

## *The Ravaged Goddess*

This is the story of a mother and a daughter. This is the story of the mother goddess, Demeter, and the daughter, Kore, the maiden of the Springtime. It is an ancient tale, told and celebrated for 20000 unbroken years in the town of Eleusis in Greece, home of the Eleusynian Mysteries. The story tells how the maiden goddess, Kore, was wrenched from the safety of her world and her mother's love, by a dark god, Hades, and taken to the underworld, his world, to become queen Persephone. It is a story of a heart-broken but ultimately triumphant Great Goddess, who had to bargain and compromise and play hardball with the patriarchy, to procure her daughter's safe passage home. It may even be a love story, for we are never told how Persephone felt, and how she made her peace with her winters as a wife, where she, the maiden goddess of new growth, annually became the red queen of death. There are intimations that she may have gone there voluntarily, and set it up so that she would not have to tell her mother. There were other rumors that, once there, she found certain things to like. We are not sure, and that makes us very uncomfortable.

Gathered together on the knife's edge that cuts between Dark and Light, we can see new life budding and rising from Her body. We have the power to remember. We can awaken as though from a long sleep. We can shake the cobwebs of patriarchy from our heads. And like Persephone emerging from Hades, we can return. But how? And as whom? Who did the maiden goddess become in those long months underground, where every form breaks down? How does the daughter return to the mother after she has been ravaged?

This is not a pretty or an easy story for feminists. It is a story of rape and/or seduction, and of collusion with the oppressor. It reflects many centuries of women's experience. The Greeks myths are interesting to us not because they hold some essential truth, but because our culture is the descendent of patriarchal Greek culture. Its stories and values

live in our social arrangements, our institutions, our religious symbols, and in our own psyches, shaped as they are by patriarchal acculturation patterns.i

This myth, which was probably originally redacted to justify and mirror the increasing rule of the fathers and the diminished role of the Grain Motherii, is not just an archaic tale told of some ancient time and place. It is archetypal. It is still happening today. It goes on and on. We cannot just ignore these stories called myths. They have a hold on us, and we ignore them at our peril. As soon as our heads are turned, they reach up and pull us down into their depths, just as Hades grabbed Persephone . . .but I get ahead of myself.

Archetypes are the thought forms deep in the culture's unconscious that hold us by the throat and set the patterns of our lives. We dare not step over them in our post-modern hubris. We need the courage to enter into mythic time and space to reclaim and redeem the old archetypes and symbols, and transform them, in order to free ourselves from their legacy.

There is a legacy to this story that we still live out. The story of Persephone is our story. The saga of the archetypal Mother and daughter torn from one another, continues today. We are all Persephone. We have all been torn from our Mother. We have all been raped and broken. You remember.

*“Six lifetimes ago I was my Mother’s Daughter,  
A free Earth Goddess roaming free fields  
Rape subdued me, starvation broke me.  
I lost the fruits of the Earth for six blood-sweet seeds. . .iii*

How did it begin? An innocent walk with friends to pick wildflowers. We were young and very full of ourselves. The whole world bloomed under our eyes. Perhaps we thought we didn’t need our Mother. Didn't we know everything? We were innocent and bold, like the spring, broadcasting fragrant invitations at random, and not quite knowing what to do with the responses when they came, as of course they did. It seemed, as it often does to

young girls, that nothing could harm us. So Kore wandered away from her friends. In those days, we were all invincible.

Kore was feeling her oats. Why not?? She was young and beautiful, and the blossoming world belonged to her.

Then HE arrived. Maybe he was on a motorcycle, wearing black leather, or was it tight jeans, that showed every inch of his well-developed, male body. Her maiden heart started beating, He was dark and mysterious. He was very powerful. His attention sent thrills of fear and excitement up her spine. Her pheromones started pumping, her hormones started racing. He was hot! Unfortunately, this man had not been trained in the nuances of courtship. He was from a different place. He was from the underworld, hewn of rougher stuff. He did not play by the rules she knew, her mother's rules of behavior.

Perhaps he was a little shy, too, for all his power, making him all the more appealing. Probably Kore thought she could socialize him. He had a fancy, fast chariot, young girls are impressed with such things. I admit it, we were fascinated. He offered her exotic flowers. He offered her a ride. She was flattered. She was excited. Right up to the moment that the ground opened and swallowed her, the thought she could run away or say change her mind.

We didn't realize what we were getting into, how could we? Maybe we thought we'd show our mother. Or that we could change him. He seemed to need us to bring sweetness and light into his dreary bachelor world.

Next thing Kore knew she was in the underworld, his world, with no hope of escape, separated from everything she knew and loved.

Homer tells us Hades had made a deal with Zeus, her father, in the back room of course, for the use of her body and the power of her spirit. He needed her to regenerate life from death, in exchange for . . . what? Money? Power? Survival? We were never told.

