

## The Black Virgin/Madonna

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**Description:** Through myth, legend, dream and literature, we will explore the quality of feminine strength and energy that is hard to locate in Christianity except in the cult of the Black Virgin/Madonna. She carries a deep generativity that Jung perceived in the unconscious and that flows out of the bringing together of opposites.

But could I share something to put our exploring today into a reconnecting enterprise rather than just a head trip. Last Sunday morning, I decided to take a walk along the Torrens before pulling together some of the threads that we could look at about the quality of feminine strength and energy that belongs to the cult of the Black Virgin/Madonna. I began my day, actually asking the Black Virgin or the Black Madonna to help me out, to do her justice.

Synchronicity never fails to surprise. For about 10 minutes into my stroll, I heard music, singing, felt the rhythm of drumming and then saw marchers carrying palm branches just near the Morphett St. Bridge. The group numbered about 200 young people walking behind an icon of Mary, somewhat like a painting of “Mary of perpetual help” or as she is called in ancient Greek *“the Merciful One”* (Muzj:48).

I asked one of the marchers, a young woman, what was going on? She said her companions were on pilgrimage from Darwin, Perth and the others states and then a young man whom she called over, told me that this youth movement, that I literally stumbled across that morning, had also helped some of their friends to get beyond a culture of drugs and confusion and to find another path for their lives.

While I am not advertising any particular movement, what I heard and saw in that encounter was a response to prayer that reassured the pilgrim in me. Namely that in our search for the Merciful One, she often finds us and we are taken on a journey to rediscovering more of ourselves through what occurs unexpectedly in our ordinary lives. And as a Jungian analyst, I would say that the nurturing archetype of motherhood will find surprising ways to meet us.

It’s like Kidd’s story of **The Secret Life of Bees**, that was on the suggested reading for today, where we get another picture of a daughter’s search for her mother that leads a desperate young woman into self-acceptance and into the company of loving and earthy women who teach her the depth of the feminine.



**I wonder what our searching today in this company will offer us?**



We may not be in Pompeii and the villa where initiation into the sacred mysteries was celebrated. No matter, we are here in this place of Sophia where the opening ritual has already invited us into a sacred space and time reminding us that we are part of a transformative process.

*Could we allow ourselves to be open to what we need to receive and to give today?*



This openness to the feminine is crucial and inclusive for both women and for men. By way of example, Bede Griffiths was a Catholic monk and mystic living in India. Writing his biography in *Beyond the darkness*, Shirley Du Boulay cites what Bede called his “breakthrough” to the feminine. Bede Griffiths came to this insight just before his death and is somewhat similar to another man’s insight into his journey:

*God is not simply in the light, in the intelligible world, in the rational order (but) is in the darkness, in the womb, in the Mother, in the chaos from which order comes...but the darkness is the womb of life (4).*

Our inner chaos and emptiness can potentially become “*the womb of life*” and enkindle an inner and outer generativity that is completely and continually transforming of life if we experience a containing Other in our lives. Could I illustrate from the life story of **Joan Winch**, an Aboriginal Woman, who has worked tirelessly with the World Health Organization and appeared earlier this year on Australian Story? You may have seen this programme? In the course of the interview, Joan retold a dream that came after the death of her mother.

**In the dream I was walking down by a stream and Mum said ‘Joan I am not dead.’**



Up to that time, Joan spoke of herself as having lost her way. Yet the dream put her in touch with a spiritual force that she says drives her life from within. It wasn’t too long after this ‘breakthrough’, that Joan said her daughter was conceived -- the daughter significantly in which Joan Winch recognizes her mother’s spirit.

