

## Inanna's descent: A Sumerian myth

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Inanna's path and its stages ... present a paradigm for the life-enhancing descent into the abyss of the dark goddess and out again. ... This openness to being acted upon is the essence of the human soul fed by the transpersonal. It is not based on passivity, but on an active willingness to receive<sup>1</sup>

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This is a mythic story from western cultural history - that of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who journeys to her banished feminine sister-mother Ereshkigal in the underworld. This story and its associative resonances provide a psychological-mythological account of a process of return to unconscious psyche and a repressed earth-feminine divinity. The story has widespread popular appeal and it appealed to me at both personal-intuitive and reflective-intellectual levels. It seems to draw together and express in a single image a series of seemingly disparate points of interest and provides an image of return to the archetypal feminine presence. I recount this story in some detail, and then comment on its general relevance for experiences in contemporary cultures.

Stories of the Sumerian goddess Inanna have been preserved, but buried, on stone tablets from the third millennium BC. After thousands of years of silence, these tablets were excavated in 1900, and translated during the subsequent sixty years.<sup>2</sup> There are many versions of myths about Inanna's life<sup>3</sup>, and the evocative re-telling by Diane Wolkstein in *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* provides the basis of the following abridged presentation.<sup>4</sup> I focus on the final story in this compilation, "The Descent of Inanna", which tells how Inanna, a powerful worldly 'Queen of Heaven and Earth' makes the dangerous journey of descent to meet her fearsome mother-sister Ereshkigal, who is Queen of the

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<sup>1</sup> Perera 1981 *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women* pp13

<sup>2</sup> Kramer 1983 "The Discovery and Decipherment of the Descent of Inanna" in Wolkstein and Kramer, pages 127-135

<sup>3</sup> See Furlong 1992 "The Mythology of the Ancient Near East" and Vieyra 1965 "Empires of the Ancient Near East: The Hymns of Creation".

<sup>4</sup> This edition (Wolkstein and Kramer 1983 *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*) is the result of close collaboration between Sumerian historian and cuneiformist, Samuel Kramer, and folklorist and story-teller, Diane Wolkstein. All direct quotations come from this source.

Underworld. This recent archaeological recovery of Inanna from distant western cultural history provides an image for the 'return of the goddess' into the modern world, after thousands of years of silence.<sup>5</sup> This theme of recovery is also found within the story of Inanna's descent.

Sumerian mythologies provide early accounts of transitions from matriarchal to patriarchal mythologies. The story of Inanna begins with an account of Sumerian history in which the masculine gods are active and choose their domains whilst Ereshkigal, the primal matrix, is given her domain - and effectively banished to the unseen and feared regions of the Great Below. In the words of the myth:

*When the Sky God, An, had carried off the heavens,  
And the Air God, Enlil, had carried off the earth,  
When the Queen of the Great Below, Ereshkigal, was given the  
underworld for her domain ...*<sup>6</sup>

The primal matrix, Ereshkigal, is thus removed from sight but is not forgotten, in this transfer of power to the masculine sky deities An and Enlil.

Above ground the underworld queen's sister-descendent, Inanna, is given power as a goddess of high. As queen of heaven and earth, she is associated with Venus, the morning and evening star.<sup>7</sup> Inanna associates herself as part of the family of sky gods, whilst her relationship with female relatives is distant. In Inanna's personal life story, the theme of banishment of primal feminine energy in the development of secular worldly power in a patriarchal society is recapitulated. Inanna plants the Huluppu-tree - the tree of life - in her garden:

*Then a serpent who could not be charmed  
Made its nest in the roots of the huluppu-tree.  
The Anzu-bird set his young in the branches of the tree.  
And the dark maid Lilith built her home in the trunk.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This symbolic import is well recognised - see Murdoch 1990 *The Heroine's Journey*; Perera 1981 *Op Cit*; Whitmont 1987 *Return of the Goddess*; Woodman and Dickson 1996 *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess and the New Mythology*.

<sup>6</sup> Wolkstein and Kramer *Op Cit* page 4

<sup>7</sup> The planet Venus periodically descends below the horizon as it alternates between its position as morning and evening star. As morning and evening star, Inanna-Venus represents transitional times as she ushers in the further rhythms of day and night.