We were taken far away from our Mother, our sisters, our community.

You remember. What was YOUR story? How did the loss of innocence happen to you?  
Bind your thread to Persephone. When was the moment? What happened?

When Demeter, our Mother, found out her precious only daughter was gone, she was inconsolable. She roamed the Earth searching for someone who could tell her where her beloved daughter had gone. She had counted on her for so many things, and she had such dreams for her, none of which included being queen of a dark, shadowy realm! But everyone was afraid to tell Demeter the truth. Everyone was afraid to speak. Hades was fearsome! He had such power! When someone who had seen what happened finally spoke, it was to tell Her that Hades was a fitting husband! Imagine!

We know the power of the patriarchal gods and authorities. There is often reason to be fearful. What does it take to say what we saw? Do we keep silent because we fear reprisals? When we speak, do we justify and rationalize injustice and oppression?

Demeter became despondent. The Grain Mother left her post. There was no harvest for a long time. Hence, there were no sacrifices to the gods, who were becoming hungry. Sheaves of wheat did not ripen in the summer sun. Food supplies dwindled, people starved. "Until I have my daughter back," she said, "nothing will grow. Let them eat snow!" The snow fell and fell, while Demeter, disguised as an ugly old woman, laid low in Her temple, waiting for Zeus to be hungry enough to cut a deal.

What would it take for Demeter to allow the harvest again? Life was drawing to a halt without her playing her role. Other gods came to her to appeal to her sympathies. They offered her a better place in the pantheon, more status. She stonewalled them. She would accept her daughter and her daughter only. Never mind that no one ever came back from Hades. They would just have to work that out. Only her beautiful daughter, now called Persephone, could make things grow again. They would have to return the maiden to her mother to get the harvest. Non-negotiable demand.

While all this was happening on Olympus, Persephone disappeared into the underworld for a long time. A season? A year? Five thousand years? We don't know. There is no time in love or death, and this was both. Persephone was in the throes of discovering her womanhood. Hades was taking her deep into the dark realm where, in the words of Diane Di Prima,

*" . . .black fire shapes the walls  
And ecstasy screams through unrelenting winter  
"My love is there.  
Not on this softened earth.  
Not in the life I quicken.  
But in the bowels of night where all my warmth  
Is lost in vast darkness of galactic air."*

We lose our identity, our form, in both love and death. In French orgasm is called "the little death," This one went on for eternity. Maybe it was only an instant. It was so long that it became her world. It became normal. She became someone different. Spring green no longer draped her shoulders. We see her robed in red now, stained by the blood of pomegranates.

They could not return a maiden to Demeter because Persephone was no longer a maiden. She had become a part of this dark world. She had partaken of its fruits. She had eaten --- some say three, others say six--pomegranate seeds, which stained her red as blood. Kore had lost her girlish innocence in the underworld and had become Persephone, wife and queen of Hades. She ate the food that was available to her---pomegranate seeds, the fruit of sexual love and the blood of suffering, of initiation, kept her alive, even while keeping her bound.

Song: *" I ate six seeds that stained me red as blood, six blood-sweet seeds, that stained me red as blood,*

*And now I'm waiting through the passage of a long, dark winter.  
What are six seeds that I should suffer so?"*

Persephone had suffered in the underworld of love. Whatever had happened down there, had happened, and it couldn't be undone. She was no longer sure that she wanted to return to the world above, the world in which she was the eternal maiden, her mother's daughter. She was no longer sure that she could. She was a woman now. She had felt a woman's joy and suffered a woman's pain. If she returned at all, she would have to return on different terms, and so do we.

Finally Hermes took it on to negotiate a settlement between Demeter and Zeus. When things got bad enough, the other gods had petitioned Hecate, Demeter's mother, Kore's grandmother, herself the death crone, who presumably had some influence in the underworld. I think Hecate went to Hermes, the messenger between the worlds, who went to Zeus, the big daddy. Now Zeus had not always been such a big deal. He was an invader god, while Demeter was indigenous. But Zeus had usurped most of the power in the Greek pantheon by now, and was not used to having it questioned, except occasionally by Hera, his wife.

Demeter had been the original deity in these parts, though, and she still had some clout. The people still loved her. Zeus could do all sorts of tricks with politics. But some things he could not do. He could not make things grow. Only Demeter and Kore could do that. And Demeter would not budge without her daughter. So there was considerable pressure on him to make a deal to set Persephone free, so that everybody could eat. (It's the economy, stupid!)

Zeus had not expected to have to eat crow for this. He was just making his cousin, Hades, happy---a bit of political patronage to have things below run more smoothly. He didn't think anyone else would notice or care. After all--just one little maiden goddess---there were plenty more where she came from. Never mind that she was his daughter. That merely meant that he could do as he pleased with her. Besides, he had lots of daughters--

there are legends far and wide about Zeus fathering many children. His royal seed was spread pretty thin.

