

## **Women of Wisdom**

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### **Introduction**

When I was 13 years old, my family moved from rural Michigan to inner city Detroit. It was the middle of the school year, I was in the seventh grade and it was 1950. I was immediately identified as a “hick,” I wore hightop boots instead of saddle shoes and, unlike the other kids, I had never ridden on a streetcar or swum in a swimming pool. The kids teased about everything from the way I talked to my wild, curly hair. I was relieved when school let out for the summer and determined to learn how to be a city kid. I managed to make friends with a few girls in my neighborhood and near the end of the summer three of us decided to form a gang. When school started again, four other girls and I had become the WW Gang. The meaning of WW—one of the many secrets shared by members only—was Women of Wisdom. As the school year progressed our little group grew to about nine girls and we got tougher and more daring. By the ninth grade WW was very popular and we even had a few “rumbles” with girl gangs from other neighborhoods.

How we came up with the name Women of Wisdom is a mystery and why we called ourselves “women,” is beyond me. In my study of Jungian psychology and the Goddess, I came upon one possible explanation for this strange name for a girl gang.

According to Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes, a model of the ancient goddesses exists in the collective unconscious and can be activated in the consciousness of individuals. I suspect the Goddess of Wisdom inserted herself into my consciousness years ago and whispered the name “Women of Wisdom.” And I believe she has been guiding my life for a long time now as well as the lives of many other women. I am pleased to see so many women joining the W.W. club in the past decade. This year the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Women of Wisdom Conference in Women’s Spirituality is being held in Seattle. <sup>i</sup>

According to Christian theologian Beatrice Bruteau “The presence of the Goddess herself has never departed from her holy place in our consciousness, and now as we enter what many feel to be a “new age,” we sense that the Goddess is

somehow making her way back to us. But in just what guise is so far unclear.”<sup>ii</sup> And Merlin Stone, author of *When God Was A Woman*, agrees:

There is no question in my mind that the Goddess is reawakening. And as she rises, we learn more and more about what it is to be women. We have reclaimed role models of women as wise, courageous, creative at the highest levels, as healers and physicians, as architects and builders, as the inventors of written language and so much more. The ancient images of the Goddess have allowed us to reconstruct core concepts of the feminine principle that would not have been possible without knowing of them. ... This interest has grown primarily from within the women’s movement, as women began to question what kept us from doing what we really wanted to do.<sup>iii</sup>

Jungian psychology offers a useful map for exploring what is meant by the “return of the Goddess” and what this has to do with the developmental process of the female psyche today. One of Carl Jung’s greatest contributions is the notion of the collective unconscious and the continual evolution of human consciousness. According to Jung, none of our personal experiences cease to exist. Those experiences that do not make it into the conscious level or are forgotten or repressed, for whatever reason, are stored in the personal unconscious. However, in addition to the personal unconscious there is a portion of the human psyche, which is not dependent upon personal experience at all. The individual is linked, not only with the past events of this lifetime, through her personal unconscious but also with the past of the species and before that with the whole of the organic and conscious evolution, through the collective unconscious.<sup>iv</sup>

The contents of the collective unconscious are called *archetypes*. The word ‘archetype’ means an original model after which other similar things are patterned. According to Jung, “There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic constitution, not in the forms of images filled with content, but at first only as *forms without content*, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action.”<sup>v</sup>

It is very important for a correct understanding of Jung’s theory of archetypes that archetypes are not to be regarded as fully developed pictures in the mind. They

are more like outlines or patterns that need filling in. “A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it becomes conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience.”<sup>vi</sup>

The archetypes are inherent patterns or predispositions in the human psyche. The difference between archetypal patterns and activated archetypes may be compared to “blueprints” in seeds. Growth from seeds depends on the conditions of the soil and the climate, the presence or absence of certain nutrients and loving care or neglect of a gardener. Under optimal conditions, the full potential in the seed is realized.

The Goddess or the feminine principle<sup>vii</sup> exists as an archetype in the collective unconscious. It can be activated in individual women and when enough of us grow into our full potential, the feminine consciousness of the collective will awaken. This is what is meant by the return of the Goddess. The question is, how is this archetype to be activated? How can we as women activate that guiding pattern at the core of our being?

