

Childbirth as Initiation and Transformation: The Wounded Mother

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Abstract: None available.

Full Text: THE WOUNDED MOTHER In "The Goddess Within" a book about Goddess psychology, the authors ask the question "How is it that Demeter's sacred functions have come to be so demeaned and so neglected in the modern world?"² they suggest that in order to answer this question we must look back at the social history of the Goddesses during the ascent of western civilization. With the advent and rise of patriarchy, the role of the Mother Goddess became secondary, and the functions of childbearing, mothering and agrarian culture were given an inferior status. According to the authors, Jennifer and Roger Wollger, "a sharp division arose at that time between the urban Gods and Goddesses who reflected the values of a rising warrior patriarchy and the more traditionally rural divinities who were all essentially matriarchal and attached to the land."³ This shift in consciousness had dramatic social and psychological consequences. Women all over the world who had hitherto been the guardians of the sacred mysteries of birth and death and powerful healers, began to be shunned, persecuted and often even put to death. As patriarchal medicine emerged, women healers everywhere were driven underground by those who feared their powers, and the feminine values of nurturing and bearing children, healing the sick and tilling the land became secondary to those of power and social position. The devaluation of the feminine was complete when Demeter sustained her most intimate wound in the denial of her birthrights, something which I believe today to be reflected in the medical control and management of childbirth in a culture which generally undervalues the role of the mother. I believe that western civilization is nursing a deep mother wound and that this wounding of Demeter consciousness is but one rarely perceived aspect of the general repression of the feminine. This repression of feminine consciousness is something which Jungians and many others have long lamented and which has deeply marked our world. Applied to the most primal act of birth, I believe the wounded mother to be manifested in the many problems (psychological and physiological) that women encounter when giving birth and becoming mothers in our present society. This paper attempts to address the nature and depth of this wound by outlining the archetypal dimensions of the experience of childbirth and demonstrating how birth is both an initiation and a profound metaphor for change and transformation. Furthermore I believe that it is only through recognizing the archetypal and spiritual nature of the experience that an understanding of and a healing of the wounded mother can begin. We are all the inheritors of the wounded mother. The repression of the feminine in our culture has meant that we have lost touch with our instincts, and worse, that we have become alienated from the natural in us. In the denial of our birth rights, however, patriarchy strikes its cruelest blow to the already wounded mother. Wielding the knife of power, patriarchy attacks Demeter at her most intimate and vulnerable, and she, divested of her dignity and stripped of her strength, limps into passivity as resigned and broken she can but suffer the indignities perpetrated upon her at a time when she is least able to resist. The supremacy of patriarchal values has meant that childbirth, formerly the province of women, where women were tended by women, has fallen into the hands of a male orientated medical profession intent on controlling rather than facilitating the process of birth. In practice, the medical control of childbirth has meant the virtual death of home birth and the subjugation of midwives, as women are shepherded into centralized "units" to have their babies. However, women since the beginning of time were the guardians of the secrets of birth and death and as such, uniquely suited to their role as midwives. The original midwives were more often than not the mothers of the women giving birth and theirs was a singularly intimate and supportive role. Childbirth was essentially a family event of deep social, cultural and spiritual significance, and not a medical feat requiring the ministrations of professionals. The real inheritors

of the wounded mother today are those women who, depressed and disillusioned after the birth of their babies, flock to their doctors or therapists seeking to be healed from a wound which they often do not know they possess. It is these women that I see entering my consulting room. And the real inheritors of the wounded mother are those babies born into fear, pain and loneliness who do not know anything except that this is not what they expected.

