

Inanna and Ereshkigal, An Ancient Myth for Modern Times

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It is a great and terrifying honour to be asked to give the Margaret Cain Depth Psychology Lecture tonight. As I lay awake worrying about this at 2am the other night, I remembered hearing that a survey found that Americans are more afraid of public speaking than of death. It was strangely comforting.

There are a number of reasons why I've chosen to explore an ancient Sumerian myth as my focus tonight. In most spiritual traditions the emphasis is on losing the ego in order to connect with spirit. It seems to me that for many women, we don't have strong enough egos to lose. Indeed I believe that the task for many of us is to establish a strong ego, or sense of self. This myth seems to be a very powerful guide for women in their search for selfhood.

Another reason is sentimental. It was a very important myth for Margaret and the subject of the first course we ran together in 1995 as part of our Psyche and Story series. It is thanks to Margaret that I came to fall under the myth's spell after initially finding it very difficult. In the end I was excited and challenged by it and I still am. It seems to me to be still so alive and relevant and I hope tonight I can impart some of that enthusiasm to you.

There are many myths and fairy tales that describe the descent to the underworld. Stories about being lost in the forest, or falling asleep often for 7 years, Persephone being dragged into the underworld, but this, The Descent of Inanna is the oldest. This Sumerian myth was written on clay tablets in the third millennium B.C. and there are a number of different versions of the story. The one I am working from is a translation by Diane Wolkstein who originally worked with Samuel Noah Kramer on translating the myth.

Before I begin the retelling of this myth, a moment to reflect on the importance of stories:

Clarissa Pinkola Estes says in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, "Stories are soul vitamins. Stories set the soul into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged or cornered."

The Rabbi Ba'al Shem –Tov , "When the bond between heaven and earth is broken, when even prayer is not enough, only a story can mend it."

Karen Armstrong in her book, *A Short History of Myth* says, "A myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do in order to live more richly."

And Joseph Campbell in *The Power of the Myth* talks about myths contributing to our sense of feeling fully alive, which he claims is what we're all looking for. Indeed he says:

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

So I’d like you now to sit back and relax and let me tell you this myth. To get you into the mood for listening to a story, if you are open to it, I’ll lead you into a mindful place. And as you listen from this open place, I invite you to notice the parts of the story that touch you or excite your interest, the parts that you are most curious about.

Inanna, Goddess of Heaven and Earth, great warrior, lover, creator of poetry and song, decides to go to visit her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld.

Before she begins the descent, Inanna instructs her faithful handmaid, Ninshubur, to raise the alarm if she hasn’t returned after 3 days.

Inanna arrives at the first gate of the Underworld and demands to enter.

The gatekeeper goes to consult with Ereshkigal. When the Queen of the Underworld hears this, she is furious. She slaps her thigh and bites her lip and takes the matter into her heart. Finally she agrees to see Inanna but Inanna must be brought to her naked and bowed low.

Inanna has to pass through 7 gates to get to Ereshkigal’s palace. At each gate she is forced to remove a piece of her regalia. When she objects, she is told, the ways of the Underworld are perfect and they may not be questioned.

Finally she comes before Ereshkigal, naked and bowed low. Ereshkigal fastens upon her the eye of death. She strikes her and Inanna is turned into a corpse, and is hung from a hook on the wall, a piece of green rotting meat.

When Inanna does not return after 3 days and nights, Ninshubur sets up a lament and beats the drums. She goes to two of the Sky gods and begs them for help. They refuse saying Inanna was asking for trouble and deserves all she gets. Then Ninshubur goes to Enki, the god of Water and Wisdom. He takes pity on Inanna and from the dirt under his finger nails, he creates two little creatures that are able to fly through the cracks down to Ereshkigal in the Underworld.

Now Ereshkigal is either mourning the death of her consort or giving birth. She’s moaning and wailing in her pain. The little creatures sit with her and mirror her pain.

“Oh, my poor heart,” she wails; “Oh, your poor heart,” they commiserate.

“Oh, my poor belly,” she cries; “Oh, your poor belly,” they cry with her. And so on.

Finally Ereshkigal stops. "Why are you moaning with me?" she asks. Then "I like you, I will give you a gift."

The creatures ask for Inanna's body. Ereshkigal agrees and they take Inanna and restore her to life. Before she ascends to the Upper world again, the Judges of the Underworld demand that she send a replacement. She agrees to do this. And as she ascends, at each of the 7 gates, she puts on her royal robes.

When she returns to the Upper world, she finds everyone in mourning for her. Except her husband, Dumuzi, who is sitting on her throne eating and drinking and making merry.

Inanna fixes upon him the eye of death and decrees that he shall be her replacement in the Underworld. He is terrified and tries to flee. But he is pursued by the fierce galla from the Underworld. He begs for help.

Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna, who loves him dearly goes to Inanna and offers to take his place in the Underworld.

Finally Inanna decides they shall each spend half the year there. When one returns after six months, the other must make the descent.

So just take a moment now to reflect on how you were affected by this story, which parts touched you or that you were curious about. Maybe you were bored, just notice that. And if you would like to, take a few minutes to share with your neighbour what your experience was.

Sylvia Brinton Perera has written the definitive Jungian analysis of this myth in her powerful book, ***Descent to the Goddess, A Way of Initiation for Women***. I'm not going to try to paraphrase her book tonight, quite a bit of which, I have to confess, I still don't really understand. Instead, I would like to talk a little about my thoughts and responses to this story and how it's helped me make sense of difficult times in my life. But first a disclaimer: needless to say, Life and our purpose on earth remain a great mystery. So too, does the meaning of this myth. Tonight I am simply going to circle around it and give you a very personal response to it and my musings about it.

Most of us do not choose to voluntarily enter the underworld territory. Most of us resist as hard as we can. For some of us it is a depression that takes us there, a relationship ending, illness, a death of someone close.

I realise that I have made many visits to the underworld. Indeed presenting this talk precipitated a mini descent. After rather blithely agreeing to do this last year, so far ahead it seemed unreal, as the time approached for me to put out some more definitive publicity about it, I went into melt down. I had one night of paralysing terror. Like Inanna, I felt immobilised, nailed to the wall. I knew nothing, had nothing to offer, couldn't write any more, couldn't think etc etc. In fact there was no way I could do this. All that remained was to somehow extricate myself from this terrifying ordeal. I rang my friend Helen.

“Of course you don’t have to do it. You don’t need any more stress in your life. I’m sure you could do it, but it’s not worth that kind of distress.” She soothes me.

Greatly comforted I head down to Sophia, prepared to say “Look I just can’t do this. I’m terribly sorry.” Angela was the only person here and I told her of my state. “You’re a 4 aren’t you? Yes I understand how you feel. I have similar feelings. Just do it in your own way. It’s OK.”

There was something about the understanding and empathy of both these people, that helped me to step beyond my paralysing fear and think, “OK. I am not an academic or a Jungian therapist, and there are of course many people who are more knowledgeable than me and could do this better than me, but I have been asked to do this, and I can do it in my way and hopefully offer something. It is time now, aged 60, to step up to my own truth as being valid enough.”

Like those amazing little creatures that the God Enki draws out from dirt under his finger nails, Helen and Angela offered me the empathy and understanding that allowed me to move beyond my place of paralysis and fear and find new life and energy in my thinking about this talk. And every time I faltered again, I thought of Margaret. And there she’d be beaming at me saying, “Go on, you can do it!”

In those little creatures that were able to soothe Ereshkigal, by simple mirroring her pain, “Oh my poor belly ,’ she cries, “Oh. Your poor belly,” they repeat, we have possibly the earliest example of the power of empathy and mirroring, essential ingredients of therapy. Sylvia Brinton Perera tells us that the god Enki is the Patron of therapists.

In all the current exciting research on the brain, what is becoming clear now and very beautifully elucidated in ***A General Theory of Love***, one of many books written on the subject, is the importance of emotional attunement between parents and children for our emotional health and well being. Most of us that present for therapy did not receive this as babies and children. This emotional attunement helps in the formation of a well- balanced, healthy brain.

If the baby smiles the mother smiles back, if her baby cries she wrinkles up her face with her baby and makes comforting noises. Even more than that, she is so tuned in she is able to anticipate her baby’s needs. They give a lovely example. A toddler falls over at the park. She turns to her mother. If her mother smiles reassuringly, nods and says, “Up you get, you’re ok.” Then almost certainly that’s what the toddler will do, secure in the knowledge that’s she’s OK. But with the same incident, if the mother is overly anxious she may leap up, rush to her child looking worried. The child then will pick up on her fear and start crying and demand to be picked up. Thus a child learns and her brain is formed.

What is most exciting about this brain research is the discovery of the plasticity of the brain. That is, its ongoing malleability. It can continue to create new neural pathways throughout our lives. And one of the ways this can happen is in the sacred space of therapy. Indeed we are affecting and changing each other's brains all the time apparently.

In a safe space, the therapist can mirror and emotionally attune to the experience of the person seeking therapy, in a way that the person most often did not receive as a child. And in this way, slowly, haltingly the people learn to trust their own feelings and knowings and often slowly haltingly self acceptance and trust follow. Repair in the brain happens. New and healthier neural pathways are created.

In Hakomi therapy, which informs the way I work with people, we learn to track people's experience, not just the story they are telling us but the often subtle things going on in the body or facial expressions. For instance a client may put her hand over her mouth when she speaks. She is surprised when I point this out to her, she was quite unaware that this is what she is doing. When she does it slowly and mindfully, she makes a whole lot of connections about its meaning. It becomes conscious.

