

Demeter and Persephone as *Temenos*: A Perspective of Understanding Postpartum Depression

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Abstract

Bringing life into the world is an awe inspiring endeavor. Few walk away from the experience unchanged. Yet, the transformation of the feminine body mirrors the transformation of the feminine psyche, what occurs physically also occurs instinctually. One does not develop without affecting the other. Often these ripples of change can tear open the psyche causing a loss of self that is labeled as postpartum depression, anxiety, or depression. This article explores a postpartum loss of self and the personal experience of postpartum depression through the myth of Demeter and Persephone. There is an unaided search for meaning in motherhood that is explored in this article through myth. It aims to pursue a deeper understanding of women through a conversation of the feminine soul.

Keywords

Demeter, Persephone, postpartum depression, motherhood, women's studies, mothers groups

“Once you shave your legs, you can not go back.” Wise words spoken from a knowing mother watching her daughter “lingering on the borders of Hades [...]” (Jung and Kerényi 108). Many events in life hold this truth - the death of a loved one, the submission of our body to the pleasure of another, the birth of a child. Events such as these alter us. And though the decision to descend is sometimes our own, the descent never feels completely willing. “The ego still yearns for the status quo, but further down the price has been paid, and we can't go back” (Luke 195). We can simply succumb, falling into the cocoon of metamorphosis to arise anew, into a deeper understanding of ourselves.

The loudest voice of postpartum depression is infanticide. A mother's destruction of her own bloodline is a horrific loss in American society. Rare occurrences such as these are given a great deal of attention, while little attention is given to the whisper of self-destruction. Infanticide's silent sister is the destruction of the mother from within. An exploration into the experience of postpartum depression through the myth of Demeter and Persephone, alongside the archetypal images of the Great Mother and the Kore, could introduce an additional perspective for understanding postpartum depression, and perhaps offer some source of healing. For often when we encounter an archetypal image, a deep

root into our psyche, the energy we source can manifest “in anxiety, in manic and depressive states, and in the feeling that the ego is being overpowered” (Neumann 3). According to C.G. Jung, when we encounter the “psychic organ” of the archetype, “the most we can do is to *dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress” (Jung and Kerényi 79). And to do this we fall into the myth, dance with the archetypal images, and internalize them until their story becomes our story as well. Christine Downing so beautifully states that “truly to know these myths means recognizing ourselves within them. One learns about myth from myth—from the discovery of what it means to live a myth” (Downing, *Goddess* 26).

A Story of Postpartum Depression

The earth stood still in the arms of my mother. Rocking to the rhythm of a Navajo chant, circled in the earthly scent of coffee, listening to the beat of her eternal heart - I have known the love of a mother. As I stepped into the sacred space of motherhood, I envisioned myself as a mother through my own mother. I marveled at the instincts of my body in the creation of this child. The tightness of my belly, the swelling of my breasts, the separation of my pelvis in preparation for birth all felt so natural and primal. However, no amount of Lamaze classes, *What to Expect When You Are Expecting* research, or birth-plan preparation could prepare me for my encounter with the chthonic creatrix. The spiral of postpartum depression seized me as the “sharp grief seized [Demeter’s] heart, and she tore the veil on her ambrosial hair with her own hands” (Foley 4).

A recent meta-analysis of multiple studies found that 15% of women struggle with postpartum depression, making it “the most frequent form of maternal morbidity following delivery” (Letourneau et al 345). There is a wide definition of postpartum depression and diagnosis is a struggle. Despite the research available, postpartum depression and its violence is silently prevalent. Letourneau states further, “Factors contributing to the symptoms of postpartum depression are low self-esteem, inability to cope, feelings of incompetence and loss of self, and social isolation” (346). Often mothers cannot sleep and struggle with indecisiveness and lack of concentration. There is also a strong sense of guilt felt by postpartum mothers, for this is supposed to be a happy time and a mother should be happy. And I was happy for this child lying in my arms, but on a deeper level, I was in awe of him and of me. My ability to sustain life, to produce milk and to create such a creature placed me in a numinous womb of my own, and I was drowning in the power of it. I could not function. On one spring evening while watching my newborn sleep, I fell to my knees convulsing in tears, telling my husband that creating this child was my entire reason for living. I wanted nothing but this child and I could not reconcile this obsession with the working responsibilities of my current world.

