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**Patricia Reis**

# THE MYSTERIES OF CREATIVITY: SELF-SEEDING, DEATH AND THE GREAT GODDESS

*The icons of old are the codings of tomorrow. And tomorrow holds the promise of recovery of forgotten wisdom.* Jean Houston

## The Goddess and the Creative Process

From earliest times, there has existed in the human imagination a creatrix, a Great Goddess who brought forth all living things. Her images and imaged stories are reminders of an ancient female gnosis—a special knowledge about the profound intricacies woven into the cosmic pattern of life, death and rebirth. It is very important for modern women who are consciously engaged with their own creativity to have some awareness of this ancient goddess creatrix. In order to create from our depths as women, we must find, somewhere in our psyches, an image of a creatrix, a creator in female form. It is helpful for us to know that in our human history there was a primordial goddess creatrix. How she developed through time, what her stories and images were is important because her history and development is intimately linked with our own. Her story is ours and in the process of experiencing our own creativity we, consciously or unconsciously, re-enact her mysteries.

The ancient images of the Great Goddess give evidence that our early ancestors understood the inherent sacrality of the feminine mysteries. The tremendous potency of this imagery is demonstrated by the conservative continuity of these symbols through time. The prehistoric female figures with their sacred signs and symbols persisted in the religious and mythic imagination of our ancestors from paleolithic times. For more than 20,000 years they continued to be expressed.

During the neolithic era of Old Europe (6500–3500 B.C.) the symbol system of the Great Goddess not only remained intact but her images flourished. They became increasingly more refined and articulated by the high cultures of that era. This was signified by a tremendous flowering of artistic creativity surrounding the depictions of the Great Goddess in her many aspects.

According to archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, the indigenous peoples who inhabited Old Europe during the Neolithic period were agriculturists; peaceful, without evidence of weapons of war. They were theacratic. Their political structure was based on religious worship of the Great Goddess in her many manifestations. This is evidenced by the more than 30,000 female images, signs and symbols that have been found throughout Old Europe. As in the imagery from the paleolithic era, each image depicted some part of her story, telling us of a highly refined and sophisticated culture and a rich mythical imagery complete with cult and ritual. (Gimbutas,* 1982)

What do these images of the Great Goddess from prehistory tell us as modern women about the process of creation? What new/old ideas may be sparked by exploring these images? What may we learn by listening to the goddess's unspoken language of signs and symbols? How do we undertake a journey to this ancient, ancestral Great Goddess to be initiated into her wisdom? How can we remember her? The answers to these questions are to be found by exploring the mysteries surrounding the Great Goddess and in our own deepest experiences of female creativity. What follows comes from my experience of the way these personal and collective poles of human consciousness inform each other.

In 1978, as a 38 year old woman in a Master of Fine Arts graduate program, I suffered a profound rupture in the fabric of my being. I had been seriously making art for eight years. I had been engaged in a process called "surface design" working with dyes on silk. The decision to enter graduate school was a commitment to deepening myself as an artist. At the time, I was obsessed by images of the grid. In my work, I made grids and then attempted to break them down and dissolve them. I was impelled by a desire to "get beyond the grid," to penetrate the surface, to reach the deeper structures that I suspected were behind the imprisoning grid.



In the summer, after one year in graduate school, my own structures were being dramatically torn apart by forces which I could not name. I could no longer "make art." The thin thread of meaning that connected me to my surface images had been cut; the carefully knit structures of my life were unravelling at a speed faster than I could keep up with. This process of un-making left me with feelings of a terrifying fragmentation and a deep emptiness. I walked on the beach every day. That vast oceanic space somehow both reflected and held my falling apart self. I was burning with questions about the meaning of making images, my spiritual nature and myself as a woman. These were questions I had never asked before; they had never even occurred to me.

In the attempt to keep myself together and to fill this seemingly endless, and profoundly dark emptiness, I began to read. One day in the UCLA library, as the same questions were throbbing in my head, I came upon pictures of the Venus of Willendorf and other female figurines from the paleolithic era. My body became electrified. I began to realize that this was the beginning of an answer. These objects held a haunting mystery filled with sacredness. They were saying something about a time when those three aspects, artmaking, femaleness and the sacred, which felt so sundered in me, were once unified.