Of course this is to greatly oversimplify a vastly complex and in many ways still mysterious process. But it is the same kind of empathy and mirroring first articulated in the 3rd century BC in this myth. Those little bits of dirt from under the god Enki's finger nails who sit with Ereshkigal compassionately witnessing her pain. I find this exciting and extraordinary. As if scientific research is catching up at last to a fundamental human need that has been known and practised for millennia.

D.W.Winnicott, the famous British Psychoanalyst, knew it too when he famously said about the therapy process, "I am seen, therefore I exist." This intense and empathetic witnessing of us helps to create a sense of self where before there was none.

Which is not to suggest that parents or therapists have to get it right every time. Of course we don't. What seems to be most important is that we repair after we've had a lapse in empathy or support. We can apologise or go back and say, "You are feeling angry, it's ok, or whatever."

It is thanks to these little creatures from the dirt under the god Enki's fingernails that Ereshkigal is able to move beyond her pain, and restore life to Inanna when they request it.

Probably the most difficult and agonising of all my descent experiences was the years of one of my daughter's life and death struggle with anorexia. During those agonising years, it was the friends who were able to just listen to my pain, be with me in my rage and despair and grief and frustration, who helped me survive that nightmare time. Not the well-meaning people who kept offering their advice. And there were many of these. And tho I understand that was the only way they could cope with their feelings of

powerlessness in this apparently intractable situation, it was no help to me, and it was definitely not what I was needing. I realise now it takes great courage and wisdom and love to just be with someone in their pain without trying to fix them.

Anyway, enough of dirty finger nails! But before I leave them, just a word about the healing power of being able to name and acknowledge what we are truly feeling, to ourselves. And how it often helps us to move on in places where we are stuck. So instead of sitting on feelings of being hurt, for example, or angry or whatever, and telling ourselves we shouldn't be feeling this, just to name it as anger or hurt or jealousy or whatever it is that we are truly feeling, can be enormously freeing. So we can learn to do the dirty finger nail work for ourselves. Compassion for ourselves, which I believe to be the starting place of genuine compassion for others.

Ok. Ereshkigal. This is the territory of the underworld, where we meet all the grief of our lives that we have buried or ignored. Here we face into our suffering, the pain of betrayal, loss, death of someone or parts of ourselves, our childish naiveté. Here we are like Inanna, nailed to the wall. There is no escape from this pain. In this territory we have the chance to face and reconnect with shadow parts of ourselves that we were told were unacceptable. Like our rage and our capacity to hate, our deep grief about all our woundedness. But also with those strengths we have that have also been relegated to the shadow, pushed back into the unconscious because to be strong or assertive, or clever or creative in our families was for some reason unacceptable.

Marion Milner that extraordinary British psychoanalyst who tracked her own process with such honesty and vitality in her wonderful books, ***A Life of One's Own*** and ***An Experiment in Leisure*** written in the 1920's. She was essentially trying to discover what made her really happy. And came up with fascinating results more closely attuned to her unconscious than any conventional notions of what is supposed to make us happy. I highly recommend her books for anyone interested in the inner life. Anyway she describes Ereshkigal territory powerfully, I think in this extract on Violence from her book ***Eternity's Sunrise***. What I love about M.M. is how closely she follows and trusts her bodily sensations of whatever it is she is experiencing. Indeed they become the key to what makes her happy.

I quote, "Is it true that too great muscle tensions are related to the fears of violence, either done to me or by me? Which means that behind the self-image of how one might like to think of oneself, for instance as gentle and considerate and preserving what one loves, can be the opposite, its shadow, the violent self-aggrandising ruthless gangster self? Or even a more terrible image, the wild mad Agave who tears to pieces her own law-abiding son, wild because so split off and denied? Hence the great haunting question, do I love or do I hate, do I save or do I destroy? Of course I do both, in thought even if not in action. And only when the two can meet, interpenetrate, can something truly human grow, which is neither god nor devil, but a human being. And the struggle when I don't face it, admit it, does really seem to be locked up in the

tense muscles. I do believe this is true. And also that the place where these two opposites can be held and permitted to interact seems to be somewhere in one's middle, probably around the diaphragm area where breathing happens."

And here Marion Milner touches on the essence of feminine wisdom or Sophia as Marion Woodman, a Canadian Jungian analyst and another great articulator of women's experience calls it, and that is being able to live in the tension of paradox. I am this and also this, I can be kind but I can also be cruel. I hopefully will choose not to act from a place of cruelty, but I know I have the capacity to be cruel. Both/and not either/or of dualistic thinking which tends to be a more masculine way of thinking. George Bush's good versus evil, black and white thinking.