<sup>8</sup> Wolkstein and Kramer *Op Cit* page 8

And Inanna wept because she wanted to make a throne and a shining bed from the tree, and they would not leave. She cried to Gilgamesh, her warrior brother, for help and:

*He entered Inanna's holy garden.  
Gilgamesh struck the serpent who could not be charmed.  
The Anzu-bird flew with his young to the mountains.  
And Lilith smashed her home and fled to the wild, uninhabited places.  
Gilgamesh then loosened the roots of the huluppu-tree;  
And the sons of the city, who accompanied him, cut off the branches.  
From the trunk of the tree he carved a throne for his holy sister.  
From the trunk of the tree Gilgamesh carved a bed for Inanna ...<sup>9</sup>*

Inanna's story continues, to tell how she gains considerable worldly power as a daughter of the patriarchy. Inanna is full of energy, and unapologetically passionate: "*Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman Inanna applauded herself*".<sup>10</sup> She decides to visit Enki, the God of Wisdom, and wins from him the holy *me*, the wisdom of the holy laws of heaven and earth (of Sumerian culture) in a beer drinking challenge. She presents them to the people of Sumer in her city of Uruk, and establishes her position as the city's central deity.

Then Inanna courts and marries the shepherd Dumuzi. In a joyful celebration of sexual potency, the energy of attraction between the young lovers is imaged as a bountiful ripening of the fruits and grains of nature, and fertility of the earth is directly imaged as sexuality and fertility of the goddess.<sup>11</sup>

However, in time the abundance of the youthful, fertile love fades. Dumuzi is taken up with his worldly power as king, and wishes to deny the feminine, through whom his power has been achieved. Dumuzi requests Inanna to be "A little daughter to my father", and free him from erotic relationship. Inanna is not prepared to do so, and with the ailing of the royal marriage - the relationship between masculine and feminine and the fertility of nature - she decides to visit Ereshkigal in the Great Below. She is called to her descent: "*From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below*".<sup>12</sup> Inanna prepares herself by gathering together the holy *me* and adorning herself in the seven items of

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* page 9

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* page 12

<sup>11</sup> This is an example of feminist and creation spiritualities, which sees embodied life and sexuality as a source of joy and 'original blessing' rather than 'original sin' (cf Matthew Fox 1983 *Original Blessing*; Plant (ed) 1989 *Healing the Wounds*).

<sup>12</sup> Wolkstein and Kramer *Op Cit* page 52

regalia which mark her offices as queen and goddess of sexuality and wisdom. Recognising the dangers she is to confront as she is forced to accept the rule and power of Ereshkigal in the underworld, she asks her old nurse and faithful servant Ninshubur to get help if she should fail to return after three days.

When Inanna requests entrance to the underworld, Ereshkigal says; "*Let the priestess of heaven enter bowed low*" Inanna is told that "*the ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned.*"<sup>13</sup> And so she submits. At each of the seven gates to the underworld, Inanna's royal garments are removed, one by one, and finally:

*Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room. ....  
Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.*

*She struck her.  
Inanna was turned into a corpse,  
A piece of rotting meat,  
And was hung from a hook on the wall.*<sup>14</sup>

When Inanna fails to return after three days, Ninshubur follows her instructions, and gains help above ground from Enki, the god of waters and wisdom. Enki fashions two small creatures from the dirt under his fingernails and instructs them to slip into the underworld like flies and go to Ereshkigal. He tells them that they will find her in labour, and that they must empathise with her in her birthing pains:

*Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, is moaning  
With the cries of a woman about to give birth. ...  
When she cries, 'Oh! Oh! My inside!'  
Cry also, 'Oh! Oh! Your inside!'  
When she cries, 'Oh! Oh! My outside!'  
Cry also, 'Oh! Oh! Your outside!'  
The queen will be pleased.  
She will offer you a gift.  
Ask her only for the corpse that hangs from the hook on the wall...*<sup>15</sup>

Everything happens as Enki says it will, and a grateful Ereshkigal releases Inanna. The other face - the life giving, birthing power - of Ereshkigal is

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* page 57-8

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* page 60

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* page 64

revealed. However, Ereshkigal demands a reciprocal payment for her restoration of life to Inanna. She must choose someone to be returned to the underworld in her place.