LOSS OF SOUL When I began work in the area of childbirth, I was aware of a strong sense of wanting to help women give birth in a manner in which they felt fulfilled. From my own experiences of being pregnant and giving birth I was aware that all was not well out there in the birth room and that many women experienced the birth of their children as negative even traumatic events, often suffering from postnatal depression. Since at that time I was also in Jungian analysis and training as a psychotherapist, I was aware that I myself had been wounded and more, that like most I carried the wound with me and that it was this which would enable me to heal others with the same wound. As time elapsed and I began work as a therapist, I saw in others what I had begun to see in myself, that often all was not well inside as well as outside, and that not only individual but collective psychological constellations had a part to play in how birth was being experienced. I began to understand how important the experience of giving birth was for most women, and further, how feelings about this experience often filtered through into their lives and their relationships. I saw how the way in which birth happened, influenced both the mothers relationship with her baby, and the future development of that baby. I found that I was frequently working with the causalities of a medical system which it seemed, was unaware of the deeper dynamics of the birth experience. I saw bruised, depressed and traumatized women, battling to come to terms with an experience which fell far short of what they were expecting, and I saw battered, scared, confused and frightened babies. From my own experience I knew that there is a need in most women (conscious or unconscious) to experience something sacred when giving birth. From the many women who came to see me, I knew that most wanted to experience the birth of their child as a fulfilling joyous, and creative act. It seemed that all too often, this was denied them, as the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the birth process went largely unacknowledged. When Jung talked about loss of soul, I knew what he meant. What he had to say about this, I felt, applied also to childbirth practice in the West. When Jung began his journeys to North and Central Africa and New Mexico, he was in search of what he called the 2 million year old within. Jungian analyst and author Anthony Stevens addresses this and suggests that Jung, having entered the archetypal realm during his confrontation with the unconscious between 1914 and 1918, sought to corroborate his introverted researches from the outside, throwing objective light on the prehistoric layers of collective experience and potential:⁴ "I unconsciously wanted to find that part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and the pressure of being European."⁵ These journeys provided Jung with invaluable insights into age old patterns of human life and confirmed his impression that Europeans had become alienated from their own humanity. This was because their rationalism had been won at the expense of their vitality, and thus their most primitive natures had been "condemned to a more or less underground existence" (ibid). Jung felt that this, and nothing else, lies at the bottom of our contemporary angst, man is in need of reconnecting with his basic nature, alienation from his nature has led him to lose his soul. Having lost touch with our souls, we have lost touch with our natures, and ultimately, with the meaning of life. This is what had happened to childbirth. I realized, that all too frequently, the birth experiences of many of these women were unfulfilling, and that this led them to feel loss of soul. What should have been a joyous, sacred event had become instead full of pain and loss. Furthermore, in my role as birth "teacher" I found myself in a curious position. I found myself running antenatal "classes" in which I was "teaching" women to give birth, something which they already knew. I later came to realize that what I was doing in effect, was simply enabling women to get in touch with, and activate their own inner knowledge and instinctive abilities to give birth. What had happened to this "knowledge"? This inner "knowing" had been eroded through years of conditioning and increased medicalization of what is primarily a natural process. Having a baby is a normal biological function. Women have given birth since the beginning of time, and a woman's body is designed to carry, give birth to,

and feed her young. For two million years, women have been laboring and birthing, according to the dictates of nature and the customs of their tribes and traditions. Many gave birth alone, unaided by anything save their own instincts, others gave birth assisted by other women. This is quite different to our birthing practice of today, where technology has largely replaced nature in a physiologically natural process. The two million year old wisdom, the wisdom of our ancient childbearing grandmothers was cut off from modern childbearing women. Pregnant women, alienated from their own natures, were alienated from their innate, instinctive ability to give birth. On a deeper level, their archetypal expectations had been frustrated, and everything each pregnant woman is primed to expect from her antecedents, had failed to happen. In order to understand this notion of inherited expectations we must look at the Jungian concept of archetypes and the collective unconscious. During his lifetime, Jung demonstrated that the Freudian model of the human psyche was too narrow and limited, amassing convincing evidence that we must look much further than personal biography and the individual unconscious if we are to even begin to grasp the true nature of the psyche.⁶ His concept of the collective unconscious, an immense pool of information about human history and culture that is available to us in the depth of the psyche, and his identification of basic dynamic patterns of primordial organizing principles which he called archetypes, are fundamental to his work.

