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**THE VITAL
SPARK**

**Reclaim Your Outlaw Energies and
Find Your Feminine Fire**

 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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DIVISION: LOSING YOUR FIRE

From the living fountain of instinct
flows everything that is creative;
hence the unconscious is not merely
conditioned by history, but is the very
source of the creative impulse.

—C. G. Jung, *Collected Works, Volume 8*

We arrive in the world connected with our full potential, but most of us gradually lose access to our vital spark. No one makes it to adulthood uncompromised. All of us have parts that have been discarded and lie in life's lumber room. According to Jung, the blossoming of self-awareness that occurs as we mature necessarily produces a "division with oneself."¹ We learn to distance ourselves from essential aspects of our souls. We bury those traits that are found to be unwelcome by our families or culture. We follow the rules of convention and cease listening to the deep, instinctual voices that guided our remote ancestors. These forgotten traits, which were originally part of our fullness, fall into the unconscious and become what Jung referred to as shadow—those parts of ourselves we would rather not know.

The aspects of ourselves we lose touch with will depend in large part on our family and culture. For many of us, there was something we were not allowed to be in our families. I was never allowed to be boastful. Maybe your family ethos taught that you were never to be a burden, or rude, or lazy. Our culture also imposes expectations

that shape us as we develop. In the United States, children are often taught that being outgoing and extroverted is highly desirable. Those who are slow to warm up can come to feel ashamed or inadequate. Though families and cultures require everyone to conform to norms, they generally make different demands on women and girls than they do on men and boys. As a result, women tend to lose access to different parts of ourselves than men do, and our journey to wholeness is therefore also different.

This chapter will provide a map to the territory we will be covering in this book. After briefly considering what happens to girls and young women that leaves us alienated from core parts of ourselves, we'll explore an ancient story of a woman who was able to reconnect with her fiery qualities. "Fitcher's Bird" lays out an essential template of female psychological development that the rest of the stories in this book will elaborate upon.

FROM GIRLHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE

How does it happen that women become cut off from their most vitalizing qualities? Though there are sex-based differences in temperament in young children—girls tend to experience more negative emotions than boys—these are small. As adolescence looms, however, boys and girls are seemingly set on significantly different trajectories. In her book *Reviving Ophelia*, psychologist Mary Pipher writes movingly about the loss of confidence that girls experience as they go through puberty.

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a developmental Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic and "tomboyish" personalities

and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies.²

Prepubescent heroines of literature and film are full of moxie and courage—think Matilda, Pippi Longstocking, or Laura Ingalls. Female protagonists at the other end of adolescence are often struggling, as is the nineteen-year-old narrator of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* or the protagonist of the 2017 film *Lady Bird*. Before adolescence, girls are often exuberant and vivacious. For some, it is as if a light goes out as they become teens. They become meek and quiet. They develop eating disorders, anxiety, or an unhealthy obsession with their appearance fueled by a desperate sense of inadequacy. Their unselfconscious joy and abandon evaporate.

By the time we have made it through the stormy seas of adolescence and found ourselves thrown upon the shores of adulthood, most of us have lost contact with some vital part of ourselves. We become so focused on pleasing or caring for others that we lose touch with parts of ourselves.

YOUNG ADULTHOOD

As we grow into adulthood, we continue to struggle with feeling self-assured. For example, research about confidence in women finds that in college women’s confidence drops while men’s confidence increases.³ The word *confidence* comes from two Latin words that mean “with trust.” To have confidence is to trust ourselves. We cannot fully trust ourselves if we don’t have access to fiery qualities such as shrewdness, assertiveness, and desire. A lack of confidence is a symptom of being cut off from our outlaw energies.

When I was in college, I took two seminar courses with the same music professor—one on Beethoven and one on Mozart. I loved those classes. The professor was dynamic, passionate, and funny. I received top grades in both classes, and in one of them, the professor chose to read sections of my paper aloud to the other students as an exemplary effort.

He always welcomed us to visit him during office hours. A part of me longed to go. I saw my male classmates talking and laughing with him when I passed his office. But I felt shy, and I couldn't think of what I would say if I were to drop by. I had no difficulties with the material we were learning and couldn't think of any clever questions to ask him. So I never went.

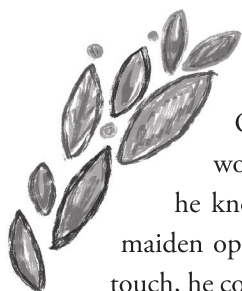
In my last year of college, I considered applying for a prestigious fellowship. My high grade point average would have made me competitive, but I needed strong recommendations. I decided to ask this music professor. I approached him during his office hours and presented my request. When he realized what I was asking, his brows knitted. "You don't have anyone else you can ask?" he said irritably. "I barely know you! Haven't you made any connections with professors in the four years that you've been here? What have you been doing with your time? I wouldn't have anything to say in such a letter." He dismissed me with disdain. I slunk away, mortified and empty-handed.

I had worked hard. I had attended every class and done well on assignments and tests. I had written at least one outstanding paper. But I could not find the fearlessness and assertiveness that would have made me feel comfortable approaching this man as an equal, the way my male classmates did. Their audacity was rewarded. My agreeableness was not. I never applied for the fellowship.