The awareness that I was seeing an image of a female creator painfully brought home to me that my image of a creator had always been male, and that my inner artist was also decidedly male. Slowly, my profound lack of female groundedness was made clear. But, with these goddesses from the paleolithic, from 30,000 B.C., I was ignited. I spent the rest of the summer devouring books and decided to take a leave of absence from school and go to Europe on a quest for the Great Goddess. It was to be a search for my artistic and spiritual heritage as a woman and a profound experience of the creative process at work within my own being.

I spent days in museums looking at these tiny, seemingly insignificant figurines. I sought out the paleolithic caves of central France. I crawled in the cool, dark womb/tombs of prehistoric Brittany—sitting like a seed-stone in the center of the earth waiting to be reborn. I had no idea at the time what I was doing or what was happening to me. All I could do was follow the inner necessity.

In the years that followed the trip, the process of de-structuring continued. My studio resembled an archaeological dig filled with strange,

fragmented artifacts. My images were ones of death and decay. At one point my studio was filled with "bones" and "skeletons." I called them the "grandmas." They were at once comical and filled with immense grief and sorrow. I was digging up my dead. Still, I had no conscious knowledge of what I was doing; only on a deep instinctive level did I sense that this process was absolutely vital for my survival. I began to work laboriously with fragmented clay images made from casts and molds of my own body which I would then subject to the purifying and hardening fires of the kiln. The images of fragmented female body parts looked like pieces unearthed from an archaic dig.

Finally, driven by a desperate desire to make whole images, I began to conceive of a large three-dimensional sculptural piece. There were eventually nine, eight-foot tall "presences" that seemed to grow up out of the ground. I called them the "Ancient Ones" or privately, the "Mamas." They were very phallic in shape, which seemed strange to me, and yet they were fully female in feeling. The making of them was hugely satisfying. I felt that I was creating them while they were creating me. The process was one of loving labor and I had endless energy and patience for the making of them. I installed them in a gallery with sonorous vibrational music and they took on a life of their own. Another installation gave me the opportunity to do a performance/enactment with them. And I knew that it was time to give them a voice. What follows is what the "Ancient Ones" said to me:

From the beginning,
We have been with you.
We are the ancient ones
And we remember.

We remember the time when there was only love,
The time when all breathing was one.
We remember the seed of your being
Planted in the belly of the vast black night.
We remember the red cave of deep slumber,
The time of forgetting,
The sound of your breath and the pulse of your heart.
We remember the force of your longing for life,
The cries of your birth—bringing you forth.
We are the ancient ones
And we have waited and watched.



You say that you cannot remember that time
That you have no memory of us.
You say that you cannot hear our voices
That our touch no longer moves you.
You say there can be no return
That something has been lost,
That there is only silence.

We say the time of waiting is over.
We say the silence has been broken.
We say there can be no forgetting now.
We say listen.

We are the bones of your grandmothers' grandmothers.
We have returned now
We say you cannot forget us now
We say we are with you
And that you are us.

Remember, Remember.

It took me four years to go through the whole process of de-structuring, death, inner seeding, fruition and renewal. One very important aspect of this time has to do with the fact that I removed myself completely from the whole outer arena of the "male world." In order to accomplish my own second birth, so to speak, I had consciously to separate myself from the world of men. It was this deliberate process of pulling in, of creating my own female matrix, that helped me to find my own inner powers, my own feminine ground. I doubt that I could have accomplished this in any other way.

Now eight years later, I find that these experiences were a profound initiation into the mysteries of the creative process and have resulted in my current life's work, the labor of making connections between the images of archaeology, myth, the female psyche and the creative process. I continue to immerse myself deeply in the study and research of these female images from the paleolithic and neolithic eras. I am struck by the stunning synchronicity that these Great Goddess images are literally coming to light in the past one hundred years as the Feminine is attempting a return to the consciousness of our Western culture. I am convinced that they hold a message of forgotten wisdom.