A one-off experience of the healing feminine? No, in 1979 when Joan was hit by back trouble, she had another dream where she experienced hands massaging her back... a very physical sense of her mother’s presence. **The experience deepened her “attitude,” a determination to sink her roots into what sustains her spirit:**

*“whenever I come to a dead end, I know I have to ask for guidance to show me the way. Then I do what Lazarus did, and get up and walk.”*



This attitude that promises life for women and men also seems to be a receptivity and regard for relationship that belongs particularly to the feminine. In the Christian tradition, this aspect was guardedly recognized as the black Virgin who embodied the image of sponsa Christi and mater Christi. The attitude was associated with two Marys - the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen and especially celebrated through what is known as the cult of the Black Virgin. It seems this Black Woman is not hard to find --- for to those who search for her:

*She will come to meet (them) like a mother, and receive (them) like a virgin bride (Ecclesiasticus 15:1-2).*

This Virgin-Mother incarnates the Shekinah, or what the Jewish tradition called the Feminine Presence of God. The image appears at the dawn of creation as a playful and earthy feminine (sometimes called Sapientia and named Sophia by the Gnostics) with the masculine counterpart of God:

... *Wisdom, ... who was present when you made the world*  
(Wisdom 7:27,9:9).

Sapientia's fine sensitivity is indicated in her name which comes from the Latin root of "taste"; while Sophia comes from the Greek for wisdom, spirit of God and virgin of light (Jobes:1475). These elements characterize the Black Virgin who spans time and space. In Asia, the cult of Artemis Ephesia celebrated this feminine divine and natural energy. The Archeological Museum of Naples has a sculpture of the black goddess wearing a temple-shaped crown that I show in this Reproduction:



Figure 8. *Artemis Ephesia*, c.600 B.C. - sculpture.

Around her head is a kind of halo, she wears a very ornate dress and under her necklace, and over her breast, she wears scrotums of sacrificed bulls to show her power and fertility. Her dress is ornamented with bees, flowers, sphinxes and nymphs that point to her generative and spiritual nature (*Artistche Electa Napoli*: 326).

Human and divine, masculine and feminine were acclaimed as meeting in the archetypal image. In a later Christian tradition, Ephesus is named as the place where Mary lived with St. John and from where after her death, Mary was taken in to heaven. In 431 A.D., this city was the site of the third Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church. At this assembly, the Virgin Mary was declared to be Theotokos, the Mother of God. of Mary. In her, we see an affirmation that any human, whether female or male can come close to God and attain to wholeness. In the Secret Life of

Bees, Lily gets close to a more vital image of Mary: “*I pulled the wooden picture of Mary out of my bag and propped it against a tree trunk...A ladybug crawled up and sat on the Holy Mother’s cheek and I wondered if Mary had been an outdoor type who preferred tress and insects over the churchy halo she had on*” (p.58)

In a Greek Orthodox monastery at Toplou, in Crete, an especially beautiful icon called “*the Greatness of God*” recognizes this meeting of the earthy and spiritual feminine within God. The icon in this next figure is a reproduction portraying universal redemption. Mary is sitting on a throne between Adam and Eve. The Christ Child is on her lap and with her left hand Mary reaches out and takes hold of the arm of Eve. The latter is portrayed as turning away - but called back by Mary’s gesture.

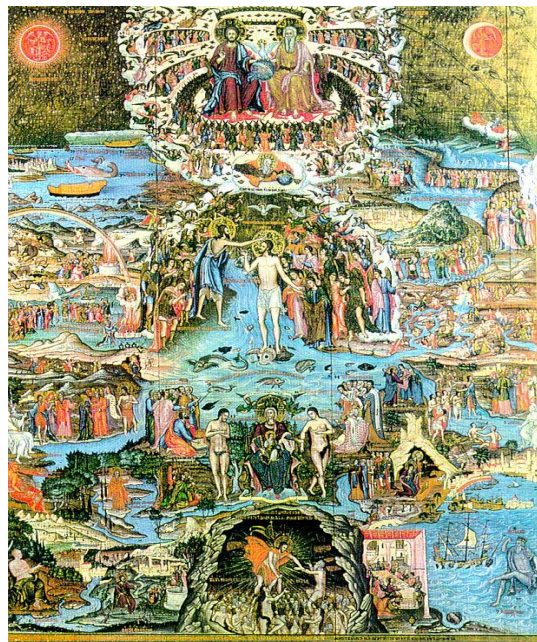


Figure 9. *The Greatness of God*, Artist unknown, Byzantine icon, Reproduction from the Greek Orthodox monastery, Toplou.