As we enter the workforce, women continue to suffer from a lack of confidence, and the evidence is that this holds us back professionally. Researchers have discovered that women will apply for a job when they meet 100% of the criteria. Men, however, feel comfortable putting themselves forward when they meet approximately 60%. Studies show that men overestimate their abilities and performance, while women underestimate both, and women are much more likely to express self-doubt about their competence.⁴

Cultivating confidence requires Lilith qualities. When we can't access these, we are trapped in the mode of caring and concern, which can hold us back partly because we don't want to make others feel

challenged or uncomfortable. A lack of confidence can render us timid and ineffective. The implications of this go far beyond the workplace. When we can't access boldness, authority, and a healthy sense of entitlement, we will be less able to protect ourselves, feel enlivened, or claim our power. We will have a harder time pursuing our path, nurturing our creativity, or marshalling our power to defend our loved ones. A dark but satisfying tale from the Brothers Grimm provides a rich portrait of the potential costs of being cut off from Lilith—and shows us how we can reconnect with her.



FITCHER'S BIRD

Once upon a time, there was a sorcerer who was a thief and would disguise himself and beg from house to house. One day, he knocked on the door of a house where three sisters lived. A maiden opened the door and gave him a piece of bread. With just a touch, he could compel her to jump into his basket. He carried her back to his house, which was large and well-appointed. He gave her whatever she wished for, and, at first, she was content to stay with him.

After some time had passed, he told her that he had business to attend to far away and would be gone for several days. He gave her an egg and told her to take good care of it and always keep it with her. He also gave her a key. "Whatever you do, do not go into the room that this key opens if you value your life!" he told her.

When he left, however, curiosity overtook the maiden. She went into the forbidden room, and there she saw a large basin with dead and butchered women lying in it. She was so horrified that she dropped the egg into the basin. She retrieved it immediately and wiped it clean, but the blood reappeared as quickly as she wiped it away, and no matter what she did, she could not remove the stain.

When the sorcerer came home, he immediately asked for the key and the egg. Not knowing what else to do, the girl produced them. The sorcerer immediately knew what had happened by seeing the blood on the egg.

“You have disobeyed me!” he roared. “Now you will pay with your life, and you too will inhabit the bloody chamber!”

So saying, he dragged her into the room, chopped her up in pieces, and tossed her into the basin with the others.

After some time, the man went begging again at the same house. He captured the second sister in the same manner, and in time, she met the same fate as her sister. She entered the forbidden room, dropped the egg in the basin, and was chopped into pieces.

Eventually, the sorcerer captured the third daughter, but she was smart and cunning. When it came her turn to be left alone with the egg and the key, she left the egg in the cupboard before entering the forbidden chamber. When she saw her sisters in the bloody basin, she searched and searched until she found all their parts. Then she put them all back together—arms, legs, head, and body. In this way, her two sisters came back to life.

The third sister led the other two out of the bloody chamber and hid them. When the sorcerer came home, he was delighted to find no blood on the egg. He asked the third sister to become his wife. She agreed, but said that before she would marry him, he must carry baskets of gold back to her parents’ house. She then secretly put her sisters in the basket and covered them with gold.

“Don’t delay!” she told the sorcerer. “I will watch you from my window and know if you tarry.”

The sorcerer lifted the basket onto his back, but it was quite heavy. When he stopped to rest a bit, one of the sisters in the basket cried out, “There is no time for rest! Get going!” The sorcerer thought it was the voice of the maiden watching from the window, so he stood up and continued, but the basket was so heavy that he had to rest. When he set the basket down, the other sister cried, “I’m watching you! Get a move on!” Thinking that his bride watched from her window, he lifted the basket again onto his back and limped toward his destination.

Meanwhile, the third sister decorated a skull with jewels and other fine things. Then she put it in the window, so it looked for all the

world like a beautiful maiden watching for her lover to return. Next, she undressed and covered herself in honey. She split open one of the mattresses and rolled in the feathers until she was completely covered. In this way, she disguised herself, for she looked so strange that no one could recognize her. Then she set out for home.

As she was on her way, she met the wedding guests on the way to the sorcerer's house who asked:

“O, Fitcher's bird, what are you doing here?”

“I come from Fitcher's house, quite near.”

“And what is the young bride doing there?”

“She's swept the whole house clean, I know,
And now looks out on the world below.”

Next, she met the bridegroom, slowly making his way back. He, like the others, asked:

“O, Fitcher's bird, what are you doing here?”

“I come from Fitcher's house, quite near.”

“And what is the young bride doing there?”

“She's swept the whole house clean, I know,
And now looks out on the world below.”

The bridegroom looked up, saw the skull in the window, and thinking it was his bride, he waved. But when he and his guests had all gone in, the brothers and kinsmen of the bride, who had been sent to rescue her, arrived. They locked the sorcerer and guests inside the house, then set it on fire, and everyone burned to death.