I am aware that my own process continues to unfold; that what I am exploring and describing here is not "the whole thing," a completed story; there is another chapter being written. I do believe, however, that as daughters of the patriarchy, as modern Athenae born out of the head of the father, we must have an experience of a birth back into and through the body wisdom of the mother. It is through this second birth experience that we attain our full creative powers. It is necessary to keep in mind that this initiation is one that must take place outside of the male world. It is a female initiation. It may also be a mid-life rite of passage. That does not mean to say that men are unnecessary or irrelevant to a woman's unfolding. It does mean that, at some point, it is necessary and crucially important for women to experience their potential for female wholeness separate from their relationship to men. It is only after an experience of self-creation that we can find the ability to be in relationship with the self-creative activity of others and humanity as a whole. It would be a mistake to think that this experience of wholeness is the end-point. Rather it is just the beginning. This state of wholeness only prepares us for being radically split open to relationship with the self-creative other.

The process of giving birth has always been held in our imaginations as the paradigm for creativity. Such a process immediately evokes images of seeding, gestation, labor, birthing, nurturing, and sustenance. In many current interpretations of this paradigm women have notoriously been described as the empty vessel—waiting for "fulfillment"—waiting to become fully-filled. Having a female body, according to this view of women's nature, means having an empty space that longs for something to fill it. This idea of emptiness implicitly connotes lack—a lack of fulfillment and wholeness—and implies the necessity of an "other" that will fill that emptiness.

At some level, there is a truth here. We do have an emptiness that longs for fullness—for completion. We can even experience it in our bodies as a longing for the missing part. But, this has too often and traditionally led us to believe that what we as women are longing for is the male other to come and fill us—fulfill us. The longing has been literalized into a fantasy of "penis envy" and is perceived as the need for the phallus of the male which will fill our empty spaces—both to fill the empty vaginal space and to seed and thereby fill the womb space—that deeper more internal empty vessel—with the growing child.



Our creativity relies, we are led to think, on an outer other. And if we don't have that our fields lay fallow.

Women are innately connected with the process of creating life through the experience of our bodies. It has been often read by our culture as a biological imperative, an inexorable destiny. In our culture the imperative has been literalized into the expectation that we become biological mothers. But, even a woman who does not have children has a cellular knowledge of her potential ability to create life out of the stuff of her own body. This embodied knowledge of the ability to create something out of one's self seemingly from nothing is an attribute we most frequently give to God. And indeed, we find that humanity's first image of God was not male, but female. What do these earliest images of a female deity tell us about the nature of our own creativity? By returning to the early conceptualization of the Great Goddess creatrix, we find clues about an earlier, more primary form of creating.

Myths and images about the act of creation always include some kind of idea about the initial seeding or sparking of new life along with an almost simultaneous knowledge of and familiarity with death. Whether conscious or not, these two elements are integrated at a deep level in our psyches. When our earliest ancestors imaged the divinity as female they understood that she contained the whole cycle of creation. They included the divine powers of phallic self-seeding and death within one symbolic system: "For millenia, Mother Earth gave birth by herself." This complex symbolism of sexuality, birth, death and rebirth, the whole miraculous cycle, was assimilated into the images of the Great Goddess. Each aspect of the process became a part of her story.

Eventually, the two aspects of self-seeding and death were split off from this cyclical rhythm in favor of a linear configuration which placed birth and death at opposite and unrelated poles of a continuum. The notions of self-seeding and the place of death in the creative process were misinterpreted, ignored, and finally suppressed and pathologized by the dominant culture's view of woman and her creative abilities. It is these very images, however, that hold the keys to understanding the great mysteries of the feminine creative process.

In thinking about women and creativity, I am most intrigued by these two notions suggested by the imagery of the ancient Great Goddess and the images that I created out of my experience of her: one, the startling idea of a female phallic power for self-seeding and the other,

the intimate connection of death to creativity. Looking at the images of the Great Goddess we see that these two aspects of the creative process are conjoined in her depictions by the further notion of rebirth which brings the whole process full circle. At the level on which these images exist, in the artifacts and deep within our psyches, there is a felt sense of self-containment and self-fulfillment. In my own experience, the images that I made took me through the whole process of seeding, death and decay, and new birth, a regenerative process that continues to unfold itself in all my further creative efforts.