Well, Zeus had calculated wrong, and now he was going to have to deal. He was going to have to find some way to make things right or he would face starvation and possibly a major insurrection on his shift. Still, there were laws to be observed. He could not just break the laws of nature, and the laws of the underworld by decree. He had to find some loophole. So he sent Hermes down to deal with Hades and to find out if Persephone had consumed anything in the underworld, in which case, she would be bound by her having taken its fruits into herself. As it turned out, as we know, she had eaten the pomegranate seeds. So it was agreed that she would stay in the underworld one month for every seed she had eaten. And hence during the months of winter nothing grows. Demeter stops harvesting grain, and life decays to regenerate itself, as Kore becomes Persephone with Hades. Thus every year Persephone returns to Hades, and the world experiences winter.

The story tells us that ever since that occurrence, which is now, at spring equinox, Persephone is permitted to climb the long staircase home, to rejoin her mother, and to bloom again with the spring flowers.

*“ . . . & in the spring  
Persephone remembers Hades  
relives her winter sojourn.  
she walks moaning over dry & stony fields; her tears  
Raise primroses.  
Diane di Prima, Loba*

Now here is our question: How does the daughter return to the mother after she has been ravaged? Answer: As a peer. The daughter is no longer a maiden, an innocent. The mother never was. Life ravages us every one. None of us are maidens any longer. None of us can return to a former age of innocence after suffering the ravages of either oppression or love. Regeneration is not a return to innocence, but a redemption of it. How do we renew ourselves when we are no longer innocent of suffering, of hurt, of betrayal, even of collusion?

And that is what I want to talk about. Because you can be sure that their conversation is not the same. They are comparing stories. They are swapping secrets. They are initiates. Persephone is no longer a child, although she will always remain a daughter. There is a different relationship available to her with her mother.

And there is a different relationship available to us as well, now as adult women in the world. Remember, we are all Persephone, all daughters of the Goddess, all having passed some time in the underworld of love and oppression. We cannot return to an earlier age of innocence, before patriarchy, a world before time, when life was simple and cyclical. We have entered history. We have been broken and raped. We have loved. We have experienced agonies and ecstasies. We are educated and literate in linear thought and analysis. We have been initiated. And we have emerged as adult women, as generative women, as co-creators with the Goddess. We are no longer in a parent/child relationship to the divine, and that is the big change that we are moving into. It is time to give up a child's relationship to the Goddess, resisting her, resenting her, hoping that she will fix things, as a child relates to a mother.

All of that is over. It is time to become co-creators with the Goddess now. Women have to be responsible for working and creating WITH her, for generating the future of life on this planet for the next millennium. It is the time of the passage of the daughters into adulthood, not just to become mothers, but to become co-creators of history. This is not merely the return of the divine feminine we are witnessing, it is the birth of the generative feminine, fully conscious and fully responsible, with mind and heart and soul and body, in union with the mother.

*"one 'life' is not more real than the other  
not in 'deflowering' do we come  
into bloom; we have been always*

*there at the fluid boundary of Hades*



*we spring continuously into life and death  
this is the province of the co-emergent mother  
this is the daughter, sixteen, wrathful and ready*

*nor is the daughter separate from the mother  
fruit within fruit; a sweetness  
known only at the source where the fountain divides/becomes itself  
where fruit & seed & flower dance equally  
exchanging shapes      exchanging essences*

*there is no knife can sever me from her  
where I go down to bleed, to birth, to die*

(Diane Di Prima, Persephone: Reprise)

The redemption of the daughter lies in co-creation with the mother. In that co-creation lies the redemption of the world.

*I lost the fruits of the Earth for six blood-sweet seeds.*

*But now I am rising from darkness and despair.*

*Like the Phoenix from flame, Like Aphrodite from foam*

*I am rising from the Earth green as the spring, and singing;*

*I have dwelt in the land of the dead, yet still I live.*

*I have ruled in Hell, yet still I am divine.*

*I was locked in the underworld of mad civilizations.*

*I am overcoming it.*

*I am bursting the twigs,*

*swelling the buds,*

*unraveling the petals.*

*I am again my Mother's daughter*

*A free Earth Goddess, roaming free fields.<sup>iv</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> Chodorow, Nancy, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," reprinted in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, ed. Helene P. Foley, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994.

<sup>ii</sup> Foley, Helene P. "Gender Conflict and the Cosmological Tradition," pp. 112-117, *ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Cerridwen Fallingstar, "Persephone Returns," reprinted from *Lesbian Tides Journal*, Spring 1978

<sup>iv</sup> Cerridwen Fallingstar, *op. cit.*