There is a symbolic reconciliation between the first woman and the second Eve - in psychological terms, the instinctual and the spiritual woman. For example, in Crete, the belief and the experience of the local people is that this icon offers healing help to people who humbly bring their neediness. The mothering-virgin reaches out, welcomes and takes hold of women and men who are burdened with guilt in the same way as the compassionate mother is represented in the icon. It sounds similar to Lily’s experience in the Secret Life of Bees, where she says the statue of the black Madonna “*made me feel like Lily the smiled upon, like there was goodness and beauty in me too. Standing there I loved myself and hated myself. That’s what the black Mary did to me, made me feel my glory and my shame at the same time*” (p.71)

With similar overtones in central Switzerland, the Black Madonna is honoured at the Benedictine monastery of Einsiedeln. This important pilgrimage station is located on one of the many routes to Santiago de Compostela. In a long revered statue of the Black Virgin, Mary is depicted holding the Christ child in her left hand and wielding a sceptre in her other hand. In this sacred image that thousands

of pilgrims from many religious traditions come to honour, the black woman holds both the Grail of Christ and the lance-like rod of authority:



Figure 10. *The Black Madonna*, Artist unknown, c.1400, Wooden sculpture, Reproduction from The Abbey Church, Einsiedeln, Switzerland.

Her particular story goes back to the ninth century and to a hermit called Meinrad who had gone into this area known as the “Dark Forest” to live a life of prayer, holiness and solitude. It was common that in such marginal places, Mary was often invoked as patroness. In this place, legend tells that Meinrad had a vision that he took as evidence of the sacredness of this sanctuary to the Black Madonna.

Meinrad’s spirituality inspired others who felt estranged from God, Church and society. In the tenth century, a monastery was built and dedicated to St. Mary of the Hermit and from under this chapel a spring had reputedly begun flowing. Significantly a sacred well, or spring, is often found at sites that are loved by the Madonna and many pilgrims attribute healing to these waters.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it is believed that this sculpture along with the chapel was destroyed in a fire. There was a replacement image of the Virgin that was carved. Her features were painted black by the artist-sculptor after he discovered that the original one had been turned black by smoke from the candles of the countless pilgrims (Salzgeber:3-15).

One of the early Jungian Analysts, Joseph Wheelwright, tells of an initiation dream soon after visiting her shrine at Einsiedeln. Subsequently, with Jung and Toni

Wolff's help and encouragement, Wheelwright made his own journey into connecting with this potent feminine aspect in himself.

For pilgrims then, the Black Madonna is like the Indian feminine energy of Shakti who invites people to come and let go of their burdens. More chthonic parallels of the Black Virgin also surface in the figures of Isis and Kali whose names mean "the Black One" (Jobes: 903) and who destroy evil and ignorance. The shakti of nature and of the dark feminine is active and thousands of pilgrims pray for and receive her help at shrines like Einsiedeln.



Whatever the origin of the blackness of the Madonna, one can hear echoes of the Hindu myth of Parvati. The daughter of the Himalayas was the wife of Shiva in whom all of the gods concentrated the power of fire. In that way, Parvati was transformed into the goddess Durga who on her lion went out to face the demon-buffalo. According to this Hindu myth, after three days of terrible fighting Durga paused to drink some nectar from the cup of the gods. It gave her the necessary strength for making a deadly thrust at the terrible monster. At that instant of slaying the demon, the goddess turned black and she was given the name of "Kali."

With her wild hair and bowl of blood, Kali symbolizes the feminine divinity capable of facing life's terrible realities and who is needed in life's desperate times. The beneficent nature of this fierce goddess is conveyed in Lapierre's novel, *City of joy*. There is an incident where a Brahmin is suffering from cholera and is shunned by everyone. The afflicted man is found by Mother Teresa of Calcutta who takes him to her refuge for the dying and nurses him back to health. The man later says:

*for thirty years I have worshipped a Kali of stone. But here is the real Kali, a Kali of flesh and blood (Lapierre:184-214, 251).*

As I tell you this, I am reminded of another client who had a similar experience of a friend whom she described as a wellspring for her.