Marion Milner continues, *"If I feel myself into my jaws I get a self-image of having immense power there, not only power to crush, but also to hold on tight. Wasn't it Degas who did a picture of the girl acrobat hanging onto the rope with only her jaws? Often I find my jaw is tight, as if there's something I can't let go, that I'll die if I do let go. But when I make it relax by just attending to it, what I find there is laughter, laughing at myself."*

Laughter. I am often delighted by the way humour creeps in to a therapy session and it is like a breath of fresh air, even in some of the most painful descent experiences. It always helps to keep things in perspective.

So Ereshkigal, enormous and naked, hair everywhere, wild with her grief and her pain. All powerful in her underworld realm. She slaps her thigh and bites her lip and eyes Inanna with the eye of death. She is definitely not 'nice'. Indeed she probably burps and farts and picks her nose too. Tho this is not strictly elucidated in the myth! She is all that is primal of the body: giving birth, howling with grief or rage. But most importantly for me she is in and of her body not separate from it, which is how all too often many of us still live our lives in the western world.

I remember being at a funeral years ago of a man I'd grown close to during his dying process. He was involved with Aboriginal people and there were a lot of them there. I remember standing in the rows of non-Aboriginal people. Beside us the wailing and crying of the Aboriginal people, giving full voice and body to their grief. The rest of us stood stiffly containing our grief. I remember desperately wanting to lift my voice and howl with them. To give voice to the grief inside me that I was tying myself in knots inside trying to contain. How I longed to have the courage and emotional honesty to express outwardly what I was feeling. I had never heard of Ereshkigal or this myth but I felt her powerful pull. It was an instinctual response and it arose from somewhere deep in my body. At what cost to stifle it in the interests of propriety or whatever it is that keeps so many of us Westerners crippled emotionally in this way.

I don't know about you, but I lived a lot of my life in my head, not really aware of my body at all. Ashamed of it probably, if I thought about it at all. Like that

wonderful description of Mr Duffy in James Joyce's short story, "A Painful Case" from *Dubliners*.

I quote, "Mr Duffy lived at a little distance from his body."

Descartes the 17th century French philosopher can be blamed for it with his famous statement, "Cogito sum ergo," 'I think therefore I am.' Positing that to think is more important than to feel or our bodily experience. Or Isaac Newton with his idea of the body as machine. For women so much of the stuff of our lives is determined by our bodies: our menstruating, our hormonal ups and downs, our gestating and giving birth and our dealing with the chaotic rhythms of the body, our own and our children's and often our parents as we deal with their ageing and dying.

There are of course many books written on the subject of the relegation of the feminine and the body by the patriarchy and I won't pursue that subject here. Except to say that sadly and not surprisingly, many of us women have accepted the patriarchy's verdict on the feminine and our bodies, that it is unacceptable, worthless, something to be ashamed of, that feeling is not as valuable as thinking, being logical etc. Particularly for us father's daughters. And especially if we had fathers who denigrated our mothers and mothers who were ashamed of the feminine.

I believe the descent to the Underworld is about reconnecting with our bodies and our instinctual ways of knowing and our full power as women.

James Hollis says in his wonderfully titled book, *Swamplands of the Soul: new Life in Dismal Places*:

"The descent is necessary for the beginning of consciousness- the necessary humbling leading to psychological richness. Such a person humbled is not only more interesting but more fully human."

One of the ways I survived my less than ideal childhood was by abandoning my body, disassociating so as not to feel the pain of what I was experiencing. A common story for many of us. Yet the pain does not go away. We push it out of consciousness in order to survive at the time, but it is stored in the very cells of our body, in our musculature, in the way we walk and talk, waiting to be processed. If we are not able to do this consciously our bodies are apt to give us a gentle or not so gentle nudge.

As children we try to make sense of ourselves and the less than ideal families that most of us grow up in, as best we can. And many of us grow up a bit or a lot, crippled and contorted psychologically and emotionally, as we try our best to fit in, to be accepted and loved according to the particular rules of our particular families or church or school or peer group.

So our fathers might fly into a rage when we make an innocent remark about something we observe happening in the family. We learn it's not OK to speak our truth or to really see what's there. Or we come running home from school

brimming with excitement because our story's been read out in class which we announce proudly to our mother and she says, "If you keep on like that you'll get a big head." Or "Who do you think you are?" So we learn there's something not right about being successful. Or we say we hate our sister because she broke our favourite toy and we're told, "No, you don't, you love your sister.' So we learn not to trust our feelings. And what happens to the rage and hatred and our ability to succeed? We push it underground, because it's got to go somewhere. It goes, if you like, into the Ereshkigal parts of ourselves. We stuff it back into the unconscious.

