

MOTHERHOOD

Facing
and
Finding
Yourself

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Introduction: Journey to the Source

Consciousness longs for the healing power of nature,
for the deep wells of being and for unconscious
communion with life in all its countless forms.

C. G. JUNG

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Any initiatory journey requires a guide, and this book aims to be just that. The stories told in this book map the universal cycle of descent, sojourn, and return that marks a feminine initiation. This cycle will recur for us repeatedly as we come to know ourselves more deeply through mothering. When you first become a mother, when your child starts school, when she faces difficulties as a preteen, or when he leaves for college—all of these experiences may offer an invitation to descend to your source and return changed yet again. In little ways and in big, motherhood will be full of opportunities to know yourself better, and this book endeavors to cover the full range of a mother's psychological journey.

In part one of this book, I will explore how motherhood repeatedly sends us down the well into the marvelous, frightening inner world. The descent is most of all experienced as a loss—a loss of freedom, control, ourselves. In part 2, we will look at the discoveries to be made and the challenges to be faced in this subterranean land. In the sojourn, we will encounter the darkness within, including those despised and repudiated parts of ourselves that are sometimes frightening to know. Finally, in part 3, the return, we will take a closer look at the psychological treasures to which we can hopefully lay claim when

we resurface, including mature spirituality, renewed creativity, and an abiding sense of inner authority.

Some of the tales in this book may pierce your heart, speaking to you with great clarity and immediacy. Others may seem strange or difficult to understand. Sometimes those tales that are challenging at first may hold important wisdom that only becomes clear later. As you read, pay attention to the feelings, thoughts, and images that come up for you. You might find it helpful to keep a journal where you can write about your reactions.

You might also pay attention to the dreams that visit you while you read this book. Dreams are the strange language through which your unconscious addresses you. “In each of us there is another whom we do not know,” remarked Jung. “He speaks to us in dreams and tells us how differently he sees us from the way we see ourselves.”¹ Dreams communicate through metaphor, image, symbol, and feeling. Sometimes frightening, sometimes beautiful, they are always fascinating. Even when we don’t understand them, somehow we know that they are meaningful, for they contain the wisdom of the guiding self. They always reveal something we did not consciously know before. Your dreams can be your guide through your motherhood journey. In this book, we will sometimes explore a dream and ponder its significance.

Fairy tales, like dreams, are nourishing if we only enjoy and value them. However, as with dreams, their healing value is made more potent when we engage with them actively. For this reason, I have included questions for reflection at the end of every chapter. To make use of these, first read the tale in full. Then use the questions as prompts for reflection, journaling, or discussion. Just respond with the first answer that comes up for you, even if it doesn’t make much sense. The point is to let the imagery of the tale guide you in a conversation with your unconscious. There are no wrong answers.

Mothering is one of life’s great opportunities to submit to the fires of transformation. Such a transformation brings with it enormous psychological wealth as we grow into the person we were meant to become. But there can be no doubt that transformation is often painful, lonely, and frightening. Most of us will face dark moments at least

occasionally as we mother, though it can feel forbidden to speak of them. Darkness will always be part of a descent, and this is why many of the tales in this book have dark themes. As you follow the promptings of your soul and go down into the inner world, you will find yourself in the realm of the unconscious where darkness predominates. Darkness can sometimes seem chillingly empty, but really it is always pregnant with the germ of new life. The difficult feelings you encounter while mothering can be painful, but they are not to be avoided. It is in this darkness that new things grow. It is darkness that gives rise to transformation.

A MAP FOR OUR JOURNEY

What might we expect from a journey down the well? We have a map available to us in the form of a fairy tale. “The Two Caskets” will serve as our guide for the journey down the well to find the secret well-spring of meaning in the inner world. It features the universal motif of descent, sojourn, and return that characterizes female initiation. There are many such tales that tell about what happens to a woman who descends to the depths. Perhaps the oldest of these is the ancient Mesopotamian story of the goddess Inanna and her descent to the underworld to visit her dark sister Ereshkigal. This and other such stories express a deep truth about the nature of a woman’s psychological development that still applies today. “The Two Caskets” will prepare us for the journey we will take in the following pages of this book. It will show us what we might expect when we are cast down the well, what attitude we must take when we are at the bottom of the well, and the treasures we might gain upon our return. This is the first story to tell in the motherhood journey because, as mothers, we will be cast down the well over and over again.