Inanna returns to the upper world with the death-dealing capacity of Ereshkigal: with the 'eyes of death'. She chooses Dumuzi to replace her, because he continues to be absorbed in his kingly role and, unlike her other subjects, has not shown concern or mourning in her absence. Inanna later mourns Dumuzi's loss and rescinds his death sentence. In answer to a plea from Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna, Inanna decrees that Dumuzi and his willing sister share the underworld six months each. Thus, masculine and feminine share in the shadow, underworld aspects of life.

In this resolution, the Inanna myth provided the basis for Sumer's annual ritual of seasonal renewal. Humans are brought into relationship with the divine, as the journey of the goddess Inanna is reproduced by humans in the ongoing movements of Dumuzi and Geshtinanna. Seasonal movements of growth and inactivity are linked to human life and death cycles: "Acknowledging the duality of life dying into death and death leading into life gives the participants in the ritual the opportunity of annually renewing their relationship to the cosmos, to each other, and to their goddess".<sup>16</sup>

### **Inanna's Descent in the contemporary world**

Mythology, like the severed head of Orpheus, goes on singing even in death and from afar. ... Archaic man ... stepped back a pace before doing anything, like the toreador poisoning himself for the death-stroke. He sought an example in the past, and into this he stepped as into a diving-bell in order to plunge, at once protected and distorted, into the problems of the present. In this way his life achieved its own expression and meaning.<sup>17</sup>

I assume archetypal understanding when I imagine how Inanna's experience is present in the contemporary world. From this perspective, I suggest that the myth provides a "healing fiction" with considerable metaphoric power that works at many levels.<sup>18</sup> The archetypal interpretation argues for the possibility that the stories of Inanna and Ereshkigal, as mythic images, have a capacity to transport

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<sup>16</sup> Wolkstein "Interpretation of Inanna's Stories and Hymns" in Wolkstein and Kramer *Op Cit* page 168-9

<sup>17</sup> Kerenyi, (in Kerenyi and Jung Kerenyi 1949/85 "Prolegomena" to Jung and Kerenyi *Science of Mythology: Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis Op Cit* page 4, using images from Thomas Mann

<sup>18</sup> Bishop 1990 1990 *The Greening of Psychology*. page 2

the teller and listener 'back' into the archetypal world or primordial world; to a ground in depth psyche.<sup>19</sup> In addition to this depth interpretive level, mythic influence can also be understood in terms of other poetic and analytical interpretive understandings of metaphoric activity.

The story provides one image of what may be involved in bringing breadth to the one-sided and restrictive concepts of feminine in western patriarchal cultures, through encounter with and ongoing inclusion of that which has been rejected and repressed. In this mythology, feminine presence has much more power and autonomy than in the images from Greek mythologies which are often used by Jungians for psychological amplification: For example, the Greek Persephone is *abducted* into the underworld by the masculine Hades, whilst Inanna makes a conscious choice, and visits a feminine underworld power. Historically, Sumerian culture represents an early stage in the repression of the earth feminine under a rule of sky gods and so it is a place we might come to, when we work to revive that feminine energy which has been suppressed. In feminist terms, Inanna seems more 'advanced' in the liberation of her own potential than modern women, and yet she is close enough that many women feel an immediate relationship with her.<sup>20</sup> This is a process of multiple returns: Inanna returns to her repressed feminine sister-mother; she and her story return to contemporary cultures after its repression; and, through it, we can return to her energies.

Taken together, Inanna and Ereshkigal form a bi-polar goddess. In expressing the heights and depths of feminine potential, the overall myth can be seen as uniting culturally separated aspects of the feminine into a pattern of uncompromising feminine potency. When judged by Christian values of humility and moderation, Inanna seems perhaps dangerously inflated with her own power and pleasure. Alternatively, Inanna can be seen to represent the energy of spring, whilst Ereshkigal is the darkness of winter, where life lies dormant within the seed and is buried outside the light of the sun. However, historically and mythologically, Ereshkigal's long winter existence is suffered without the relief of seasonal alternation, and this makes her significantly more powerful and fearful than might be expected from an encounter with the annual winter season. As an impersonal and creative-destructive element of nature, Ereshkigal is a difficult energy to deal with, as she seems to bear little consideration to individual human concern and frailty. Also however, she

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<sup>19</sup> Kerenyi (*Op Cit* page 1-9) provides a thoughtful account of processes whereby myth intersects with the personal and relative and the absolute coincide; where "the 'abyss of the nucleus' opens out".

