of us realize. Christian communities can be tested or weakened by inappropriate relationships and dependencies.

The Richardis episode also conveys a second valuable lesson about the pervasiveness of human fallibility, even among the faith's recognized saints and mystics. Hildegard's willingness to wrap herself in the mantle of the godly mystic and do battle with anyone who disagreed with her shows that no matter how many heavenly experiences we have, we still remain people with clay feet planted firmly in this world of imperfection and half-truth.

Hildegard's complex and varied work illustrates what might be called a metaphysical understanding of the close interdependence of color, sound, rhythms, harmonies, and other elements that make up God's divine music and art. Each one of these elements has a unique impact on our emotions, even the various organs of our body. That's why some music assists in the process of healing.

And according to the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Hildegard created "the earliest morality play by more than a century." Morality plays, which became increasingly popular during later centuries, were dramatic presentations featuring actors personifying Christian virtues like humility or purity. Though tempted by the devil, the godly characters in Hildegard's dramas ultimately remained faithful to God.

Under Divine Control

Visions have played a powerful role in my own life. Both my work as a community founder and as a musician and composer of contemporary sacred music were based on a vision I received in 1971. I also experienced other visions of a more personal nature that inspired my conversion and subsequent vocational journey. Perhaps it is because of these experiences and my love of sacred music that I find Hildegard so interesting.

Some call Hildegard a genius. Others say she was a pre-Renaissance renaissance woman or creative polymath. But as she saw it, she was merely a simple woman in thrall to a much higher power. A feather on the breath of God, she went first this way and then that way, following the promptings of her Heavenly Father and going wherever he guided her.

When you think about it, that's not a bad goal for any of us who desire to experience a powerful connection with God in our own lives. But how do we do that? How do we order our lives in such a way that God can prompt and guide us?

We can't pretend to be Hildegard, and we shouldn't waste time trying to imagine that our twenty-first century is like her twelfth century. But in our own lives and our own time, we can seek to cultivate the wholehearted love and single-minded focus she had for God. It might also help if we could turn down the chaotic noise of our lives so that we might be able to hear when God's still, small voice speaks to our soul.

Perhaps if we maintain an attitude of hopeful silence and keep our heart open to the breath of God, we too can see some of the things Hildegard saw, hear some of the words she heard, and experience just a small portion of the heavenly love that she knew so well for so long.

LEARNING MORE ABOUT Hildegard of Bingen

There has been a revival of interest in Hildegard of late, resulting in a bumper crop of books by and about this unique saint. As with the work of many other mystics, her best-known work *(Scivias)* is available in Paulist Press's Classics of Western Spirituality series. And lesser-known works are available in English today that were impossible to find a quarter century ago.

But if you're just beginning to explore Hildegard, the best place to begin is Sabina Flanagan's *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*, which was published in the United States in 1996 by Shambhala Publications, which is best known for its works on Buddhism. The collection includes portions of most of her major works and includes four-color reproductions of some of the illustrations created by artists during the saint's lifetime. Flanagan also wrote the biography, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (Routledge, 1989).

A more recent biography is Fiona Maddocks's *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (Doubleday, 2001)—a well-written study that incorporates some of the latest research.

Barbara Newman, another of the better-known scholars, has written numerous books about Hildegard, including *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (University of California Press, 1997).

If you want to listen to some of Hildegard's music while you're reading, you have your choice from more than a half-dozen CDs, including Sequentia's *Canticles of Ecstasy* (which seeks to recreate the compositions in their original style) and Richard Souther's *Vision: The Music of Hildegard of Bingen*. The popular 1994 album, which attempts to update these medieval compositions by giving them a contemporary-music sheen, was released by Angel, the same label that had an earlier surprise multiplatinum success with *Chant*, an album of Gregorian hymns.

I address topics related to mysticism and music more fully in my books, *Music of Creation*, *Come to the Quiet*, and *The Joy of Music Ministry*.