Through worried eyes, my mother asked me to go to the doctor. By the next day I sat in a cold sterile room surrounded by the symbiotic sounds of ultrasound heartbeats and piercing infant cries causing my milk to let down. The OB/GYN’s calm eye, ever searching for the madness within, observed my sunken

face, milk-stained clothes and disheveled hair. She handed me a small business card that led me to the woman who would diagnose me with postpartum depression.

The time spent with the psychologist would be the unspoken place of Persephone to me, the going “down into mist darkness” (Boer 118) where the sacred fire of the underworld would transform me. The psychologist worked with me to begin interacting with others again and a paradox presented itself to me. Depression in my understanding is sadness, and I was not sad. In fact I was completely captivated with love for this child. For it was not so much that I did not want to go out into the world as I did not want to let anyone *in* to this sacred space I held with *my* child. Because this child was mine and mine alone and it was in these moments that I realized that somewhere along the way, this child had erased me.

The Paradox of Myth

Kerényi speaks of the paradox of the mythological idea. Myths hold a “structure [that] combines contradictions in perfect equilibrium” and can only be known by “immediate revelation” (Jung and Kerényi 104). This can be seen in Persephone, as she holds the tension of being the goddess of death in the underworld as well as the carrier of life to the upper world each spring. Through the darkness that Persephone holds so unwillingly I can begin to see “how much of motherhood is loss” (Downing, “Persephone” 222). For once a woman gives birth, she is forever known as mother. Though there is joy in new life, there is also loss, as the maiden she has known will never be the same. M. Esther Harding develops the idea of the in-one-selfness of the maiden in a way that personifies the rape of Persephone. To be a virgin is to belong to one-self. To lose that virginity means to have “no separate existence of [our] own” but rather to be defined through another be it our mother, our husband or lover, or our child (Harding 104). In light of this definition, the loss of self is a kind of abduction and “depression is a defense against experiencing the deep pain of loss of self” (Bushe 175). Society has no structure for navigating the heroic journey of motherhood. Loss of self is rarely acknowledged and the search for meaning in motherhood unaided.

On the other side of this coin, I want to sit in the paradox and honor the depression. I want to hold onto it and let it form me. “For if a woman is in resistance to any part of her own nature she cannot garner its values, but experiences only its negative aspect [...]” (Harding 74). Depression exists for a reason and the emotions are real. Our task is to listen to what is being said and sit in the crucible of change. Harding describes it as the dark moon:

So the woman also has an opportunity at the dark of the moon to get into touch with a deeper and more fundamental layer of her own psychic life. Symptoms of physical or emotional disturbance at that time, indicate that there is a conflict between her conscious attitude and the demands of her own nature, [...] because an inner

necessity is calling to her to introvert, to withdraw psychologically from the demands of her external life and live for a little while in the secret places of her own heart [...]. (74-75)

Pathology tells us that depression is a disease that needs to be cured and to be sure, left untreated there is a great risk of harm. However, perhaps a better understanding to the mysteries of women is not only through the clinical eye but also through the eye of the feminine psyche. The Demeter and Persephone myth ends in reconciliation. This is simply stated but the importance is immense. We experience the abduction, the loss of self, the madness, the fear and confusion, however, in the end, Persephone's return to Demeter is a "restoration of meaning" (Young-Eisendrath 215). To live in the myth means to understand this paradox. These experiences of being lost to ourselves are most evidently times we are being pulled into ourselves (Downing, *Goddess* 45). So how do we, as women, begin this reconciliation, this restoration of meaning in motherhood? Perhaps we begin by looking to the feminine images that have walked with us throughout human history. Perhaps their ancient story holds pieces of ours as well.