What I will look at here are these two particular boons given to women. They are a part of the Great Goddess's initiation into the mysteries of creation: the phallic powers of self-seeding and the understanding of the processes of fragmentation, burial and death in the creative process. I would like to open the imagination to these images in order to help us re-think and re-connect with the deepest level of women's creative powers. To fully explore these two notions, we must dig deeply into our human background, back to the paleolithic and neolithic eras, the pre-patriarchal times when the Great Goddess's images encompassed all of these attributes as part of her cosmic pattern of life, death and regeneration. What I am suggesting is that the world of archaeology and myth reflects the inner world of the psyche, that the journey back through the dimensions of time and space is also a journey deep into the ancient recesses of our own personal and collective foundations. In order to reopen our imagination to these images we must drop down through the stratified layers of increased consciousness and rationality. In order to reopen our imagination to these images we must go back to the caves.

## Self-Seeding

From earliest times, the creative impulse was imaged as female. Over the last one hundred years, some one thousand engravings, reliefs and sculptures of female images from the paleolithic period have been found, dating from ca. 30,000 to ca. 9,000 B.C. This means that for more than 20,000 years during the paleolithic era this Great Goddess existed in our mythic imagination, our art, our rituals, and our lives.



What these images tell us is that in the earliest periods of human consciousness she was already conceived of as the organizing principle of the universe. She was the cosmogenic woman. She encompasses the whole cosmic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth mysteries within her ground of being. She appears in her animal epiphanies as the pregnant mare and bison painted in the deepest recesses of cave walls. In coal, bone, and stone, her body is sculpted with great egg shapes—breasts, belly and buttocks—images of fullness and potential becomingness. She is seen in rock engravings from Laussel, France holding a notched horn indicating her association with the three aspects of the moon. Animal bones and antlers with the same kind of notched markings show that her calendar was lunar, tying her cycle of periodicity to the cycles of the moon. These figurines are found over a vast area of Europe, from Siberia and the Ukraine to Germany, France, and Italy.

The earliest known representations of the female divinity are from the Aurignacian period, 30,000 B.C., in the Dordogne region of France. Here, the "supernatural" vulva is engraved over and over onto cave walls. Indeed, the cave itself is a womb holding all of the painted and carved images of the natural world. Special areas of the cave, oval shapes, clefts and smaller cavities are marked with red ochre, sometimes painted entirely in red. These signs and symbols include plant life, seeds, and buds. The association of vulva with plants and seeds, with sprouting and germination bespeak the powers of generation and regeneration. In a complex web of association, the paleolithic Great Goddess gave birth to all life forms: plants, animals, and sky phenomena. She was capable of producing both male and female out of her body. The fertility of the earth and the creation of the cosmos were linked in the imagination with the mysteries of female fecundity. Eliade says, "For millenia Mother Earth gave birth by herself, through parthenogenesis. The memory of this 'mystery' still survived in the Olympian mythology and can be read in numerous myths and popular beliefs concerning the birth of men (sic) from the earth . . ." (Eliade 1978, p. 40).

Many images of the paleolithic Goddess show the conjunction of both vulva and phallus within the form of a female body. She is frequently portrayed with a phallus-shaped neck which shows the phallus to be deeply incorporated into her physical nature. From a cave in France,

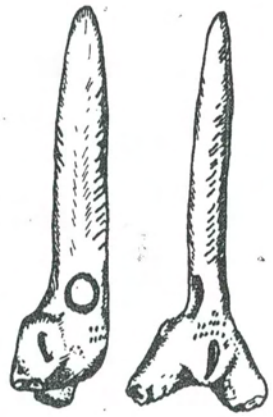

FIGURE 1. *A carved figurine of reindeer antler with a raised vulva in the focal position and a long phallic neck marked with chevrons from the cave of Le Placard, Charente, France of the Magdalenian I-II period. H.15.3 cm. (Delporte, 1979 p. 88).*