Fairy tales speak in the mysterious tongue of symbol and image, the language of the unconscious. To understand a tale symbolically, we must squint a little, soften our gaze, and sink into the story. It won't do to go too quickly or be too smart. We must take our time and let the images work on us. Then we can open ourselves up to a shift in perspective.

We start with the assumption that every element in the tale is a part of one psyche. According to that understanding, each sister is a different aspect of the young woman about whom the story is told. The sorcerer, too, is a part of her. This may be difficult to imagine at first, but it immediately rescues us from the stuck polarity of “good” and “bad” and opens up realms of psychological subtlety.

The fairy tale uses a story of relationship between a man and a woman as a symbol for the work we must do as we become more whole. Ultimately, psychological growth is an inside job—there are both rich resources and dangerous challenges in the inner world. Intimate partnerships often mirror our inner reality and therefore are a stage upon which we work out our deepest personal wounds. For this reason, many fairy tales focus on romantic couplings, and we often dream of our intimate partners. It is important to keep in mind that in both dreams and fairy tales, these relationships can be understood symbolically. They often represent dynamics at work between parts of ourselves.

The tale begins with a maiden and her two sisters, but the story does not mention the parents. The young woman who answers the door is seemingly alone and unprotected. She opens the door to the sorcerer without a thought. Her compassion and naivete make her susceptible to abduction. When she hands him some bread, she gives away her psychic energy—her power and agency—and can be compelled to jump into the basket with just a touch.

By the time they reach young adulthood, women in our culture have usually been socialized to be kind and friendly. If a strange man speaks to you on an empty subway platform, you may feel compelled to be polite and answer even though you feel uncomfortable. The cultural voice in your head telling you to be courteous may outweigh the primal warning bell that rings. When we don't feel that we have permission to say no or have a boundary, we are like the sisters who cannot adequately protect themselves from the danger represented by the sorcerer. We ignore our instincts at our peril.

BECOMING CONSCIOUS

The story tells us that the first young woman was initially content to stay with the sorcerer because he gave her whatever she wanted. Hopes that we will be loved and cared for can entice us to abandon our inner knowing. We so long to be cherished that we can be persuaded to disregard our intuition. Or, we may feel helpless to do otherwise than to go along with pressures and demands. Without the fierceness needed to care for and protect ourselves, we may feel we have no choice but to rely on others and hope that they have our best interests at heart.

When the first sister is given the egg and the key and left alone, she has enough pluck to enter the forbidden chamber. This bold action indicates a desire to grow toward consciousness. We all have forbidden chambers in our psyche, things we would rather not know about ourselves or someone else. My client Laura grew up with an alcoholic father. She came to see me after realizing with shock and horror that her husband and the father of her two children had a drinking problem. Until this point, she had been able not to know what had been there for her to see. It was as if she had been given a key that she hadn't allowed herself to use. We all make such efforts not to know what is painful or inconvenient. A willingness to peer into the forbidden chamber is a healthy impulse to overcome an inner injunction not to see. The key, therefore, is also a key to greater consciousness and self-awareness.

But we should not approach such knowledge without adequate preparation. The first two sisters break one of the rules—they go into the chamber. But they follow another rule to the letter—they always keep the egg with them. Their foray into the bloody room is impulsive, driven by a healthy yet immature curiosity. They aren't aware of the magnitude of what they are up against, and blithely approach the terrible knowledge that awaits them in that room without sufficient preparation. Doing so leads to death and dismemberment.

Dismemberment is a powerful metaphor for a state of psychological dissolution. We come apart. We dissociate. We no longer experience ourselves as having a coherent sense of self. Such experiences are

not uncommon. They can be caused by trauma, psychosis, drug use, or other extreme conditions. They are terrifying and can sometimes lead to a permanent state of fracture. However, they can also herald a process of profound growth and healing. Shamans in various cultures report experiences of gruesome dismemberment during their initiatory journeys. These precede an experience of re-memberment and restoration that brings with it the power to heal others.

THE THIRD SISTER

The three sisters make different choices and have different fates. Three is a number that denotes a movement toward wholeness. In fairy tales, sequences of three often imply a temporal development and give a picture of something changing over time. According to this understanding, the three sisters are all aspects of the same person but at different stages of awareness and development. Being able to fail and learn from our failures is essential to psychological growth. Video games capture this archetypal truth. We keep getting beat in the boss fight until our skills develop to the point that we win. And just as in fairy tales, we can thankfully respawn. When we are young and have not yet learned to protect ourselves, we are like the video game newbie. We behave like the first two sisters, unthinkingly giving away our energy and thereby leaving ourselves vulnerable. The third sister is an image of what it looks like to claim Lilith qualities in the interest of growth and development. To do so, she must find new ways of coping that depart from her usual ways of going through the world.

We all arrive in adulthood with a narrow repertoire of behaviors and responses that are well-honed and habitual. We have consistent strategies we employ when we are disappointed, angry, challenged, or bored. Other reactions feel impossible, partly because we may have learned that these were unacceptable. We are like a painter with a vast palette of colors to choose from, but who only ever uses a small number of hues as she fills her canvas. Learning to broaden the scope of our behavioral responses allows us to make conscious choices about