BIRTH: THE ARCHETYPE OF TRANSFORMATION

Birth is an archetypal event, it is through the experience of birth that the universal is made personal and individual. Moreover, the way in which that birth takes place and is experienced, creates an archetypal pattern which then becomes a life pattern. The birth archetype is the most fundamental of all archetypes as it governs all creative processes. Giving birth and being born are supremely powerful experiences within which it is possible to encounter the archetype of transformation, or psychological rebirth. A consideration of birth as metaphor for change and transformation however, involves looking at the birth experience in a larger context than simply biological birth. Within transpersonal psychology and also many spiritual traditions, birth is a transitional state and considered as a rebirth. A definition of rebirth reads thus: Rebirth: a psychic experience of transcendence and/or transformation that is not observable from the exterior perspective but is nevertheless a reality felt and attested to by those who have experienced it. It is the subjective result of an encounter with the archetype of transformation. (Samuels, 1987) The concept of rebirth is archetypal and has existed since the beginning of time, and psychological rebirth involves an encounter with the archetype of transformation. What we are concerned with is the subjective experience of psychic transformation which can come about in a variety of ways. In writing about rebirth Jung included the concept of Individuation, which he called Natural Transformation. This is the natural movement towards change and renewal; just as nature demands a death and rebirth, and the human body moves naturally towards health, Jung saw that psychologically, there is a natural movement towards wholeness. In Jungian psychology, the individuation process itself is considered a potential rebirth in that it is a psychological experience in which transformation takes place. The individual in analysis will undergo a process which, if successful, will result in the birth of a new aspect of personality, namely the Self. This idea is contained within the symbolism of the Hero myth. The "questing Hero" the Ego, descends into the underworld, a metaphor for the unconscious, confronts his shadow and dies to himself in order to emerge transformed. Rebirth in this sense is seen as an initiation into higher consciousness, but in order for this to happen there must first be a confrontation with metaphoric death. In the process of individuation, the transformation and subsequent evolution of personality takes place in the interaction between the ego (consciousness) and the unconscious, out of which a new unified being the Self, emerges. Inherent to the process is the conflict of and integration of opposites. Thus, as in biological birth, where the union of the two opposing forces (in this case, male and female/man and woman) produces a third, a baby, we have the metaphor; biological birth becomes the metaphor for the psychological birth of the individual. In nature and natural processes, regeneration involves a process of death and rebirth, the old giving birth to the new and so on. In this way, the archetype of Death is the shadow to the Birth archetype. On a personal psychological level, depressions and mental breakdowns represent the possibility of psychic (ego) death and rebirth. A symbolic