Le Placard, comes a carved reindeer antler with a pronounced vulva and a long, featureless phallic neck shape (Fig. 1). In a group of figurines from Savignago, Italy, we see the familiarly abundant, pregnant female form again topped with a prominent phallic neck/head (Fig. 2). From Dolni Vestonice in Hungary comes a carved ivory figurine, a simple long phallic shape covered with incisions and two prominent breasts (Fig. 3). Sometimes the phallus is incorporated into her body in the shape of a columnar neck, such as the neolithic figurine from Nea Nikomedeia in northern Greece. This figure has a large nose, slit eyes, an incision near the top and a canal down the center. The marble sculpture from Attica, Greece shows the Goddess with a long phallic neck and pronounced buttocks (Fig. 5). A terra cotta figurine from Starcevo, southeast Hungary (ca. 5500 B.C.) shows the goddess's upper body as a phallus with breasts and her lower body as testicles. The same shapes are repeated in an incised design on her lower front (Gimbutas, 1986, p. 233). A more abstract pillar-headed goddess with a large pubic triangle is found in the cemetery of Cernavoda in eastern Romania.

Many of these phallic-headed goddesses were found in neolithic graves

FIGURE 2. *Figurine with a phallic head, pronounced buttocks, breasts and a pregnant belly carved of steatite. Savignano, Italy. Assumed to be Gravettian (Grimaldian). H.22.5 cm. (Delporte, 1979 p. 111).*

suggesting their regenerative function. In the Cucuteni culture in northern Moldavia a neolithic shrine was excavated which contained thirty-two female figurines which were all rendered with a snake-shaped or phallic head and one in particular that holds what looks to be an erect phallus. It is portrayed as an integral part of the figure (Fig. 4). This is not a phallus from a sacrificed male! There is no archaeological evidence of this sort of activity until post-patriarchal times. Rather, this is the snake/phallus of the goddess that shows her self-renewing, regenerative capacities.

For millennia, the goddess with a phallus was "an accepted form of depicting life promotion or the strengthening of life powers. . . . The phallus, as well as the snake, is endowed with the mysterious power of spontaneity; they are not necessarily "male symbols" (Gimbutas, 1981, p. 9). Indeed, they are found conjoined in a single image of the female deity. Despite her bisexual nature she remains definitively female.

The notion of a female figure with a phallus may seem a freakish aberration to us. Yet the portrayal of the goddess and her phallus is common in figurines from the paleolithic time and neolithic eras. As

FIGURE 3. *Phallic figurine with breasts carved from mammoth tusk incised with groups of parallel lines. Dolni Vestonice, Moravia Czechoslovakia, East Gravettian, c. 26,000* B.C. *(Delporte, 1979 p. 142).*

always, there is both a unity and a multiplicity portrayed in these images of the goddess. She is seen as the giver of life and the taker. And, always, she has contained within her the powers of rebirth and regeneration.

This particular configuration of the Great Goddess with a phallic aspect continued to be a part of her iconography for at least 30,000 years during the paleolithic period and neolithic times. Certainly this image must have something to tell us about the nature of female creative potential. The image holds within it a concept of the possibility for self-fertilizing, for self-renewal, and regeneration. It is not merely the notion of an androgynous, "hermaphroditic" being, a blurry, uninspired homogenization which always seems to connote a feminized male. Nor is it the masculinized feminine. Rather, these are profound images of a religious nature that demonstrate an ancient concept of female wholeness consisting of a fully developed femaleness and a fully developed maleness.

What does it mean for a woman to have her own sense of an *inner* phallus? In the figurines it is not the outer phallus—the probing, seeking, erection—so much as it is a sustaining, supportive inner core. In the images from the paleolithic and neolithic eras, the phallic element



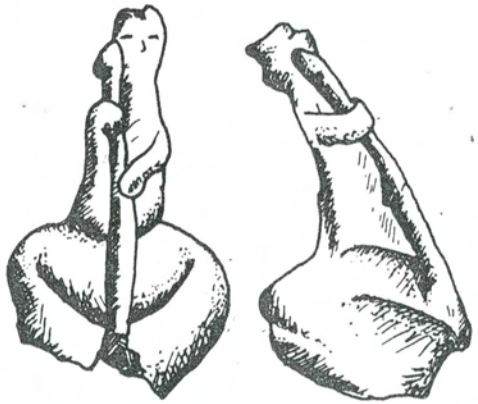

FIGURE 4. *Clay figurines from a shrine. Neolithic, early Cucuteni culture, Soviet Moldavia. c. 5000* B.C. *(Gimbutas, 1974 p. 73).*

tends to be in the upper part of the body, the neck and the head providing an axis around which the rest of the body is organized. This is a different image from "the empty vessel." A young woman dreams:

> I am naked and on my back floating free of the world as I know it. I am mostly in a grey fog with another woman who is next to me and naked too. We make love and she has a long serpentine penis which she puts inside of me. I am afraid she is going to go too quickly and I will get hurt. She goes a notch at a time and finally has it all the way in and never hurts me.

The young dreamer tells me, "When I recall the dream and the way I felt with Her in me, I felt complete—as though there were a void filled but also still voidless. It is thought we were originally fashioned together and had been split. Our union is completely natural and fulfilling."

How can we as women go about the process of self-fulfillment—of filling the self? What does it mean for a woman to be self-fulfilled? How does one go about creating oneself out of oneself? How does a fulfilled woman create? What we are looking for, it seems to me, is a way to seed and ignite our own creative energies without feeling perpetually lacking and dependent on an outer other. In our search for this

FIGURE 5. *Marble sculpture with long phallic neck from Attica. Greece. Neolithic c. 6000* B.C. *H.22.5 cm. (Gimbutas, 1974 p. 133).*

sense of a fulfilling, sustaining phallus there are many, many wrong moves, moves that take us off course, distract us and deceive us, moves that may lead us into being procreative before we have been self-creative.

A woman's desire for the fulfillment of the phallus may lead her toward the male in order to become pregnant. The desire for the experience of having an actual child is, of course, most natural and legitimate —and possibly fulfilling. On the highest level it may be a profound initiation into the feminine mysteries. However, the longing for the phallus to provide pregnancy and the child may also be an acting out, a wrongly interpreted literalization of the desire to give birth to the Self, or a desire to generate a creative form: a painting, a book, an idea. And here is where we can become lost if we do not know enough to discriminate what it is that wants to get born.

In myth, there is the association of the phallus with the child. Jung notes that "the child is, in certain circumstances (e.g., in the case of Hermes and the Dactyls), closely related to the phallus, symbol of the begetter, so it comes up again in the sepulchral phallus symbol of the renewed begetting." (Jung 1959, p. 178) Is it possible that when we as women are seeking a sense of our own phallic energies we sometimes



mistakenly create the phallus/child—the phallus/child that will fill us for nine months? The phallus/child that will give us a feeling that our empty space has been filled? Is there a mistaken notion that the seeding, the inner growth, the swelling of life will be the phallus that stays within and fills the empty place? Certainly when we fill ourselves in this way we have also filled in our future hours, days, and years with the demands of the new life that we have created. For women who wish to explore their creative powers in other ways another process seems to take over.

The search of women for the literal phallus can lead to no end of unfulfilling relationships, to say nothing of the paradoxical aborting of true creativity. I am not talking here about the natural and legitimate desire for physical union or the quest for a deep relationship with a man, or even the more mystical experience of the hieros gamos, the sacred marriage. Before the wedding or sacred marriage can take place, a woman must establish her own relationship to the phallus of the Great Goddess. A woman client in her early forties has this dream:

> I am in bed on my wedding night. I have married an older man. He is an artist and he is wearing a flannel shirt and levis. The bedroom decor is early 40's with a mahogany dresser and a small double bed. I am not sexually aroused and he does not seem to be interested either. But, it is our wedding night so I take the initiative to start some sexual activity. He has an erection. Then I look and see that there is a penis on the dresser. It has some chiffon fabric draped around it as if it were on exhibition. It has a glow around it. It looks like an icon. I begin gently to stroke and lick it. I make love to it with great affection.

This is a woman who is married and has a child. However, she is just coming into a sense of her own creative powers. From this dream, it appears that before she can unite with the man who is to be her husband she must find her own loving relationship to the phallus. Certainly the phallus on the dresser is filled with a numinosity. It has a glow around it. It is compelling for her, and she leaves her new husband in the unconsummated bed to pay homage to it. The accent of chiffon fabric gives it a feminine touch.

