

Jon Yoder

Capstone

### **Hildegard of Bingen: Interdisciplinarian of Medieval Europe**

Interdisciplinarity is not solely defined by one's familiarization with more than one discipline of academic study. It can better be defined as a lifelong process involving the integration of many dimensions present in one's life in order to form a more progressive, inquisitive mind which is illustrated through the way in which that life is lived. Throughout history, important and powerful men and women have demonstrated a life such as this; among them are Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa, and Mahatma Gandhi. One other person who has most assuredly reserved a place on this list is a woman named Hildegard of Bingen.

Born in 1098, Hildegard was the tenth child to Hildebert von Bermersheim and his wife Mechtild. They were a very well-to-do family of the free nobility from the Bermersheim region of Germany. When she was eight years old, Hildegard's parents dedicated her to the church as a tithe. Hildegard was placed in a Benedictine monastery in an enclosed room with an anchoress and tutor named Jutta von Sponheim. As an anchoress, Jutta (and presumably Hildegard), had been placed in the room also called a cell or a tomb, with a ceremony including funeral honors. This was a lifelong dedication of seclusion from the world, the ceremony being symbolic of one dying to the world, or rather the world dying to one's self so that that person might live a life of purity removed from all sin of the world. Jutta and Hildegard had very little contact with the outside world; only with any attendant or other students Jutta may have had. It was under these conditions

that Jutta taught Hildegard to read and write Latin and sing from the Psalter. She also learned the ways of the Benedictine rule and the process of the Divine Office, though she could not directly participate because she was a woman. In this intimate setting, Hildegard revealed to Jutta visions she had seen since the time when she was three years old.

According to various sources, Hildegard had openly talked about her visions until realizing that others could not see them. Jutta apparently relayed these visions to Volmar, a monk at the St. Disibod cloister who later became Hildegard's secretary and very close friend. As the number of women at the cloister grew, they were allowed to participate in the Divine Office, which according to *Vision: the Life and Music of Hildegard von Bingen*; this "might have brought Hildegard some expertise in musical production" (Bobko 4). After Jutta's death, the other nuns elected Hildegard as their abbess, marking the beginning of Hildegard's interdisciplinary life.

The number of women grew enough to form their own convent apart from the monks at the Disibod cloister. This was a large undertaking on the part of Hildegard and her nuns. They struggled financially and because they were women, were considered subordinates to the monks. They eventually succeeded however and founded a new convent near Bingen, a town on the Rhine River. Hildegard led the abbey until her death in September of 1179.

What else happened in her lifetime? What did she accomplish after leaving the cell she originally intended to remain in until her death? Hildegard became one of the most influential women of the middle ages, and according to Matthew Fox, "If Hildegard had been a man, she would be well known as one of the greatest artists and intellectuals the world has ever seen." Hildegard exhibited interests through her writings and life of

leadership, psychology, the medicinal uses of herbs for healing, diplomacy, preaching, music, and even the biological processes of human reproduction. One might ask why? What was Hildegard's motivation for studying, writing about, and participating in these activities (excepting childbirth)?

After conducting research on the life of Hildegard, it is evident that her motivation for incorporating many areas of study and practice largely stems from her role as a leader and advisor to her nuns. From this, her reputation grew and her activities compounded on one another. The leadership of Hildegard von Bingen is a model to anyone facing a role of management today. Her perseverance through trials and setbacks is exemplary and should be noted by anyone in a position of leadership or any student of a leadership role. By the time the group of nuns at the St. Disibod monastery had grown large enough to start a new abbey, the monastery had gained much wealth. Visitors left gifts and nuns brought dowries. The result of Hildegard founding a new abbey with complete independence from the monastery would mean less funding and less influence both intellectually and spiritually for the St. Disibod monastery. It would also mean that a woman would be, for the most part, an independent leader of an institution of the Church, something not at all common for the time.

A prime example of Hildegard's leadership capabilities and strong will to stand up to authority when necessary was demonstrated less than a year before her death. In what is said to have been one of her greatest struggles, Hildegard's convent at St. Rupertsburg was penalized with an interdict from the clergy of Mainz for having buried a particular man in their cemetery who had been excommunicated. The nuns were required by the clergy to remove the body and until they did so, were prohibited from celebrating mass, receiving the

sacraments and reciting the Divine Office with music; it could only be “whispered behind closed doors” (Bobko 31). Believing it to be a horrible sin to remove the buried body, and based on the fact that the man had repented prior to his death, Hildegard exercised her rhetorical skills and sent a rather stern letter to the clergy of Mainz, her superiors, requesting the removal of the indictment. In her letter, she tells the clergy that though she disagrees with their decision to repress the chanting of the Office, the nuns have complied for the time being, in order to exercise obedience. However, she lets them know why she disagrees. After quoting a portion of the 150<sup>th</sup> psalm that mentions worship with music (instruments specifically) she begins to remind the clergy that before Adam’s fall, he was surrounded by angels and the glory of God; and as such, he would sing praises to God. After the fall, however, he would no longer sing due to the separation from God. Upon his restoration however, he would regain his voice to sing praises (Baird 158,159). In writing these things, Hildegard implies that to sing praises is the natural function of a follower of God and to take that away is equated to evil. She even goes so far as to metaphorically relate the clergy of Mainz to the devil in this sense. She accomplishes this by stating that:

But when the devil, man’s great deceiver, learned that man had begun to sing through God’s inspiration and, therefore, was being transformed to bring back the sweetness of the songs of heaven, mankind’s homeland, he was so terrified at seeing his clever machinations go to ruin that he was greatly tormented. Therefore, he devotes himself continually to thinking up and working out all kinds of wicked contrivances. Thus he never ceases from confounding confession and the sweet beauty of both divine praise and spiritual hymns, eradicating them through wicked suggestions, impure thoughts, or various distractions from the heart of man and

even from the mouth of the Church itself, wherever he can, through dissension, scandal, or unjust oppression. (Baird 160)

Hildegard continues by warning them that if they are to make the decision to silence a congregation praising God through song, or to remove from believers the right of receiving the sacraments, then they had better have a very good, well thought out, and thoroughly discussed reason for doing so; she also warns them that they must take caution not to let personal grievances blind them and to be on guard against attacks from Satan who will attempt to deceive them. Unfortunately, the prelates at Mainz ignored this letter, but rather than give up, Hildegard displayed further leadership and rhetorical skill by composing a letter to Christian, the Archbishop of Mainz, requesting that he utilize his position of authority to resolve the issue at hand. The Archbishop acted in accordance with Hildegard's demands and pushed the prelates at Mainz to lift the indictment. This is an example of her strength as a leader because it demonstrates the strength and influence a leader needs to achieve a desired goal, or to move in a desired direction.

Another trait of leadership is her desire to understand her followers; something Hildegard demonstrates by taking an interest in psychology. Her interest in psychology is made known through her documented classifications of character types. She took the classification standards of the time a step further by "emphasize[ing] psychosexual traits and offer[ing] separate character sketches for men and women" (Bobko 19). According to Bobko, Hildegard's main motivation for the study of psychology and character types may have been to help women decide whether or not to become nuns. Hildegard's study and interest in psychological matters may have, in part, been a reaction to the need to gain a better understanding of people in general. In a position of ministry, a person should be at

least somewhat versed in the way people think and what life circumstances may have contributed to any given world view. Ministers familiar with a basic psychological understanding of humanity will be better equipped to serve the needs of their community than those who do not have such insight.

Also from a more scientific perspective, rather than spiritual, Hildegard studied medicinal herbs and the healing process as well as animals and lapidary (Bobko 17). Her collected observations of various plants and other things concerning natural history are included in her book *Physica*. A companion book, *Causae et curae*, addresses both mental and physical diseases and their cures. It also addresses human sexuality including what is possibly the first written description of the female orgasm. These books were not written in the prophetic mindset as were most of her other writings, but have a more scientific approach. According to Bobko, “scholars have been unable to determine which portions of these works represent Hildegard’s practical experience, and which portions are derived from the standard medical lore of her time” (Bobko 17). Like her time spent studying psychology, Hildegard’s intent for studying diseases and healing may have been for the purpose of serving both her nuns and the people in the surrounding community.

By the time Hildegard was abbess of the St. Rupertsberg cloister, her influence as a spiritual advisor had spread to popes and kings, as well as nuns, monks, abbots and abbesses throughout Europe. She received letters from people asking her to pray for them, to tell them the future, or just to asking her to give advice on something. For example, Frederick Barbarossa, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, wrote many letters to Hildegard. In one, he asked that she pray for him and his people that they may retain the grace of God. In perfect demonstration of her personal strength and unwavering ideals, she responded to

the emperor by telling him that she “see[s] [Barbarossa] like a little boy or some madman living before living eyes.” (Baird 78). In telling the emperor he is “like a little boy” and a “madman,” Hildegard demonstrates that she has the clout to be able even to stand up to the emperor. This demonstrates also, that she had the charisma and influence necessary to lead her convent. Another example of Hildegard’s unfailing resolve for accomplishment and protection of the rights of her convent is expressed in a letter to Pope Alexander III.