Bit by bit our natural spontaneous selves get buried under the shoulds and oughts. Our souls become constricted. And for women particularly we often find ourselves saying 'Yes' when we would like to have the courage to say 'No'; putting everyone else's needs before our own, because we have ingested with our mother's milk in this patriarchal culture, that we, as women and as individuals don't matter. For to put ourselves first would be being 'selfish', and a lot of us don't value ourselves enough to even try. And being seen to be 'nice' and therefore likeable and acceptable becomes more important than being real.

As James Hollis says in, ***Swamplands of the Soul***,

"Most of us are conditioned to be nice rather than real, accommodating rather than authentic, adaptive rather than assertive."

Indeed he has the great idea of starting a support group for recovering 'nice' people. So this project of individuation as Jung called it is unravelling the web of the constructed, conditioned self to find out who we really and uniquely are.

Marion Woodman, says, our psyches and our bodies are working as hard as they can for our wholeness and health. So it is often in mid-life that the whole constructed edifice of our false self begins to crumble. Some major event like illness or depression or a significant relationship break down, tries to alert us to the fact that the false self is no longer working for us. Our soul is demanding that we pay attention. And this comes often comes in dreams and bodily symptoms.

And it is often when we are dragged (because no-one goes willingly) down into the underworld, that we are forced to stop and face those parts of ourselves that we have split off. And in that awful place of inertia when, like Inanna we can feel like we're nailed to the wall and left to rot, the slow process of transformation can take place. We can learn to integrate those split off parts, if we can be patient and have a trusted guide through this difficult often terrifying and tumultuous time, when all we believed we were is stripped away. Indeed it is in that place that I believe many of us face the ultimate question of whether we want to live or die, psychically. Whether we want to live from the depths of our own soul and its particular needs and desires or whether we abandon ourselves there and choose to live from other people's beliefs about us. It's a big call. And for some people it is literally whether they want to live or die. But it is here that the slow process of transformation can

begin. The possibility of new life begins to emerge. A new life growing from a self deeply rooted in the reality of who we really are, with our roots firmly grounded in the underworld.

Inanna was nailed to the wall for 3 days. For some of us it can be 3 weeks or years or longer, when we wander in the wilderness of our despair. It is then that we most need trust and patience. T.S. Eliot expresses it beautifully in those famous lines from ***Four Quartets, part 3 of East Coker***:

*'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.'*

It is then we have to trust our own organic process. Like nature. We are, after all, just as much part of nature as the trees that lose their leaves and stand bare all through winter only to blossom in spring with tiny green buds of new life. When I lived in the bush at Willunga I learnt so much by watching nature. The great north-westerly changes roaring in from the sea. The wind would howl and rain would lash the house sometimes for days. Then it would blow through and the sun would shine again. So it is with us.

And I have watched women in my practice hold through this process of dismemberment as they face some of the painful things that have happened to them with such courage and blind faith really because they could not see how this suffering would end. But it mostly does. Even if outer circumstances do not, then the way we face them does. And I have watched in awe as women emerge from this place, grounded now in their own power, go on to new careers they have only dreamed of before, or leave successful careers because they no longer serve their deep soul needs. Or they take up study or art or maybe withdraw from the world for a while, or leave a relationship that they've known wasn't right for them.

When a woman emerges from this kind of experience those around her may not welcome her return. She is not as nice as she used to be, not as amenable. But she is more textured and complex and interesting. She says 'No' when she means no, and 'Yes' when she means yes. She may appear cold or uncaring as she struggles to integrate what she has learned about what she needs to do to look after her true self. And almost always when we are practising new ways of being we can be clumsy. We need to be patient and compassionate with ourselves. I love what Paula Reeves another American Jungian says about this stage of life. She says that 'No' is a complete sentence. How wonderfully exhilarating I found that when I heard it. No more apologising or making excuses, just simply "No, can't do that." No more apologising for being alive.

It is interesting that in versions of the myth, Ereshkigal is said to be either groaning with the pain of giving birth, or mourning the death of her consort.

Birth, death. All that is born must die. These are inescapable facts that many of us have great difficulty facing.

So. The 7 gates that Inanna has to pass through to get to the Underworld. It made me ponder the significance of the number 7: 7 days of the week, 7 deadly sins, 7 stations of the cross, 7 arms of the Menorah, the Jewish candlestick, the 7 pillars of wisdom. And so on. I looked up my dictionary of symbols to discover that 7 is the number of the universe, completeness; a totality. With the 3 of the heavens and the soul and the 4 of the earth and the body, it is the first number which contains the spiritual and the temporal, the dictionary says. It is also the number of the Great Mother. And it goes on to list the significance of 7 across almost all cultures. Many of you may already know this, of course but I found it fascinating.

And at each of these gates Inanna has to remove a piece of her identity until she is naked and bowed low. A humbling and painful process as many of us here, I'm sure, know.