### **The Feminine Principle**

The stories that make up the myths of the ancient world contain the patterns of human becoming. All of the world mythologies are rich in stories of goddesses but in order to understand their relevance to our lives today we need to read these stories by shifting levels, from the letter of the word to the inner meaning. The pattern and structure of the feminine psyche or soul is revealed through an esoteric understanding of the ancient goddesses. Once we learn to recognize the patterns of our own developmental process we become more conscious of the potentials within us -- potentials that, once tapped, are sources of spirituality, wisdom, compassion, and action. Activating archetypes long abandoned to the collective unconscious can energize us and give us a sense of meaning and authenticity.<sup>viii</sup>

When the goddesses and their attributes were assimilated, trivialized, and demonized, at the beginning of the patriarchal era, women had nothing to identify with. In order to participate in the return of the Goddess and fully embody the

wisewoman archetype we need, according to Jean Bolen, “to usher in another round of consciousness-raising, this time to challenge negative stereotypes of older women and understand the relationship between the fate of goddesses and the treatment of women, the effect of the absence of a sacred feminine on women’s spirituality, and the theological basis of patriarchy.”<sup>ix</sup>

The Great Goddess in all her many aspects was once part of myth and religion. She literally embodied the Feminine Principle. The Great Goddess was not an abstraction but was visible in the world of nature and the lives of individual women. With the development of patriarchal culture, the climate was no longer suitable for the continued growth and maturation of the Goddess in this world and she withdrew into the background. In Jungian terms, the feminine archetypes became less conscious, less active, and became latent patterns in the collective unconscious. These latent patterns are waiting to be reimagined and made a conscious part of ourselves.

Archetypes are like riverbeds, which dry up when the water deserts them, but which it can find again at any time. An archetype is like an old watercourse along which the water of life flowed for centuries, digging a deep channel for itself. The longer it has flowed in this channel the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return to its old bed.<sup>x</sup>

The feminine principle has been recognized by humanity in various aspects. In ancient times she was the source of life, the sustainer, the healer, the enlightener, the one who receives us in death, and the giver of immortality. She has been sought after as the inspiration of love, the image of beauty, and the object of desire. She has been subordinated to male divinities, relegated to a position of helpmate, the relative and supporting role appropriate to a secondary and derived being. In this guise she easily became the scapegoat for the ills and evils of humanity, the personification of temptation, sensuality, and sin. Her essence has even been reduced to passivity, irrationality, and darkness. And then redeemed by a positive appreciation of the dark, the irrational, and the unconscious which is said to be a necessary complement to the light, the rational, and the conscious.<sup>xi</sup>

These descriptions, characterizations, and projections do not get to the

underlying meaning of the feminine principle. As the archetype makes its way into consciousness it is colored and shaped by the experiences of the culture in which the conscious individual lives. But the archetype itself is timeless. The root meaning or the identifying quality of the feminine or femininity is not a set of characteristics, qualities, or behaviors but a process of transformation or initiation.

Long before Christian theologians articulated the divine as the holy trinity of father, son, and holy spirit, many Western cultures worshipped the Great Goddess in triple form usually designated as Maiden, Mother, and Crone. Although there are similarities in these two triune expressions of the divine, unlike the Christian trinity, the triple goddess functions as a symbol of the divine that reflects women's experience in a way that the father-son-holy spirit triad emphatically does not.<sup>xii</sup>

## **Myth**

The world's mythologies are filled with triple goddess images, but perhaps the most familiar in the West is the story of Demeter and Persephone. This myth served as the basis for initiation rites of Eleusis. Well established by the seventh or sixth century BCE, the Eleusianian Mysteries were for a thousand years the center of inner religious life.<sup>xiii</sup>

Although this story about the separation and reunion of Mother and daughter that forms the basis for the mysteries is said to date back to Neolithic times<sup>xiv</sup> it was first put into alphabetic writing by Homer in the seventh century BCE, well into the patriarchal era. According to Homer's version, Persephone is out gathering flowers with her companions when Hades appears and carries her off to the Underworld. Persephone screams but the only one to hear her is Hekate. Persephone's Mother, Demeter, who is responsible for the fruitfulness of the earth, is filled with grief and stops being fruitful. When Demeter learns that Persephone has been abducted by Hades, her grief turns to anger. She leaves Olympus and wanders in disguise among people seeking her daughter. The crops fail and earth becomes barren. Eventually Demeter turns to Hekate who consoles Demeter and advises her to seek the truth. Demeter goes to the Sun who tells her that Persephone is in the Underworld. Hekate

helps her find the “way down” to that realm where Demeter visits her daughter who is called Kore in the Underworld. As Demeter and Persephone make their way home their passage is lit by the torch of Hekate. Since Kore has eaten a seed of the pomegranate (fruit of the Underworld), she is forced by cosmic law to return to the Underworld for a third portion of each year. While Kore dwells in the Underworld, Demeter decrees that nothing on earth can thrive.