death or a sacrifice is part of any creative process and it is only when this is complete that the transformation becomes possible. This is also the case in childbirth, when a woman becomes pregnant there is a great potential for transformation. The pregnant woman has to die to herself as maiden to be reborn as mother. In order to do this she must undergo an "ordeal" which seen in this way is in fact an initiation. PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH AS AN INITIATION The Jungian analyst and author Murray Stein describes midlife transitions as periods of liminality, which is an excellent way to describe transitional states, or bardo states, that is "in between" states, states of becoming.⁷ These are states in which we are neither who we were or even who we are becoming, we are on the threshold, as it were. Such a state is pregnancy and childbirth. A pregnant woman is in the process of becoming a mother. Transitional states are generally difficult, turbulent times in which we are unusually vulnerable, but also, as is often the case, psychologically open to new growth. All transitional times offer opportunities for transformation and change and a rite of passage or initiation forms part of any potentially transformative experience. Death of the old form and new life or birth are fundamental to initiations. In pregnancy this happens on many levels. The pregnant woman's body changes, and as her maiden figure disappears to become that of a mother, symbolically the maiden dies in order for the pregnant mother to come forth. Like the Hero in mythology who must surrender and face metaphorical death in order to be reborn, the pregnant woman surrenders to the process of the pregnancy, labor and delivery in order to be reborn a mother. When a woman gives birth she faces her own metaphorical death, giving birth she is reborn; she both produces a baby, and gives birth at the same time to herself as mother. The pregnant woman like the individual entering analysis, will undergo a process which if successful, will result in the birth of both a live baby and a new self. Psychologically, the way in which the transition from one state to another is made is of supreme importance. Thus in childbirth, the way in which the mother experiences that birth as well as the birth itself will have profound implications for both the future life of the mother and also the development of her new baby. Pregnancy is for many women an initiatory experience, one which will change her forever. For not only will the pregnancy bring changes that will shape her body, it will also influence her emotionally and mentally, it will change her psychologically. No longer will she be daughter only, she is already beginning her transition from daughter to mother, for even before conception happened, the psychic idea of it existed deep inside her. Deep inside her too, resided the stories and mythic images of being a mother as handed down to her through the generations of her family. The pregnant woman will not only be influenced by the physicality of her new condition, she will be influenced by her inner mother. I refer to the inner mother as that part of her that lies inside, her psychic space, like her womb space, already pregnant with the potential to become a mother. Each woman will have in other words, an inside story which will influence how she makes the transition to motherhood. Additionally, social and cultural factors will in each woman operate differently depending on their interaction with her inner world. She will be influenced by her family history and her personal unconscious will be a storehouse of myths and stories relating to pregnancy and birth as handed down to her from her mother and generations of mothers in her family. From her "mother imago" she will have conscious and unconscious images of what it is to be a mother. She will have prenatal imprints from her own birth which will be a reflection of her mother's thoughts and feelings during her pregnancy with her, and which will influence her in her adaptation to and transition to motherhood. She will also be influenced on a deeper level by the mythic images emanating from the collective unconscious on the Mother Archetype. Manuela Dunn Mascetti's beautifully illustrated exploration into goddess mythology shows us how conception, pregnancy and giving birth represent an important threshold in the archetypal history of a woman. She writes that "the physical phenomenon of pregnancy is almost miraculous in its essence, for woman multiplies herself into another being and becomes the channel for bringing another soul to life. For nine months she creates matter, shapes a body, brings substance within herself like an alchemist transforming essence into living matter."⁸ The way the mother archetype affects a particular woman's psyche will come through symbolically in dreams, fantasies and moments of intuition and insight. A pregnant woman will have access to unconscious images hitherto unavailable to her, and these