The process of therapy often becomes a journey to the Underworld and back. I remember distinctly my first experience of psychotherapy, precipitated by my daughter's illness. It became increasingly clear that I had work to do on myself if we were ever to find our way out of the nightmare maze of this terrifying illness. I had a sense that I was being devoured by the anorexia too. All my time and energy were going into trying to save my daughter. And to no avail. And it was neither healthy nor helpful for me or my daughter, not to mention my other 2 daughters.

So with great fear and trepidation, I started seeing this very attractive male psychiatrist. And one by one I was forced to peel off each of my personae. Being a 4 I wanted him to think I was special of course, so I tried to be entertaining. My greatest fear was that he would find me boring. So I joked and flirted probably I'm ashamed to say. Tried asking him about his life. After all, my main role in life had always been taking care of others, being a good listener etc. One by one off came my masks as, like Inanna, I passed thru the 7 gates. I tried anything to avoid focussing on me and my story. But none of my avoidance strategies worked. Until one day, I remember it clearly, the first time I was real. I just sat there and stared out the window and told him I was exhausted and had nothing to say. He just sat with me in silence. And it was such a relief. Tho terrifying too. If I was not able to hide behind all my masks, who on earth was I? My greatest fear, no terror was that if I stopped running and really faced myself, I would find that there was no-one home. I would topple down into that abyss that I'd always feared was waiting for me if I ever stopped running.

From that point the real work of therapy began. The slow and painful unravelling of my false self and the beginning of the ravelling (if there is such a word) of my real self. And I learnt that in that void, that emptiness that I'd always feared so much, lay the beginnings of new life.

The work I have done in reconnecting with my body thru Radix and Hakomi has also helped in that process. When I first began I didn't realise until it was pointed out to me that I stopped breathing, held my breath a lot of the time, that's how unaware of my poor body I was. Then the slow reconnecting often just through gently tuning in and noticing sensations in my body, began the long journey of coming back into my body. Which very much has contributed to my sense of self. So too sifting through dreams with a Jungian therapist. My dreams have always let me know in very vivid ways what my deepest soul needs are.

One of the most comforting things that C.G. Jung said and I heard it quoted on a tape by Marion Woodman, is, "When you're on the path, you're at the goal." There is no end point of perfection we reach. We never individuate, if you like. Indeed perfection is not the goal. But wholeness is, being able to own and accept one's strengths and weaknesses. To be able to say, this is who I am. I am flawed and fallible but wonderful too.

Marion Woodman in *The Pregnant Virgin* describes it thus, *"The conscious feminine says: This is who I am. I am not asking for your approval, I do not have to justify my existence. I want to know and be known for who I am."*

Marie Louise von Franz famous Jungian therapist and contemporary of Jung's said, *"The experience of Self brings a feeling of standing on solid ground inside oneself, on a patch of eternity, which even physical death cannot touch."*

The leading of a life that is fed from the deep well-springs of our big Self. A life that is uniquely our own. Those moments that we know in every cell of our body, 'This is it!' It is as if all the fragmented pieces come together and we are acting in accord with the universe or God or Goddess or what ever we like to call it. We see glimpses of this place in our dreams. But it is a felt bodily experience. Like what Joseph Campbell is describing when he says that what we are all seeking is not meaning but the rapture of being alive.

And sadly of course, this is not a steady state. We can never say, "Phew, now I've made it. It will be all plain sailing here on in for me!" Life as we all know from experiences is not like that. It is a spiral journey and we move up and down the spiral. Sometimes feeling like all the pieces have come together and we're doing exactly what we're meant to be doing, only to be plunged back into the depths again. Tho each time we learn more about ourselves, the plunges are hopefully not so deep and we learn better ways of negotiating the difficult times.

I'd like to describe 2 of my own experiences to try and illustrate what I mean. Interestingly both happened during another of my descent experiences. A year when I was incapacitated with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. It was a painful and humbling experience giving up my work. I had to ring clients and tell them I was not well enough to keep working. I couldn't go for walks, couldn't be there for my family and friends in a way that I was strongly

identified with. Going through those gates to the underworld again. All my identities and ideas about myself swept away. (I think I must be a very slow learner, I keep having to learn these lessons it seems!) Although I find every descent now is not as deep nor for as long. I get the message a bit more quickly now, I hope!

In fact once I stopped resisting what was happening (and that took a while) and surrendered to my incapacity, I found joy in all the reading and writing I was able to do. I was able to rest deeply, something my poor body had been needing to do ever since my daughter's illness, I suspect. And I must say here, my daughter made a miraculous recovery. She is now healthy and happy. It is truly a miracle and one for which I never cease to be grateful.