Persephone does not return the same as when she went, a young girl gathering flowers, she returns as a Queen laden with the riches of the Underworld. Hekate greets Persephone/Kore with much affection. In Homer’s account, this part of the story ends with the rather mysterious statement, “And from that day on that lady (Hekate) precedes and follows Persephone.”

Some feminist scholars <sup>xv</sup> suggest that there was very likely an earlier, pre-patriarchal version of this myth in which Persephone chooses of her own volition to enter the Underworld rather than being abducted by Hades. This allows for an analysis of the Goddess archetype as it functions independently of patriarchal interpretations. Whether the Underworld journey is undertaken as a result of abduction or personal choice, the myth can serve a healing function for women who have either ventured of their own accord to the deepest recesses of their own consciousness or to the darkest realm of society, or who have been traumatically transported to that condition through acts of violence or abuse condoned by patriarchy. <sup>xvi</sup>

Interpretations of this ancient story as descriptive of the development of the feminine psyche and the initiation into feminine mysteries usually focus on three aspects of the Goddess archetype: the Maiden (Kore), Mother (Demeter), and Crone (Hekate). But what happened to the girl gathering flowers with her “companions”?

The Nymph. Persephone’s companions are often referred to as “Nymphs” or nature spirits. Persephone herself is the daughter of earth and thus is a nature spirit. The Nymph could be considered the first stage in the human evolution of spirit into matter—the Nymph is the “soul’s chrysalis of flesh and matter.” <sup>xvii</sup> Interestingly, the term ‘Nymph’ also refers to the young of an insect undergoing metamorphosis. <sup>xviii</sup> Persephone is a Nymph ready for the metamorphic journey to the

Underworld and back.

If we look at this story as a map of the process of feminine psychic development, Persephone as Nymph is the first stage in the process. Today we might say she is our psychic or spiritual “inner child.” She is an instinctual creature, playful and sensual. As a psychic structure, the Nymph bridges this life and what came before – in the same way the Nymph phase of the insects' metamorphic process is the bridge between two different biological structures. She is the structure, which gives us access to information gathered by our ancestors useful to our basic functioning in this lifetime. Just as the Goddess is both immanent and transcendent, the Nymph belongs to the world of spirit and also is a creature of Earth. This aspect of our psyches gives us the possibility of profound union with nature. As spirits of nature, the “Nymphs” were believed to embed their souls forever in certain parts of the natural world: there were water Nymphs, tree Nymphs, mountain Nymphs, and Nymphs who dwelt in the earth, the sea, or Fairyland.<sup>xix</sup> The activation of this aspect of the Goddess archetype may be part of the impetus for ecological feminism.

The Maiden. When Persephone, the Nymph, is separated from her mother and enters the Underworld, which is also called Hades, she is called Kore. The word Kore in Greek means “Maiden” and ‘Hades’ comes from a Greek root means “hidden,” “unseen,” or “unknown.” Two important psychic processes are a work here. First there is the separation and reunion of Mother and daughter. Secondly there is the trip into a hidden and unknown world.

The separation of Mother and daughter and their reunion is a cosmic or collective event, not only a personal experience. In the myth the separation creates the change of seasons – prior to Persephone’s journey there was only growth and renewal. This cosmic event signals a collective shift in consciousness much like the story of the Garden of Eden.

In ancient times becoming a Maiden is an initiation into the “Blood Mysteries.” The Nymph becomes a Maiden when she has her first menstrual period. The Blood Mysteries are part of a world still deeply in touch with nature, a correspondence between phases of the moon and the Nymph, Maiden, Mother, and Crone can also be made. In modern times we tend to focus more on the emotional and

mental aspects of this developmental phase we call adolescence although the physical level can never be ignored. This correspondence between our biology and our consciousness does not limit what we can do physically or how well we think, but it does give us the potential for a profound relationship with nature and the cosmos.

The Nymph comes into life and separates from the Mother, the Great Goddess, the source of all life. Now, as an independent agent, she is a Maiden, on her own in an unknown world. In modern terms, the Maiden aspect of our psyche emerges when we began to differentiate, become individuals, make boundaries, and learn to focus our attention.