THE TWO CASKETS

Once there was a woman who had a daughter who was coarse, lazy, and rude, whom she loved and pampered. She also had a stepdaughter who was lovely, kind, and gracious, whom she treated worse than a servant. The woman hated her stepdaughter

and wanted to find a way to get rid of her. One day, she had both daughters sit at the edge of the well and spin, warning them that the one whose thread broke first would be thrown to the bottom.

She gave her own daughter the finest flax so that it spun smoothly and without breaking. She gave her stepdaughter coarse stuff that quickly broke. Then the woman grabbed her stepdaughter by the shoulders and cast her down the well.

“And that is the end of you!” she said. But she was wrong, for it was only the beginning.

At the end of her fall, the girl found herself in a beautiful land. She walked for a while until she came upon a rickety old fence, overgrown with vines. “Please don’t step on me!” said the fence. So the girl took care to jump over it. Next, she came to an oven full of bread. The oven told her she could eat as much as she liked but begged her not to hurt it. The girl ate one loaf, thanked the oven for its bread, and carefully closed its door. After walking for some distance, she happened upon a cow with a bucket hanging on its horns. It told the girl she was welcome to milk it and drink but asked the girl not to hurt it or spill the milk. The girl carefully milked the cow, drank her fill, and then hung the bucket back up without spilling.

At last, she came to a little house where an old woman lived. The woman bade her come in and asked her to comb her hair. The girl graciously combed the old woman’s long, white hair, so the old woman gave her a job tending her cows. She took good care of the cows. When hungry cats came to the barn, the girl gave them milk. When hungry sparrows came, the girl gave them corn.

After the girl had been caring for the cows for some time, the old woman summoned her. “You have served me well,” she said. “But now I have other tasks for you.” She gave the girl a sieve and told her to fetch water with it. The girl was near tears at being given such an impossible task, but the birds that she had fed with the corn came and told her to stop up the sieve with ashes. The girl did so, and triumphantly carried water to the old woman as she had asked.

The old woman seemed surprised and set the girl another task. This time, she was to wash some black wool until it turned white and some

white wool until it turned black. Again the girl was distraught and near tears, until the birds came and told her to face east to turn the black wool white and to face west to turn the white wool black. Once again, the old woman seemed surprised and even a little irritated at her success.

“I will set you one last task,” she said. She told the girl to weave the wool into a robe as smooth as a king’s and to do this by sunset, but the skeins tangled and broke each time, and the girl had no success. The cats to whom she had given milk came and wove it for her, and by sunset, the robe was finished, as perfect as can be.

“Because you have been so industrious,” said the old woman, “I will let you choose a casket to take with you back to your home.” She showed her to an attic filled with beautiful caskets. The girl considered each one, but the cats came and told her to take the plain black one.

Back at home, her stepmother was not happy to see her. But when the girl opened the little black casket, gold and jewels cascaded out, filling the henhouse the girl had been given as lodging.

Seeing this, the stepmother wanted her own daughter to get such riches. She had her sit by the well and spin, and then threw her down the well when her flax broke. The lazy girl proceeded as her sister had done, but she was rude to the fence, the oven, and the cow, and she worked very poorly on the farm. Because she was not kind to the birds and the cats, they did not help her with the tasks set to her by the old woman. At the end of her service, the lazy girl was given her choice of caskets in the attic, like her sister. Instead of choosing the small, plain, black casket, she chose a large red one, imagining that it would contain many more riches than the tiny one her sister had brought back. When she got home and opened her casket, however, fire burst out and burned her and her mother to death.

A SYMBOLIC UNDERSTANDING

When interpreting a fairy tale psychologically, we start with the assumption that all elements in the tale are aspects of a single psyche. Therefore, the stepmother, the cows, the old woman, and the well are all part of the psyche of the heroine and the story shows us possible ways these elements

can interrelate. The two sisters, so opposite in their natures, can be understood to be different aspects of one personality. No one is good and virtuous and patient all the time. Some days we are the kind sister, and other days we are the lazy, arrogant sister. We all have both within us.