The Archetype of The Great Mother and The Kore

Erich Neumann describes an archetype as an "inward image at work in the human psyche" (3). Humans manifest images through our imagination in order to find meaning; however, we must remember that these apparitions are more than the image by which they are found. There is always a deeper psychic root to an archetype image, and that root often leads to a spiritual awakening. An archetype "demonstrate[s] its workings in the rites, myths, symbols of early man and also in the dreams, fantasies, and creative works of the sound as well as the sick man of our own day" (Neumann 3). History presents us with primordial beings living in the distant past and also existing in the present. Our psyche carries these archetypes always; they are not bound by time. Humans trip on archetypes like invisible furniture in an open room in order to reconcile "a dissociation having previously taken place between past and present" (Jung and Kerényi 81). These energies linger in the liminal space between the conscious and unconscious waiting to be utilized for the compensation of this imbalance or to manifest in some other physical form in the body.

Kerényi introduces an interesting idea regarding the archetypes found within the goddess. Through a comparative study of the Greek mythos, Kerényi begins to see the pattern of the triune nature of the goddess (112). The maidenhood of the Kore, the motherhood of the Great Mother, and Hecate, the goddess of the moon, all intermingle in a primordial dance that at times presents them as one all-powerful feminine only then to dissipate into separate images to be found in another story (113). Kerényi begins to see that these images are all aspects of one divine feminine.

Visioning the Demeter and Persephone myth in this way adds a layer of depth. In one telling of the story in Arcadia, Demeter is also raped (Jung and Kerényi 122). "This mythological elaboration *doubles* the rape, for the goddess

experience[s] the rape in *herself*, as Kore, and not in a separate girl” (123). Therefore the myth becomes a story of the individuation of a woman, of what it is like to be maiden and mother at the *same time*. The goddess manifests as the Kore and embodies “in-one-selfness.” She is abducted and raped in the belly of the earth. “The goddess [then] becomes a mother, rages and grieves over the Kore who was ravished *in her own being*, the Kore whom she immediately recovers, and in whom she gives birth to *herself* again” (123). The beauty in the paradox is that in losing ourselves women bring life and in life there is also death; so that the divine feminine holds immortality, a vitality that is tapped by all women who give birth.

The question that lingers is what implications do these archetypal images have for healing postpartum depression? The answer must begin with a conversation about women and the transformative mysteries of the Feminine. To start the process of healing, women must first start the process of understanding and that begins by honoring the numinous force living within us. “[...] Instinct can no longer be regarded as an asset to be exploited for the advantage of the personal life; instead it must be recognized that the personal I, the ego, must submit itself to the demands of the life force as to a divine being” (Harding 124). One of the hardest tasks of women is to let go, to fall into the abyss and suffer dismemberment, to understand that we cannot fully understand and yet ultimately experience what we cannot fully know. For as Kerényi shared, so much of being a woman is loss, letting go, and not understanding (Jung and Kerényi 123). At the same time being re-born, experiencing the power of giving life and the ethereal experience of sustaining that life, is a gift for the Feminine alone.

Perhaps Sylvia Brinton Perera states the point better, in that a story such as this “presents a model for health and for healing the split between above and below, between the collective ideal and the powerful bipolar, transformative, processual reality underlying the feminine wholeness pattern” (Perera 94). For women, life is process not vision. In mystery, we ebb and flow as the tides to the moon, so are we. To truly begin healing we must look to one another, to the divine Feminine within one another, and sit with Her.