In psychological language the Underworld refers to the collective unconscious, “The living matrix of all our unconscious and conscious functionings, the essential structural basis of all our psychic life.”<sup>xx</sup> It is here we first meet Wisdom. The journey to the Underworld is a journey into the collective wisdom of humanity. This is represented in the myth by the treasures Kore brings with her when she returns and is reunited with Demeter, her own Mother aspect. What was once hidden is brought to the light of consciousness and integrated. When Demeter and Persephone are reunited they act as one Goddess. In many representations of them, it is difficult to tell them apart. Demeter and Persephone represent aspects of a single divinity and phases in the developmental process of individual women. After the Maiden returns from the Underworld it is said that now “Hekate precedes and follows her.” By going into the Underworld, the collective unconscious, the individual gains access to the wisdom which came before and which will guide her from now on. By integrating the three aspects of Nymph, Maiden, and Mother, the Crone or wisewoman archetype is activated.

Mother. In the context of the Blood Mysteries, the Mother aspect is the giver of biological life. As an aspect of the Goddess archetype, it is the potential for mental and spiritual creativity as well as biological creation. The Mother aspect is about relationship and connection - empathy, caring, and creativity. The Mother Goddess is also the love Goddess and the Goddess of the erotic.

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane; it is a source of power and information within our lives. As women, we have been taught by the

male world to distrust that power which arises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge.<sup>xxi</sup>

This is the "Mother" aspect in her fullest sense - our most profoundly creative source. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.<sup>xxii</sup>

Crone. In the Blood Mysteries, the Crone is the postmenopausal woman. It was once thought that when a woman was pregnant she retained her blood within her body to make a baby and when she ceased menstruation she retained her blood to make wisdom.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Crone is the wisewoman archetype. In the story of Demeter and Persephone, Hekate gives advice and lights the way. The Crone is not often seen or personified except in the old woman but is always the way-shower and mid-wife for the developing feminine consciousness. Although the activation of the wisewoman archetype is usually associated with the postmenopausal years of a women's life, her wisdom is always available. Jean Bolen reports that some children who were neglected or suffered abuse drew solace and wisdom from an inner source. "As a result, they did not identify with their oppressors and so did not grow up to become like the adults who neglected or abused them. Drawing from wisdom beyond their years, they could survive such childhoods without a loss of soul."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Becoming a wisewoman or a Crone is not something that just happens to a woman when she reaches a certain age. As we have seen, the feminine principle is not a static quality or essence but a process of growth and integration. According to Ken Wilber, the developmental process is always one of becoming increasingly more whole. The psyche – like the cosmos at large – is many-layered, composed of successively "higher-order" wholes. Our growth, from infancy to adulthood, is a miniature version of cosmic evolution. Psychological growth or development in humans is simply a microcosmic reflection of universal growth on the whole, and has the same goal: the unfolding of ever more inclusive unities and integrations. "Very like the geological formation of the earth, psychological development proceeds, stratum-by-stratum, level-by-level, state by stage, with each successive level

superimposed upon its predecessor in such a way that it includes but transcends it.”

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Although the feminine developmental process is one of increasing wholeness and integration, it is not always so linear and neat. A woman, for example, could develop her Mother aspect at a young age before she has fully activated her Maiden aspect. Perhaps she took on responsibilities for her younger siblings when her own Mother died and didn't have the opportunity to become an independent "Maiden" until much later in life. Many of us have lost contact with our Nymph aspect, our "inner child," our ability to play and our connection to the natural world, but it is never too late to find her. We each develop and integrate in our own way.

The Crone aspect is always available to us and is itself always aiding in the integration process. The fully activated Crone archetype shows itself in the wisewoman's ability to access her Nymph, Maiden, and Mother aspects at will – she can be playful and independent and can access tremendous creative energies. A woman doesn't automatically become a Crone when she reaches a certain age. Becoming Crone is a conscious process and it is up to each woman when she enters her Croning.

## **Conclusion**

The myth of Demeter and Persephone provides us with an outline of the process of individuation or coming to wholeness in an individual woman and the "return" of the feminine principle in the collective. On the individual level there are many journeys to the Underworld and back. We face many challenges in our life, and when we make it through, we grow in depth and wisdom. The real meaning of the return of the feminine principle to the collective will be accomplished when enough women enter into the process of integration and wholeness. And when the generations unite bringing the energy of the feminine process into every aspect of the modern world. This means that in addition to electing women to positions of political power and putting women in leadership roles, the process of government, business, family, and all institutions must take into account the feminine principle in all decisions and

activities and include feminine wisdom in all of its aspects.