At the beginning of the tale, the kind sister is at the mercy of her cruel stepmother. Psychologically, this is an image of being oppressed by an inner critical voice that berates you and keeps your confidence low. It is no accident that this role is played in the tale by the stepmother. Often in the psyche of a woman, the inner voice that criticizes is the internalized voice of our actual mother, especially if our mother was critical and disparaging.

When we are oppressed by a constant inner stream of negative faultfinding, it is difficult to find an unbroken thread in things. We begin something—a project, a thought, a sentence—but we get pulled up and cut short by the inner critic. One of my patients, Caroline, loves to take books out of the library. She is an intelligent woman with a lively, curious mind, and she gets excited by the ideas contained in these books. However, she often finds that she does not read the books she checks out. They sit by her bedside, and when she sees them, a harshly judgmental voice tells her she has no business pursuing any of these interests as they are impractical, and she probably wouldn't understand them anyway. This inner voice is very similar to the discouraging way her mother and father would talk to her as a child. In this way, Caroline's thread through life breaks continually, and she finds she cannot sustain an interest in anything long enough to make progress.

Just imagine what it would feel like to sit on the edge of a well and try to do any sort of work that requires careful attention. You wouldn't be able to relax or give your work your full concentration. You would constantly feel "on edge," as it were, with the threat of falling in ever present. Many of us live in just this way, always balancing ourselves precariously on the edge of our dark moods, expending a great deal of emotional energy to avoid tipping over and falling into them. While we may successfully stay on the surface and evade the

plunge into the depths, such a strategy can exhaust and deplete us, making it difficult for us to engage in life fully.

When life throws you down the well, it is always a painful, frightening, and disorienting experience. What will make the difference as to whether you return with the treasure or the curse has to do with the approach that you take toward the unconscious—the marvelous land at the bottom of the well.

Always with the unconscious, it is necessary to have the correct attitude. If you face the unconscious with arrogance, clinging adamantly to an ego attitude that insists on having its own way, you are likely to meet with the destructive side of the unconscious. When you behave toward your inner life like the lazy sister, disregarding promptings from the unconscious and expecting to be given something for nothing, you will find that plans go awry and energy dries up. You are thwarted at every turn and feel you cannot trust life.

If you approach the unconscious like the kind sister, if you are willing to engage it with openness and curiosity no matter how strange or worthless it seems, then the world opens up, little by little. We treat our dreams with care, no matter how silly or absurd they seem. We attend to the faint stirrings of intuition. We notice what our bodies have to say on matters. If we live in this way, we will be in right relationship with our unconscious. Like the kind sister, we will be serving the old woman well and can expect to be richly rewarded.

UNIVERSAL THEMES

Fairy tales and myths are filled with images that convey universal themes that recur throughout time and across cultures. The witch, the wise old man, and the mother are just a few examples of such images. Jung used the term “archetype” to describe these fundamental patterns that are inborn and part of our common psychological heritage. They exist in all of us. Archetypes are the universal innate forms that structure our psychological life. Though they can be imaged in a variety of ways, the symbolic taproot of these energies always goes down to the same deep source. The archetypes are ancient and relate to our most profound instinctual wisdom. When we encounter them, they often provoke strong emotions.

The well is an example of an archetypal image, symbolizing a descent into the depths that is both frightening and potentially renewing. The well is the central metaphor in our tale—and in this book. Wells are often associated with the feminine and are sacred to the goddess in many cultures. When we partake of the waters of the well, we are restored to the sacred feminine within. Going down the well, therefore, is an image of initiation into the feminine depths of the psyche. Mothering can be like being thrown down a deep well. Like any initiatory experience, such a journey forces you to surrender control and descend into your depths where a confrontation with your soul awaits you. If borne with humility, curiosity, and openheartedness, such an experience has the potential to be transformative—to enlarge our sense of who we are, to clarify our place in the great arc and sweep of time, and to affirm our belonging to the cosmos.