Hildegard’s long time friend and provost of the Mount Saint Rupert convent, Volmar, had died and the abbot of the St. Disibod monastery would not cooperate with Hildegard in the selection of a new provost, saying that they did not even have the right to make such a choice on their own. To remedy this situation, Hildegard once again picked up her pen and sent a request to the Pope asking that their rights be retained. Though Hildegard showed fortitude in writing directly to the Pope, Pope Alexander III did not directly assist or address Hildegard’s issue. He instead passed the matter on to an abbot in Köln who pushed the abbot of St. Disibod to provide a monk named Gottfried to serve as provost and secretary for Hildegard’s abbey. (As a side note, Gottfried began, but died before finishing, a biography of Hildegard (Baird 120 – 122).) This is another example of Hildegard’s incorporation of rhetorical skill and courage as a leader.

Among Hildegard’s other rhetorical contributions to history were her missionary journeys through various parts of Germany. Not only was this a personal achievement for Hildegard (she had been secluded in a monastery or abbey for about fifty years by the time of her missions), but it was an important step for women of the time. She not only was permitted to travel as a missionary, but actually preached to all male audiences, often delivering messages that were critical of the Church and its leadership and calling for reform.

(Bobko 24 – 26). At this time, women were not allowed to preach and were especially prohibited from criticizing the Church; something Hildegard singlehandedly.

Perhaps Hildegard's most widely known contributions are those of her music. The common church music of her time was what is known as Gregorian chant. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when Hildegard was writing, the texts for the chants were preexisting liturgical prayers that were then set to music. One large difference between the chants of Hildegard and others is that the texts for Hildegard's music were written by her. At that time, very few composers are known to have written both the music and text (Palisca 70). Hildegard's music also differed in areas such as typical pitch range. Another of Hildegard's great musical/theatrical achievements is her morality play *Ordo virtutum*, Latin for "The Virtues". This play was in ways the first of its kind. Unlike liturgical dramas, *Ordo virtutum* was not based on the liturgy and could be performed at any time. Hildegard's play was full of allegorical characters "such as Prophets, the Virtues, the Happy Soul, the Unhappy Soul, and the Penitent Soul" There is also a character representing the devil who is the only one that never sings, but only speaks. This is symbolic of him being separated from God (Palisca 69, 70), and it is consistent with her discussion of music from the letter written to the prelates in Mainz. Yet another aspect of Hildegard's music that may have differed from most chant styles at the time was instrumental accompaniment. While this is unknown for sure, one can speculate based on some of her writings. In the same letter to the prelates at Mainz, Hildegard notes that instruments are to be constructed to "enhance [the] songs of praise with melodic strains" (Baird 159). If Hildegard used instruments to provide an accompaniment for her chants, it would have been unusual for the time and setting



As evidenced by her many works, Hildegard was by all definitions an interdisciplinarian. Throughout her lifetime she was a leader and an influential correspondent with many very important contemporary figures. She studied to an extent personality traits and how to heal illnesses. She was a poet, musician and playwright. What is it though, that ties these diverse fields into a single motivation with which Hildegard was wholly committed to? While her dedication to leadership might provide one explanation, it leaves one to wonder why she was so motivated to lead. The best explanation can be found no other place than her dedication to God, her relationship with the Holy Spirit and her desire to serve others in the name of Christ. The words of her poetry that became the words to her music were inspired by the intense visions she had throughout her lifetime. This single motivation drove Hildegard to accomplish the things she accomplished.

The study of Hildegard, at least on some level, should be a part of every interdisciplinary student's curriculum. Her incorporation of many disciplines to achieve a life of service and dedication to God and humanity is a beautiful example of how a single person can utilize an interdisciplinary way of thinking to make a difference in his/her world. Her leadership was infused with psychology, maintained with rhetoric, and supported through her worship of God, with which music was an integral part.

If teachers and students alike study the life of Hildegard and integrate information learned from her into liberal studies curriculums, it will only add to the educational value of interdisciplinary study. The examples she leaves behind are unique. While other men and women throughout history have demonstrated the integration of many disciplines to achieve a single goal or solve a complex problem, none have been exactly like Hildegard. Every interdisciplinarian is unique and every interdisciplinary story is important. One reason

Hildegard's story is especially important to study is because of her extensive display of rhetorical skills and incorporation of them in her leadership role.