<sup>20</sup> Perera *Op Cit* and Wolkstein *Op Cit*

represents the powerful, creative and life-giving energies that are contained within gestation, incubation and the transformations that occur below ground or out of the light of day.

The myth can be read at many levels simultaneously, and in this capacity it illustrates the fascinating, interconnected patterns which images are able to contain. No meaning is primary to another - as a Jungian analyst said to me in a dream: "it is all one thing".

### ***'Descent' as western cultural transformation***

Culturally, the journey taken by Inanna to the repressed feminine divinity, Ereshkigal, provides an image for the retrieval of qualities which have been inferiorised or outlawed in contemporary western cultures, as patriarchal values have assumed dominance. A complex array of meanings and possibilities cluster around, and travel out from, this interpretive position. The descent-ascent-descent movement images a respect for the necessity of cyclic change, in a valuation which is a balance to western cultural emphases on linear progressive change and ideals of unrestrained growth - a growth which is unlimited by the impositions of death and necessity. It speaks of restrictions which are inherent in embodied, mortal life, against a yearning for their transcendence.

The arrival of the myth within contemporary cultural life also initiates a larger cycle, in which we descend from the heights of 4,000 years of development of disembodied intellectual consciousness to the depths of mythological history and the unconscious psyche. As silenced categories, the unconscious psyche and imaginal world are very little differentiated within western culture, and in this context Ereshkigal can be seen as "the unconscious" itself. At this very generalised level, the myth tells about a journey back to a mythopoeic consciousness which was alienated in the rise of disembodied, abstract rationalities, and images a shift from ego psychology to depth psychology which occurs as the repressed qualities of psyche, earth and feminine are remembered.

Within the story, Inanna's experience of being held in, and released from, Ereshkigal's underworld domain images notions of time and space and creativity which I have described as part of immanent creative process. Ereshkigal's qualities are reminiscent of those explored in modern physics and chaos theory, in intuitions of a wider, interconnected reality and emergence of order from chaos. In addition to predictable chains of cause-and-effect acting in linear

time, there is 'the right time' when things connect across the pattern and the whole thing shifts, even when the larger pattern cannot be seen. Ereshkigal, as a primal matrix, expresses a place beyond differentiation, which is imaged mythologically as having power in an historically-prior reality. However, as a living archetype, she also images the creative source which must be contained within any conceptions of a continuously-forming present. This conceptual positioning is contained within the myth in the position Ereshkigal holds, as Queen of the Underworld who continues to live and demand respect, even while she is fearful and unpalatable to the patriarchal culture. As Perera describes this uneasy relationship: "in her terrible form, Ereshkigal never comes up. When the gods give a feast, they ask her to send someone to get her food".<sup>21</sup> In her positive face, however, Ereshkigal is the mystery of interconnection and creativity within matter, and provides a sense of immanent divinity residing throughout all life and in so-called inanimate matter. Her life-giving, as well as death-dealing, vitality within matter, the embodied psyche and the earth can provide a vital optimism in the face of the pessimism of imagining a relentless continuation of modern cultural 'progress': "Through reverence for the Goddess in her repellent form, man is once again able to drink of her ever-flowing waters".<sup>22</sup> Thus, whilst it may be read as a pessimistic scenario of sacrifice and suffering, the Inanna story also speaks about a creative activity of nature that exists outside of human control. In this mysterious space beyond the confines of linear space-time, the other side of a lack of differentiation is a mysterious interconnection.

### ***'Descent' as psychological experience***

When a myth is read psychologically, the different characters, relationships and events are understood to represent conscious and unconscious psychic dynamics, and all characters are assumed to be aspects of a single person. In a psychological reading of Inanna's descent, the conscious, successful, upper-world persona of a woman breaks her current relationship with her masculine aspect; places a part of her feminine self (a more archaic feminine wisdom) on guard at the entrance to the underworld; and goes to visit the shadow sister whom she has abandoned in order to achieve her success. Her previous abandonment of this aspect of herself expresses the fact that she herself has not grown with a positive evaluation of the feminine, because her mother was

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<sup>21</sup> Perera *Op Cit* page 29

<sup>22</sup> From Whitmont, quoted in Murdoch 1990 *The Heroine's Journey* page 164. Woodman and Dickson (*Op Cit* page 28) say that: "Anyone who has laboured to release the Goddess from the darkness of centuries of abuse has returned from the excavation with a paradox. She who is dead is alive. All we have to do is open our eyes an extra sixteenth of an inch, and there she is, dancing in every apple blossom, in the song of every purple finch, as well as in the flames of passion that we call life".

