

“Quest for Light”

A tribute to Madame Curie

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM

Once upon a time – the Earth was flat!

Ships clung to the coasts for fear of what would befall them if they ever lost sight of land. They might sail out into the void and vanish forever. And IF they survived and got to the other side, how would they ever “come up” again?

But then there appeared a flaming soul who contested the “knowledge” of the time; who dared escape the coasts’ embrace. He sailed out to the end of the world, out beyond the charted waters and returned – safe and alive. The Earth WAS round! And the world was never more the same.

Once upon a time – people were burned at the stake for thinking differently. Was not the Earth the center of the Universe? Was the Sun just a mere star among many?

Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden for eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Lucifer – the Giver of Light – was envisioned as the Prince of Hades. Light – knowledge – the path to the unknown – a threat to the powers that be.

Eve, Woman, was doomed to eternal slavery and ignorance. Knowledge was Man’s domain; and only there was “Truth” known. Other thoughts were heresy.

But there have always been brave souls who defied the establishment and explored the unknown, searching for truth and breaching the bonds of ignorance, willing to defy the incinerating flames of the stake, to find the Light. Alchemists, the wise women of old, witches and trolls of ancient times – magicians – they’ve all sought to uncover the secrets of the Creator.

Alchemists believed in the possibility of transmutation of elements, while the “learned” world remained staunch in their belief that atoms were indivisible and elements intransigent. This was absolute. Even when it was observed that the air around uranium became electrically charged and could set the hands of an electrometer in motion, no one took it seriously – with one very significant exception – a young woman: Marie Skłodowska.

A poor, Polish girl who defied the system in her homeland and sought foreign soil for the education that was necessary for her to “be to something”. Despite poverty, hunger, cold, loneliness and deprivation, Marie Skłodowska fought her way to a sum of knowledge that no man or woman before her had ever

achieved. At the Sorbonne in Paris she made first place in physics and second place in mathematics. Her continued research into the magnetic properties of various metals brought her into contact with France's leading scientist in the area: Pierre Curie. A fateful meeting. She sought Light, he an explanation for symmetry in Nature. Like two magnets, their paths crossed and they became one.

Marie Skłodowska refused to give in to the arrogance of the world around her. She chose the subject of the electrically charged air around uranium as the topic for her doctoral research. She meticulously worked her way through tons of industrial waste until she found what she sought: the radioactive elements, polonium (which she and Pierre christened for her homeland) and radium, which could cure cancer – but which also could kill. A two-edged sword, also for her.

Just as Columbus proved that the Earth wasn't flat, so too altered Marie - now Skłodowska-Curie – the world's conception of the universe with her discovery of radioactivity and its potential.

For this, her research in radioactivity, she became the first woman to be awarded a Nobel Prize; and later, the first person ever to be awarded it a second time: this time for the isolation of pure radium.

It's been said that the universe was born with a "Big Bang". The "Big Bang" of modern physics was thus inaugurated by Marie Skłodowska-Curie. She sought knowledge. She sought Light. She found it. And she died at its hand.

It's perhaps in its place to add that my perspective to Madame Curie is dual: besides being a practicing artist, I'm also a scientist. My artistic life can be found in my CV. So now a few words on my scientific life:

From 1967 to 1971, I was trained as a dentist at the School of Dentistry at the University of Michigan, in the US. "Women are only suited to teach kindergarten" was the common opinion – dentistry was man's work.

Out of 120 students starting, there were only 2 girls in my class. The other girl gave up before graduation.

In 1975 I fell in love with a Danish scientist who was on a lecturing tour to the US; and emigrated to him in Denmark. From 1980 to 1994 I had an active scientific career at the University Hospital and the Dental School in Copenhagen. This work led to a lecturing career, authorship of 3 textbooks, more than 70 scientific publications as well as a doctoral degree (dr.odont.) from Copenhagen University.

Madame Curie's dedication and striving have been a leading light throughout my life. Scientific research is a lonely journey; and her fight against male chauvinism is one that I personally know all too well.

My film is dedicated to Madame Marie Skłodowska-Curie and her quest for light.

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"Quest for Light"
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