Rhetoric is an art that is too little understood by far too many educated and uneducated people alike. Rhetoric can be very influential when used correctly, however too few people understand it. The study of rhetoric is not only beneficial to those who plan to be orators, but anyone who sends or receives messages of any kind. Hildegard provides a good example of rhetorical skills because hers demonstrates the importance of basic persuasive and writing skills for a person of authority. It is imperative that one who is in charge of an organization be able to communicate effectively with his or her own people and people from outside of the organization. One thing however that is not shown through Hildegard's life is the importance of rhetorical skills for a person who is not in a position of leadership or authority. With modern technology people of all social occupational standings receive messages constantly from various sources. A prime example of this is the recent 2008 U.S. presidential election cycle where candidates Barak Obama and John McCain spread campaign messages nationwide, which no doubt reached worldwide with the help of youtube.com and other internet media and news sources. People holding many different political ideologies were forced to interpret the messages they received. How these messages are interpreted is dependent on many factors, including world view, personal beliefs and values among many other things. One of the most major factors in determining how messages are interpreted is a person's own understanding of rhetoric and its processes. Even a simple understanding of rhetoric will help a person know what to look for in various messages, how to determine a speaker's goals, and how to not take every message received at face value. If one day the majority of Americans understands at least a

basic amount of speech construction and delivery techniques for example, politicians, preachers, company spokesmen, as well as other important and influential public officials will be held to increasingly higher standards; this would only benefit our society and since the United States is a world power, potentially the world. What can be learned from Hildegard's life is the incorporation of well crafted rhetorical skills into her life's work to more efficiently reach her goals and the goals of her convent.

Equally important to Hildegard was her music. Unlike rhetoric, music was not used by Hildegard as an external tool to reach progressive goals, but rather it was a part of something that was integral to her being. To Hildegard, music was an ingredient in the worship of God. The music she wrote added an extra, more personal dimension to the worship because the texts of the music were written by her and were inspired through the visions she had. Most writers of church music at the time set preexisting liturgical prayers to music rather than composing original texts. The fact that Hildegard took the time to write original poetry and set it to original music, and in doing so breaking traditional conventions, must have had a lasting impact on her nuns and the monks at the nearby monastery. What can be extrapolated from this aspect of Hildegard's life? While the majority of people do not hold views of music similar to Hildegard's, the example of music in her life remains useful to many people today. It reminds people to allow that which is most important in life, whatever it may be, to guide the work accomplished within a lifetime. For many people, what is important to them is checked at the door when they go to work each day. Even though many people are forced to work at jobs they do not enjoy for whatever reason, it is still possible to find ways to let the most important aspects of your life be

present in your mind while at work. People are much happier when they work and live for a goal or reason they find important. Also, people are more productive when they are happy.

Learning to integrate various disciplines helps a person to solve complex problems. A complex problem is a problem or issue that requires input from more than one area of study. Two methods of attempting to solve a complex problem are 1) using a multi-disciplinary approach or 2) by using an interdisciplinary approach. Multi-disciplinarianism involves the collaboration of many disciplines to solve a problem or address a certain issue while a true interdisciplinary approach involves the incorporation of many disciplines to solve a given problem or issue. The latter is generally the better of the two methods when encountering a complex problem because it allows for one person to share and borrow certain aspects from each discipline involved. This type of process may even allow for the synthesis of new knowledge and/or ideas through the intermingling of many disciplines. An example of a multi-disciplinary approach to a complex problem might be a collaborative research effort between a biologist, a psychologist, and a sociologist to determine the origins of an epidemic, its spread, and its effects on the general psyche of the affected population. This particular example could also involve areas such as the knowledge of a certain culture or language(s) as well as the input from experts in political science and foreign affairs; especially in a world where terrorist attacks have almost become commonplace. It is highly unlikely that any one person would have the capability to know or understand everything that is required to address a problem such as this, but one person can understand enough psychology and sociology to narrow down what specifically is needed for a study of this magnitude. One person could also know the ins and outs of a certain culture and its language or languages. When a person is competent in two or more

related disciplines, he/she will have the advantage of being able combine aspects from each discipline to solve problems. In this way, interdisciplinary work has the advantage of leaving much room for many perspectives; something very beneficial to a situation that affects many people (such as a pandemic). This is just one example of a complex issue in today's world and how it might be addressed. Hildegard, while not dealing with anything relating to the magnitude of an international pandemic, did incorporate various aspects of knowledge and insight to solve the problems in her life. From her examples, people today can learn to incorporate interdisciplinary thought patterns into their everyday lives.

Hildegard was more than a jack of all trades, she was an interdisciplinarian; even the pattern of her life is a metaphoric comparison to the academic development of interdisciplinarity. From the early stages of her life she had visions that eventually became a guiding force for her. Once she entered the St. Disibod monastery, she began developing a life that would support her visions. When people enter a mindset of higher education development of goals begins. Though she was enclosed in a tomb-like chamber during her early years, Hildegard emerged and quickly took advantage of all available resources and her interdisciplinarity took flight. The founding of her own abbey at St. Rupertsburg can be seen as a symbolic culmination of one's interdisciplinary work and achievements. When one is interdisciplinary in thought and action, success is inevitable.

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