Anyway I remember this particular afternoon. It was winter, the fire was lit. I was sitting looking out over the stringy bark trees to the sea (I was still living in the bush then). Silence but for the quiet murmuring of the fire. The last of the afternoon sun flooding through the trees. A kangaroo was quietly cropping grass down the hill. Rosellas flashed by. I was feeling absolute peace and contentment and love. And I was suddenly flooded with this knowing that this was it. This is all we need to do. To love the world. To really see and love what we see. That's enough. All our frantic running around and 'achieving', whatever that meant, was all sound and fury signifying nothing. And it was not a thought. It was a whole body knowing. As if I'd been let into some great cosmic secret. And I felt it as a grace.

The second experience happened when I was in Melbourne that same year. I was with my middle daughter whilst she was swimming at the Fitzroy pool (that Place immortalised by Helen Garner in 'Monkey Grip'). My daughter was doing her laps and I was sitting watching. Suddenly I became aware that something strange was approaching in the sky. A seagull caught up somehow in a great billowing grey plastic bag. It was barely able to fly. It lurched in to land by the pool. People stopped their laps, mesmerised by this strange apparition. Suddenly without stopping to think about it, I was on my feet and moving towards that poor bird. I knew I could help it.

Again something flowed through me that was more than me and did not allow for the usual doubts and fears that would normally have stopped me. I moved quietly over to the bird, my whole attention focussed on it, talking quietly to it. It felt as if the bird and I were in some kind of force field together separate from the rest of the world somehow. I bent and took hold of the plastic bag and as the bird rose up it broke free. But it kept still long enough for me to grab the bag, even though I could see the terror in its eyes. It stood beside the pool, traumatised, I suspect, recovering. And we left knowing it would in time fly away OK.

What I learnt from this experience was what enormous power we have if we can free ourselves from our doubts and fears. Anything I believe is possible. If we are able to get out of the way, some other power can flow through us.

Sadly I was all too quickly back to my fearful, doubting self. But I have never forgotten these experiences. I am sure they continue to feed me at some deep level I am barely conscious of.

What I find interesting about these experiences is that they happened from that place of having been brought to my knees. I could do very little. I felt nailed to the wall like Inanna. And I had no choice other than to just be. My body had forced the rest upon me that I'd been longing for but did not dare consciously to allow myself to take. And once out of the hustle and bustle of a busy life, I was opened to these experiences, which in a way have been more real and meaningful than many others.

Maureen Murdoch in her book, *The Heroine's Journey* says, *"Finding out about being instead of doing, is the sacred task of the feminine."* And *"Being requires accepting oneself, staying within oneself and not doing to prove oneself. And it is a discipline that is accorded no applause in the outside world."*

What of Ninshubur, Inanna's loyal handmaid? She is the one Inanna entrusts with her life, instructing her to seek help if she does not return in 3 days. I believe Ninshubur represents that part of us that stays conscious during the process of the descent. The part that can keep functioning in the upper world. I am so often awed by working with women who are going through profound and painful transformative processes and they keep going to their jobs, taking care of their children. Somehow managing to keep their upper worlds going. And it is important that some kind of ordinary upper world life continues during these times otherwise the experience might be overwhelming. Sometimes it is just not possible to keep going in this way, then working with a therapist can become the lifeline to the upper world. Ninshubur also represents the part of ourselves that remains conscious enough to make sense of the process; that Witness self that can report on what is happening. A very essential part.

Interestingly, Ninshubur twice approaches Gods who are not the least bit interested in helping Inanna. And I believe this is very significant in this process of growing –up if you like. So many of us who have been wounded in childhood keep looking for support and rescue from the same sorts of people who wounded us in the first place. We end up with partners or trying to please people in authority who are like our fathers or mothers until we become conscious of what we are doing. Then we can turn to sources that truly nourish us.

It is the god Enki who finally listens to Ninshubur and is concerned about Inanna. The God of water and wisdom and creativity. Water very much associated with the unconscious and with the feminine. And it is the dirt from under his fingernails that he fashions into the little creatures that are ultimately able to rescue Inanna. Again I find this so interesting. It is often those parts of ourselves that we feel most ashamed of that become the parts that heal us and become our greatest strengths. The base metal that the alchemists turn into gold; the speck of dirt that becomes the irritant that causes the oyster to make a pearl.

An example of this is the role that anger can play for women who have been abused in some way and whose boundaries are not good. Women who say 'Yes', when they need to be saying 'No'. Once the transformative process begins, the rage of all those times boundaries were violated can surface. And it can be scary for women who have always been nice and quiet and unassertive. It can feel quite out of control for a while. But it can be a very important part of learning to set boundaries, a wake up that a boundary is being transgressed. And it can feel very empowering to have the energy of anger coursing through one's body, to begin to touch into our own strength.