banished before she was born. The psychological journey to Ereshkigal involves a regression biographically and emotionally to very early, pre-verbal life where wounding of the relationship between mother and child was experienced.<sup>23</sup> In the process of being held captive by the dark feminine, capacities for action within the upper world are likely to be severely reduced as extroverted energy is removed, and the Inanna aspect experiences her powerlessness against the greater power within which she is held. However, through a listening to the experiences of pain which have been hitherto repressed from consciousness, the upper-world person is eventually allowed to return to social-cultural life. In this process, relations between conscious aspects of herself and between consciousness and unconscious dimensions of psyche have been radically reordered, and a commitment to ongoing relationship with the depth psyche has been made.

Inanna's descent also provides an image for the Jungian analytic journey. Culturally, the unconscious is imaged as being 'down', in a position which reflects its negative status and contradistinction to upward movement, light, and consciousness. Any movement to the unconscious can therefore be an imaginal descent. Descent to the primal mother is an image of deep descent. Mythologically, its destination is the place existing before the dismemberment of the mother-matrix in the formation of patriarchal cosmologies and ego consciousness. This is a point where consciousness has not been split apart from body, and psychic and somatic consciousnesses intersect. Mythology is expressed as history but, as I have said, in a very real way it provides an image of what is contained within our present. In this sense, psychological-analytical descent to the unconscious psyche is also a descent into the body (matter) personally, and is experienced in physical symptoms and sensation. It also can bring a lived recognition of direct connection with the earth-body which exists within personal embodied life.

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<sup>23</sup> In modern cultures, even a child who is closely affiliated with his or her mother is likely to be socialised as a 'daughter (or son) of the patriarchy', because the mother herself has already been born into patriarchal values and relations (Perera *Op Cit* page 7).

## ***A story for women***

The disempowerment which women experience in a cultural world in which nearly all revered models of divinity, power, heroism and action are masculine and 'other' to themselves, must be profound, although subtle. For women, Inanna and her active-passive journeys provide a powerful alternative to the heroic images which are provided in stories of men and patriarchal mythologies. In addition, the presence of Ereshkigal provides an image for an immanent feminine creative power and divinity which has been radically removed as a cultural possibility within western cultures. I certainly felt a particular affinity for this story, and in another section of this website, I tell of my intersection, as a modern woman, with the archetype of the bi-polar goddess, Inanna-Ereshkigal. This experience strongly resonates with that of many, although certainly not all, women, in a wider collective pattern that has been amplified by Jungian analysts.<sup>24</sup> For men as well, Inanna's story can tell of a meeting with an inner, repressed feminine aspect.<sup>25</sup> However, I do not try to imagine and give credibility to these differently gendered experiences.

Conceptions such as unconscious psyche, imagination, and complex change processes are not essentially gendered. However, within the psyche, nearly everything is gendered, and cultural ways of being are presented in the images of men and women, rather than through androgynous abstractions. In particular, experiences of oppression are strongly gendered, and whilst women frequently encounter oppressive masculine presences, men may often meet oppressive feminine characters. The language of the psyche and dreams thus is often raw, uncompromising, and lacking in ideologically-sound considerations of gender respect. However, when the many characters within dreams are all read as belonging within the psyche, these negative images need not be seen as an insult to and indictment of men or women in the world. A helpful attitude is to neither repress nor act-out the gendered implications of psyche's language, but rather to accept and receive this experience as it is - as an insight into ways in which meanings in psyche are patterned to consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Leonard 1987 *On the Way to the Wedding*; Murdoch *Op Cit*; Perera *Op Cit*; Reeves 1991 "Crone Wisdom and Transformation"; Woodman and Dickson *Op Cit*

<sup>25</sup> There may also be an analogy for men in their search to find the father who was absent in the patriarchal family, which arises as an issue in the modern men's movement (cf Biddulph 1994 *Manhood: a book about setting men free*) Encounter with the archetype Saturn, the 'old father', appears also to have similarities with the 'old mother' Ereshkigal (cf Vitale 1973 "The Archetype of Saturn or Transformation of the Father").

<sup>26</sup> Tacey 1997 *Remaking men: the revolution in masculinity* page 145

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