images will inform her psyche and influence her transition to motherhood. Pregnancy is a transitional phase, and like all transitional phases there will be a reemergence and reactivation of old conflicts and traumas, particularly those associated with birth and childhood.⁹ The pregnant woman will become aware of unresolved conflicts with her family and her mother in particular, as her own experience of being mothered may be remembered. If her experiences have been negative, she may have a negative mother complex which will become activated and most probably projected onto her midwife or doctor or other person close to her. She will most often seek to project positive mother onto her birth teacher, midwife, doctor or therapist to help her through the transition to motherhood hoping to somehow heal the wounds of the past. For many women, pregnancy and birth represents an opportunity to rewrite the stories and dramas of a former time, lived but not forgotten. On a deeper level, as I have already said, the pregnant woman is undergoing an archetypal experience. She is undertaking a rite of passage, an initiation. Like the Hero in myth and in Jungian psychology who must die to his Ego in order to be reborn to his Self, the pregnant woman is in the process of dying to herself as maiden and daughter, in order to give birth to herself as mother. Shinoda Bolen remarks that the inner pull of pregnancy as manifested in the behavior of pregnant women, resembles what happens to people as they are about to die. They become less and less interested in the outside world as they are pulled inwards towards death and the next phase. In dying to their physicality they "pass on" to another world, just as pregnant women "pass on" to another stage of their lives. In undertaking this rite of passage, this initiation, women enter the realm of the Mother Goddess and experience one of the sacred women's mysteries, experiencing what women have experienced since the beginning of time. For many women, "the experience of pregnancy and birth may awaken a profound sense of kinship with all women throughout history who have ever gone through this ordeal and transformation."¹⁰ BEING BORN: BIRTH AS AN INITIATION Much more has been written about the birth experience from the point of view of the baby. We are all familiar with the concept of birth trauma, and there has been a substantial amount of psychoanalytic literature from Freud to the present which bear witness to the influence of the birth experience on the development of personality. The more recent work of pre- and perinatal psychologists have served to broaden psychological boundaries to include the pre- and perinatal level of experience. As I have said, birth is an archetypal experience and the way in which it happens creates in itself an archetypal pattern which becomes a life pattern. Birth is also an Initiation, and seen as such, a supremely powerful and formative experience which will profoundly affect the future life of that baby. The sequence of physical birth is a natural one and should be allowed to flow. It is designed to be potentially positive, allowing the mother and her baby to work together, and if things are permitted to progress naturally and without disturbance, a potentially enhancing experience, fulfilling for the mother and formative for the baby. The massive propelling contractions of labor can be seen as a biologic necessity, "stroking" the skin and helping to stimulate many systems in the body, particularly the urinary, gastrointestinal and most importantly, the respiratory. The final major contractions around the baby's thorax help squeeze fluid out and initiate breathing.¹¹ Taken psychologically, it is in Winnicott's sense an ego enhancing experience. Going further still, it is an Initiation. Birth is a struggle: one that the baby must overcome in order to survive. Seen as an initiation, a successful passing through and out into life, birth must lay the foundations of later behavior, particularly the ability to deal with stress. The baby's ability to survive the intensity and stress of the birth experience means at some fundamental level a successful initiation which teaches it about the ability to struggle and survive in potentially life threatening situations. In the case of normal birth the learnt behavior is "I can do it, I have the resources necessary." Conversely, a birth in which there has been some degree of medical intervention, for example, the baby having to be "rescued" by forceps or caesarean section, the learnt behavior is "I cannot do it alone, I am helpless." This may then be considered as a failed initiation, which will have implications for the later behavior of the baby, particularly the ability to handle stressful difficult situations in later life. Often the birth struggle is continued throughout life, particularly where there has been a difficult birth where the struggle as it were got nowhere, where the child was born not by its own or its mother's efforts, but with the help of medical

and/or surgical intervention. An example of this is a baby born by caesarean section. A child born by caesarean section will, like its mother, be robbed of a joint birth process. The infant is suddenly and violently removed from its mother and has no time to prepare for the experience. Additionally, non-labor caesareans unlike their labor peers have no sense of struggle or of a process beginning and/or in progress. This is a very important point and has profound implications for their later development. They are simply suddenly "pulled out." In thus being born they are denied the struggle to be born. We know that many cultures and spiritual traditions include a symbolic birth as part of their initiatory rituals. This usually takes the form of a struggle through the forces of darkness and an emergence to the light and "new life" and is a symbolic acting-out of the psychological processes involved in psychotherapy. The client will, with the help of the therapist, enter into the dark world of the unconscious and struggle to bring the light of consciousness into the darkest recesses of the psyche and emerge into a new life—a new integrated Self—a rebirth born of the struggle to individuate. Nature itself provides us with numerous births, as even a flower has to struggle and push upwards through the earth, using a tremendous life force to break through the dark earth to flower and blossom into the sunlight. A caesarean section baby is denied this life-giving struggle, and so he or she may be born with an enormous frustration as this life force—this emotional energy—is unexpressed. The (successful) struggle to come into life is a vital aspect of the birth process. The baby has lived its life in the womb expecting and preparing to be born. What happens if this need to struggle into life is unexpressed? It is undoubtedly carried by the baby into postnatal life and given expression in later behavior and relationship patterns.