So these little creatures do their work and restore Inanna to life and she ascends to the upper world gathering her symbols of power on the way. It is a necessary skill, I believe to be able to consciously choose when to put on a mask, to use a persona or to be our true selves. At least in the beginning of this process, when we are starting to learn about who we truly are. Sometimes it is not safe to reveal who we really are. Learning the power of discrimination is a very important part of the journey towards wholeness. To be able to use the masculine sword of discrimination. Yes, I trust this person, I can take off my mask and be real here. No, this group does not feel safe, I choose not to reveal my true self here.

Inanna is accompanied in her ascent by the galla those fierce creatures that are demanding that if she lives, someone must be sent down to the underworld to replace her. And it is her beloved consort Dumuzi upon whom Inanna focuses the eye of death and says "You must be the one."

Now foolish Dumuzi is sitting on the throne eating and drinking and making merry as if everything is perfectly fine. Everyone else has been in sackcloth and ashes mourning Inanna's disappearance. Dumuzi, I think, represents that part of us that is in denial, that goes on pretending everything is fine when our bodies or whatever are screaming out that everything is indeed not at all fine. So we might continue to overwork or offer to do things that are actually too much for us even tho we're getting massive headaches or we're so exhausted we can hardly keep functioning. Or we keep pretending a toxic relationship is OK. We're refusing to read the warning signs like Dumuzi. He has to go. Nero still fiddling while Rome burns.

In my experience there is no process of growth that does not demand a sacrifice. All too often it is the part of us with which we most strongly identify. A small example: Writers Week this year and the only person I really wanted to hear was Helen Garner. I'd set aside the time and arranged to meet friends there. But come the morning I reluctantly realised I did not feel well enough to go. I went through feelings of disappointment, frustration. Anyway once I let it go, and stopped feeling sorry for myself, I went and sat in my little garden with my journal and did some of my own writing. It was a glorious day and I realised this was actually much more nourishing for me and somehow more true to my own soul's deepest needs.

There are much more serious sacrifices that need to be made if our souls are to grow, like having the courage to leave a marriage that is no longer working for us; or ending a friendship that drains rather than nourishes us; or leaving a job that pays well but cripples our soul. These are big and painful life processes, but needed in the interests of our soul's continuing growth.

Finally, Dumuzi's sister, Geshtinanna. That amazing woman who offers to go down to the underworld in Dumuzi's place. And it is interesting to note here that Inanna decides to send both Dumuzi and Geshtinanna to the Underworld. It is to me evidence of the psychological maturation she has undergone in her own descent. It's not either or but both and. Feminine wisdom. She has learnt about death and suffering and sacrifice. She has learnt that this kind of consciousness no longer allows for a simple black and white world.

As James Hollis puts it in ***Swamplands of the Soul*** when discussing people who have made the descent:

"Thereafter they are obliged to suffer the fact that many of their choices will not be between good and bad, but between all sorts of moral greys. They will need to acknowledge their moral ambiguity and their personal and cultural duplicity."

To me, Geshtinanna represents a truly conscious woman, motivated by love and compassion. She is consciously making this choice. No-one is forcing her to do this. And perhaps she knows the importance of staying in touch with the underworld domain. She has accepted that it is an inevitable part of life. To be human is to suffer, as the Buddhists remind us. Not that any of us want to suffer or would choose it. It seems to me that if we are able to accept it as an inevitable part of life, then we are better able to deal with it when life presents us with its inevitable challenges and to learn from it as well. So it can become how do I best deal with this and what meaning can I make of it? Rather than, "Why me?" Not easy. I do not pretend that any of this is easy.

So as I draw this to a close, I would like to leave you with wise words from Ety Hillesum, the young Jewish woman who died at Auschwitz aged 25, another much loved heroine of Margaret's. Ety wrote an extraordinary account of her spiritual journey which has been put together in a book, ***Ety, An Interrupted Life:***

She says, "Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world."

I believe one of the ways to a peaceful heart is to make the journey to try to uncover who we truly are and to try and live from that place. To make peace with all our own warring parts: the inner critic that keeps telling us we're not good enough and the wise kind part that can say, yes you are good enough. A journey I believe that takes a lifetime. And if we can come to some kind of peaceful acceptance of ourselves, however intermittently that might be, then

hopefully we are not then projecting our 'stuff' onto others. Then there is more space for empathy and compassion for those around us and for our poor beleaguered planet. We've known suffering and we can feel for the suffering of others.

Years ago I saw a piece of art that has stayed with me. It was a huge panel of all sorts of different women's faces. Its title was, "I see, I hear, I do nothing." I believe making the descent to reclaim all of who we are can give us the courage to stand up and speak with our own voice against the injustice we see around us. And it seems to me, these times in which we live, call for this kind of courage. It is time for women to find their voices.

And finally from that great poet and mystic, William Blake:

"Man was made for joy and woe:/ And when this we rightly know/ Thro the world we safely go."

Thank you for your generous attention and for going on this journey with me tonight.

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