The image of the Black Virgin emphasizes the earthiness of the feminine that has been largely lost to women and men in Western culture because of being institutionalized and treated as inferior in Christian tradition (Qualls-Corbett:46-47). Yet if you went into a Catholic, Greek or Russian Orthodox Church, your first impression could be of a religion that emphasizes womanhood. In a recent Economist, feminist critics see this devotion as a feeble attempt to balance the male domination of other aspects of faith. I am looking at the support and earthiness that the image of the Black Madonna seeks to uncover for us. In a seminar entitled, "*Looking at Sacred Images*," Dr. Cornelia Vogelsanger, Curator of the Zurich Ethnology Museum, referred to Kali and the feminine strength that she inspires.



The Kali myth seems to communicate to many Indian women that they have particular access to the shakti of fortitude coming from deep reflection. I find it significant that this age is actually called the age of Kali whose Shiva quality is seen as the Buddha. This quality of feminine strength and energy is hard to locate in Christianity except in the Black Madonna. She carries a vital virginal generativity that Jung perceived in the unconscious and that flows out of the bringing together of opposites:

*The feminine element is presumably to be found in the dark...Mary was the dark earth of the field... "that virgin earth not yet watered by the rains,". (So) the fourth function (our inferior function) is contaminated with the unconscious. We must come to terms with the unconscious and try to bring about a synthesis of opposites (CW12: pars.192-193).*

What I hear in Jung's words is a plea for a rediscovery of the devalued feminine, the unconscious and the inferior function that the Black Virgin embodies. I hear a call for rediscovering these elements in the dream of this 50 year old professional woman. Soon after returning from overseas, she dreamt: **I am in Italy and it's winter and I am with a group. With some of those people, I go out strolling and come into a place where I meet a black woman. She is a masseur and can tell the person's problem through massage. After giving me a rub she says something about my sexuality being stuck and then something about how my body would benefit by my coming to regular treatment. Then it seems she is a middle aged white woman. I am taken aback but also see the black woman somewhere in the room.**

What I would say to this woman is that she has literally come in touch with something or someone important for her body, her soul and her spirit. That One is prompting her to a new awareness of being woman, of her body and of the earth. As Lily observes in the Secret Life of Bees "*The body knows things a long time before the mind catches up to them.*" (p69)

Our listening to that kind of consciousness, asks of us, as it did the dreamer, to refind a fortitude marked by courage and empathy. In Jungian terms, a readiness to bear the tension of opposites until the grace of synthesis arises. It seems that is why women and men naturally meet up with or turn to the mediating figure of the Black Virgin, or the Black Madonna; even today. "*What is bound will be unbound. What is cast down will be lifted up. This is her promise*" (228)

Could I finish with a snippet from a recent interview, where Clarissa Pinkola Estes spoke about her awareness of God's Indwelling inspite of her struggle with poor health and tragic events in her family. Estes describes, indeed remembers, her breakthrough in this way. Creative inner work cannot be done without one's free

consent, without spiritual support, without accepting one's limitations, respecting the needs of the body, without caring for our life force, without kindness and compassion. And where laughter and simple pleasures have an important place.

And Estes' inspiration?:

Mi madre, la nuestra senora, Guadalupe y El Dio

Another name for The Black Madonna.

*"She is a muscle of love this Mary."* (302)



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Suggested reading:

Sue Monk-Kidd (2002), *The Secret Life of Bees*, Penguin, New York

Dirie Waris, (1999), *Desert flower*, Virago Press, Lancaster Place

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### **Questions for Table Talk:**

- 1. How has life changed for you in the past 7 years?**
- 2. What are some of the challenges you face?**
- 3. What keeps your spirit alive and how do you put down your roots into this nourishing source?**
- 4. Where have you experienced kindness or compassion recently**
- 5. *"To laugh is an earthy pleasure...somewhere in God's top 10 I think"*  
(Clarissa Pinkola Estes)**

**What parts of your life do you love and enjoy?**