Jean Bolen suggests that the way to channel women's wisdom into the culture is by activating the archetype of the circle of wisewoman. "This circle is both a sacred dimension and embodies the collective wisdom of its members. ...When older women meet together in a wisewoman circle, they are reenacting what was lost when indigenous and goddess-worshipping cultures were conquered, and yet each circle is a new creation with unique possibilities."<sup>xxvi</sup> Wisewomen circles are central to what Bolen calls "Spiritual Feminism," the third wave of feminism, which she says is "gathering now in women's psyches. Its first visible sign is the growing number of grass-roots women's circles that have a sacred dimension."<sup>xxvii</sup> The next wave of feminism has to do with bringing women's wisdom and spirituality into the world.

I believe that in order to bring wisdom and spirituality into the world, old and young women must come together. The separation of the generations is antithetical to feminine becoming. It is part of the kinship pattern of patriarchy, and reflects the pattern of generations of fathers and sons – power is passed from father to son either through a system of nepotism or revolution. Historically, sons join together and revolt against the fathers in power and then their sons revolt against them and so on. We don't want to imitate this pattern. The emerging feminine consciousness will not be brought about by the separation of generations of women -- young women activists on the one hand and older women meeting in wisewomen circles on the other. It requires a reunion of mother and daughter, both within our own individual psyches and in the world.

Our spiritual activism can be the product of "myth-making" circles in which we identify the pattern of our lives by understanding life events in terms of universal archetypal patterns. We can use the developmental model described above and identify the functioning of the Nymph, Maiden, Mother and Crone in our own lives but we need to be open to the possibility of uncovering new patterns. These phases are based on a story told originally thousands of years ago, which may provide guidelines for the telling of our own stories but human consciousness has evolved through a patriarchal era and the structure of our consciousness has evolved from the time of the Goddess. The most important thing is for us to tell our own stories and

uncover our own patterns. It's likely that each woman's pattern has some of the elements of the story of Demeter and Persephone but there will be many variations and novelties. We each come to wholeness in our own way and as we do we bring our wisdom and spirituality into the world. Once we learn to recognize the patterns of our own developmental process we become more conscious of our sources of spirituality, wisdom, compassion, and action.

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- <sup>i</sup> Presented by the Women of Wisdom Foundation of Seattle Washington, available on line at <http://www.womenofwisdom.org>; Internet.
- <sup>ii</sup> Beatrice Bruteau, "The Unknown Goddess," in *The Goddess Re-Awakening: The Feminine Principle Today* (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1989), 68.
- <sup>iii</sup> Merlin Stone, introduction to *The Goddess Re-Awakening: The Feminine Principle Today* by Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1989), 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> Calvin Hall and Vernon J. Norby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 39.
- <sup>v</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Collected Works Volume 9I*, page 48, quoted in Calvin Hall and Vernon J. Norby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 42.
- <sup>vi</sup> Calvin Hall and Vernon J. Norby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 42.
- <sup>vii</sup> I use this term cautiously. By a 'principle' I do not mean something static or fixed and 'feminine' does not refer to a list of qualities supposed to be exhibited by female persons. Rather, I hope to show that the feminine principle refers to a developmental process.
- <sup>viii</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses In Older Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), ix.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>x</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Civilization in Transition*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler; translated by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 1.
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- <sup>xii</sup> Victoria Weinstein, *Persephone's Underworld Journey: Reclaiming A Resurrection Narrative for Women* (Presented at the Conference on Female Spirituality, York University, Ontario, March, 1996), available at <http://www.w7.com/inovill/crone/index.htm>; Internet.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Elinor Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 143.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Perhaps as long ago as 5000 BCE.
- <sup>xv</sup> See Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 98-101, and Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 412-13.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Victoria Weinstein, *Persephone's Underworld Journey: Reclaiming A Resurrection Narrative for Women* (Presented at the Conference on Female Spirituality, York University, Ontario, March, 1996), available from <http://www.w7.com/inovill/crone/index.htm>; Internet.
- <sup>xvii</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of Silence* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1992), 3
- <sup>xviii</sup> *The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1966), s.v. "nymph."
- <sup>xix</sup> Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 732.
- <sup>xx</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *Number and Time* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 14.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 59.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses In Older Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xi
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project* (Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), 2.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses In Older Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 179.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.