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY: THE SICKNESS OF THE SOUL

What do we expect when we are born? We can say that each new baby is born with an expectation of being held close to his mother. For hundreds of thousands of years newborn babies have been held close to their mothers straight after birth. And although babies in the last few hundred years may have been deprived of this all too important experience, this has not lessened each new baby's expectation that he/she will be in her rightful place.¹² Jane Liedloff author of *The Continuum Concept* suggests that "the violent tearing apart of the mother/child continuum, so strongly established during the time in the womb, may understandably result in depression for the mother, as well as agony for the infant." It has been suggested that psychopathology results when the environment fails to meet basic archetypal needs in the developing individual and Bowlby, applying himself to the mother baby relationship, stated that the further the rearing environment deviates from the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, the greater the likelihood of pathological development.¹³ Further to this, "noncorrespondence between the developing needs of the child and conditions prevailing in its environment contributed to its susceptibility to neurosis."¹⁴ Winnicott and others have pointed the finger at the failure of the facilitating environment as in maternal holding, to provide the child with the conditions necessary for healthy development. Bowlby went further, and essentially agreed with the Jungian formulation that neurosis is liable to occur when the archetypal program unfolding in the psyche of the child is not met by correspondingly appropriate figures and situations in the environment. Thus, as Stevens contends, neurotic anxiety results from the frustration of archetypal intent. We know that stress is undoubtedly a key factor in most psychiatric illness, and "the probability is that the greater the gap between archetypal needs and the environment fulfillment of those needs, the greater the stress and the more incapacitating the illness."¹⁵ Jung himself had noted that many of the people who came to consult him were suffering from the aimlessness and futility of their lives, something which he came to regard as a malaise typical of the 20th century, which he termed "the general neurosis of our age." He attributed this to the emergence of social institutions that alienated us from our archetypal nature. Similarly, the modern obstetric institution, in its denial of the instinctive and the natural, alienates women from their instinctive, archetypal nature, and leads many to experience loss of soul. Modern values it seems, interfere with our perception and recovery of the archetype. Having strayed from our cultural inheritance, having lost touch with the wisdom of our ancestors we have lost touch with our own natures, we have become depressed and debilitated. Giving birth and being born has largely been stripped of its spiritual significance. The medicalization of childbirth, focusing as it does on the physical, has often meant the loss of

soul in the experience itself. Women, daughters of the past as we are, with all our expectations of having our archetypal intentions fulfilled, expecting birth to be a scared and joyous event; we are all too often disillusioned and depressed as we struggle to come to terms with an experience which often falls far short of what we have been expecting. As Jung found in his time, alienation from our natures has meant we experience loss of soul, and we become sick. Sick with a nameless disease, we struggle on, but we never really let go of it. As we psychologists and psychotherapists know, we return to these wounds again and again in our lives, just as our children return to their births again and again, unconsciously hoping to heal the wounds of the past. The nature of our contemporary angst and the increasing disenchantment with orthodox medicine means we must begin to ask ourselves some serious questions. Have we come to fear life so much that we need to be anaesthetized from it? Do our birth and death practices teach us to be afraid of living? I believe that our birth and death practices, cloaked as they so often are, in a haze of drugs and technology, have served to remove and cut us off from life. Is it not possible that coming into, and leaving life in a drugged, unconscious state teaches us that life ultimately is such that we need to be anesthetized from it, that we cannot possibly manage to deal with our own humanity, and worse still, that others cannot contain this for us when we are at our most vulnerable. Recognition of the archetypal and transformative aspects of the birth process, awareness that giving birth and being born are experiences which change and influence our lives in a deep and profound way is necessary in order to bringing about changes in the way they happen. This acknowledgement must be inherent to any system which will change birth practice. Birth is a metaphor for change; do we want our mothers to experience this time as one of desecration, torment and disillusionment, and our babies to experience their initiation into life cloaked in a fog of fear and pain, or do we want our women and babies to experience the birth process as a positive and fulfilling soul experience? I believe that it is only through becoming more conscious of the deeper dimensions of the birth process, and gaining an understanding of the archetypal nature and psychological and spiritual aspects of birth that we will be able to alter our birth practice to one more congruent with our continuum, and thus to begin to heal the wounded mother both collectively and personally. References

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