Thesmophoria as a Means of Healing through the Love of Women

One of the first questions the psychologist asked me was if I was a member of a mothers’ group. I still remember how odd this question felt and the terrifying experience of my first play-date. I did not understand how being around other mothers would help me find myself. However, there was an immediate connection with these women who were, in actuality, in the abyss with me. All of us were torn between motherhood and working, all of us had lost the self we once knew and spoke of so fondly, and almost all of us were on anti-depressants. While our children destroyed our homes, we restored our souls. What I found in these women was solidarity, community and understanding. These women *reconstructed me*.

The Thesmophoria was an ancient woman’s ritual that took place in autumn. According to Jane Ellen Harrison the ritual is of “immemorial antiquity”

and Herodotus attributes the Thesmophoria rites to the Egyptians (Harrison 120-121). The rite lasted for three days and involved fasting, sacrifice, and mourning along with feasting, lewd jesting, and celebration (Foley 73). The three days entailed a re-enactment of the myth, though Harrison tells us that the myth “arose from the ritual, not the ritual from the myth” (Harrison 124). Most of the actions within the rite promoted agriculture as Demeter was the goddess of the grain, and honoring her would ensure continued life for the community. However, what is inherent in the understanding of being a woman is the cathartic nature that a gathering of women such as this can hold. It is impossible to grasp the spiritual nature except through experience. These women could heal through shared vulnerability, something that women of today struggle to give one another. At the foot of the goddess Demeter, they surrendered their rage and shared in her loss as in their own. In this symbiotic relationship with the goddess, women’s basic emotions were given divine meaning and became a sacred rite all their own (Downing, *Mysteries* 108). In the hallowed realm of the goddess, initiates could weave stories that are older than time and in return receive enlightenment and soulful meaning to the journey of life. As Harrison tells us, the Thesmophoria “has the blood of religion, or rather magic, in its veins” (137). The mysteries existed to connect women with the nature of the Feminine. There is an intrinsic need “[...] for the Goddess to teach [women] the *meaning* of the deep transformation of [their] being from daughter to mother to daughter again” (Luke 190). The need for rites such as these are even greater today as we search for meaning in motherhood in a patriarchal world instead of experiencing motherhood physically and intrinsically through the Feminine (190).

Temenos is a Greek word for “a piece of land separated and dedicated as a sacred space” (Crane). Rites of passage often took place on a *temenos*. C. G. Jung took the spirit of the concept of *temenos* and applied it to a sacred space within ourselves for the work of the soul. This inner sacred space is a place “in which an encounter with the unconscious can be had and where these unconscious contents can safely be brought into the light of consciousness” (*CW* 12, § 63). This is a hallowed realm where narratives of meaning can be written.

As new mothers we too need a sacred space for the work of soul. A place where we can see postpartum depression as a rite of passage, an opportunity for depth into the unconscious realms of Persephone’s underworld, of the Feminine. A place where we can fall apart, be dismembered, hold the hurt and let it transform us. A place cradled in love by women who understand the immortal intertwining dance of death and birth. A place held by women who, as Demeter, cry out until we are pulled back into consciousness and through their loving wisdom we are re-membered. This is not simply healing, this is a deeper understanding of women. In order to receive such a glorious gift of divine revelation, in order to sit in the womb of the Goddess, we must first let go and be abducted, destroyed, dismembered. For how could we experience such divine love without first feeling the divine flame.

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STEPHANIE ZAJCHOWSKI holds a Bachelor of Business Administration, with a concentration in Marketing, from Texas Wesleyan University. She spent many years working in Flight Operations and then Marketing at Southwest Airlines while pursuing artistic endeavors such as marble sculpting and metalworking, which she still practices today. Stephanie has her certification in Spiritual Direction from SMU Perkins School of Theology, in Dallas, Texas, and serves as Communications Director for the Metro District Superintendent of the United Methodist Church. Stephanie is currently in her first year of studies, pursuing her Master's and Ph.D. in Mythological Studies, with an emphasis in Depth Psychology, at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California. Living the multi-faceted and somewhat insane life of a modern day woman, she lives with her husband and two often filthy young sons, in a North Texas house full of books.