When you go down the well, you will encounter the archetypal sacred feminine, which the old woman certainly is. This old woman lives in you, and you will meet her on your motherhood journey. Like all archetypes, the old woman has two aspects. She can be life-giving and creative, or punishing and destructive. Other versions of this tale tell us more about the mysterious dual nature of the old woman. In one version, the old woman makes it snow on Earth when she shakes out her feather bed, making it clear that she is none other than a primordial nature goddess. In other versions, her weird grotesqueness is emphasized. She has strangely large teeth, her hair is full of lice, or she is able to remove and replace her head at will. Always she is ambivalent, capable of bestowing great riches but also of invoking great destructive powers. This is ever the nature of the energies that form the basis of psychic life. You will likely encounter her in both of her aspects as you mother.

Two other archetypal images are particularly prominent in this story and therefore merit a bit more exploration. Spinning and weaving appear as key motifs throughout this tale. These humble activities carry enormous symbolic meaning. In Greek and Norse mythology, the Fates who control people's lives are spinners and weavers. The prominence of spinning and weaving in this tale lets us know that it treats the fundamental aspects of how we create the fabric of our fate through the myriad daily choices we make.

The cow is another image that appears in multiple places in the tale. The cow is a picture of the nourishing, maternal aspects of the unconscious. In Norse and Egyptian mythologies, the cow was associated with human creation, and the cow is sacred in Hinduism. The importance of the cow in this tale emphasizes that the gentle, life-giving nature of the sacred feminine exists alongside the strange and frightening aspect. It is a reminder that we can always find renewing nourishment within. Even when you encounter the frightening or strange aspect of the old woman, remember that the gentle cow, too, is part of you and is present.

FEMININE INITIATION

In essence, “The Two Caskets” and the many related tales of a descent into the underworld where the heroine encounters a sometimes-threatening female deity are images of feminine initiation. These tales map out an ancient archetypal pattern faced by women the world over since the dawn of human consciousness. The journey involves three distinct stages; descent, sojourn, and return. These are the same stages found in initiation rites the world over, in which the initiate must first separate from his family and tribe, then undergo an ordeal before finally returning to family and tribe with a new status. Initiation rites are meant to set us on our path, to open our hearts to the deep, mysterious purpose inherent in us at birth.

Today, few of us participate in formal rituals of initiation. Even without these, however, life initiates us. An initiatory life event is that which cracks us open, shakes us out of our familiar tread, and challenges us to reconsolidate a sense of ourselves along new, more expansive lines. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we are all repeatedly faced with chances to become initiated into our life’s secret purpose. Life presents us with myriad opportunities to journey down the well and prove ourselves for the chance to return with the treasure of greater psychological wholeness. Any challenging experience has the potential to cast us into our own depths, but motherhood may be the life experience most effective at doing so.

Questions for Reflection for Journey to the Source

1. Initiations always involve an ordeal that tests us, breaks us open, and reveals to us our destiny. Even if we don't go through formal rites of initiation, life will initiate us. What in your life has served as an initiation?
2. Imagine you are the stepmother who hates her stepdaughter so much that she is always looking for ways to get rid of her. Is there anything in your life that you have such feelings toward? What in your life do you sometimes wish you could throw down a well? Perhaps there is an aspect of yourself that you despise this much? Are there times you treat a part of yourself worse than a servant?
3. The kind daughter must sit at the edge of the well and try to spin coarse flax, which breaks easily. Where in your life are you in a precarious situation such as this? Where have you been set an impossible task?
4. As the kind girl tries to spin, the thread keeps breaking. Sometimes we try and try to get things going in some aspect of our lives without success. When in your life was this true for you?
5. The kind daughter is thrown into the dark depths without warning. This must have been very frightening. She likely did not know whether she would survive the fall, and she certainly didn't know what awaited her at the bottom. When in your life have you faced a terrifying unknown?
6. When have you treated your inner life like the kind daughter? Perhaps you allowed yourself to rest when you felt tired or otherwise listened to what your body was trying to tell you. Maybe you wrote down your dreams or heeded your intuition.

7. When have you treated your inner life like the lazy daughter? Maybe you ignored messages from your unconscious about times when you felt tired or depleted and forced yourself to push through anyway. Maybe you took for granted the gifts of the unconscious, such as dreams or moods.

8. Which casket have you chosen? Describe a time recently when you have chosen the equivalent of the small, black casket. Maybe you chose something that was less prestigious or showy but ultimately more gratifying. When in your life have you chosen the equivalent of the flashy red casket—something that was very impressive in a superficial way but destructive to your happiness or well-being in the end?