Part of the whole issue of our relationship to the phallus is the issue of power. What is a woman's phallic power like? Is it the disconnected probing, impersonal phallus we associate with so many males? Is it "monstrous" as the phallic goddess images have been called? I don't

think so. In the dreams there are feelings of deep fulfillment and unification with the feminine, there is the soft fabric, the glowing light and the orality of nurturing. But, the possible distortions are many.

The extent to which this search for the phallus can become excessive and obsessive as well as terrifyingly destructive can be seen in Nagisa Oshima's film "In the Realm of the Senses." This Japanese film made in 1976 explores the absolute borders of erotic madness in an affair between a prostitute and the brothel-owner's husband. The prostitute's obsession for the phallus ends in a cataclysmic literalization of erotic violence. After a fatal episode of a game called "extinction" where one brings the other to the brink of death, she castrates the man and keeps his penis inside her vagina. Isis reseeding herself with Osiris's dismembered penis is a beautiful and evocative mythic image, but whenever a mythic archetype is literalized or concretized it becomes horrifying. This film's portrayal of the literal reality is demonic in the extreme.

The Great Goddess figures from the paleolithic and neolithic eras that incorporate the phallic element embody the notion of a complete, self-fulfilling, self-sustaining and self-generating femaleness. One that does not demand a bloody sacrifice from the male. She is an image that is complete—unto herself. For this reason she is important as a reminder and an expression of the notion of female wholeness: the wholeness that is the pre-condition for true relatedness.

## Dismemberment and Death

Along with portrayals of her infinite potential for seeding and regeneration the Great Goddess is also found represented as a flat, contracted female body. These images begin in the paleolithic era. Sometimes they are painted with red ochre as in the so-called "shameless Venus" from Laugerie-Basse in France. Other images show her as a stiff white nude or in a cocoon or chrysalis form, seen particularly in the series of figurines from Malta, Siberia. (Delporte, pp. 197–203) These very ancient figurines show the goddess in her death aspect. The use of red ochre is an old ritual reminder of the female blood mysteries. Her sacred vulva, always emphasized in these figurines represents the promise of potential rebirth.



The Goddess's association with death continued to be depicted in neolithic times. Frequently, it was the burial rite itself that told the story of rebirth. In southern Romania (ca. 4000 B.C.), an infant was buried in an egg-shaped bread oven, the very womb of the goddess (Gimbutas, 1986 p. 233). Or, as in the burial chambers from pre-historic Ireland and Brittany, the body is placed in a fetal position in the center of a burial mound made in the anthropomorphic shape of the goddess. The body is laid in the womb space, with a vaginal passage as the entry-way and the exit. These burial practices demonstrate a belief in the Great Goddess's transformative powers.

With the advent of the patriarchal people into the goddess-worshipping cultures of Old Europe (c. 4000–2800 B.C.), the original cosmic symbol system of the paleolithic and neolithic Great Goddess was split apart. The powers of self-seeding and death were separated from their totality. Certain aspects of the Great Goddess, particularly the ones most feared, the ones pertaining to primal sexuality and death were relegated to the realms of the underworld, and the powers were assigned to what has been named (wrongly, I think) as the negative mother. I prefer to call the goddesses that hold these split-off powers and energies the dark goddesses.

This fragmentation of what was originally known as a whole symbol system is also reflected in our psyches. Psychologically, the process of reaching the completed Great Goddess means first feeling our own fragmentation and dropping down through the many overlays of collected and collective patriarchal constructs. In my imagery this process appeared as peeling back layers, dissolving the "grids" and exposing the deeper underlying inner structures. Frequently, in this process, one meets aspects of the Self that have been split off and repressed. These are the dark goddesses who act as guardians of the threshold. She may appear as a Kali that assists in our de-structuring, or a Gorgon/Medusa that stops us cold in our tracks. In Sumerian myth, Inanna, the Queen of Heaven, enters into her initiation in the underworld at mid-life. Before she can meet her dark sister Ereshkigal, queen of the lower realms, she must be stripped naked of all her worldly possessions and bowed low. Then she is impaled naked on the phallic peg to rot.

We are familiar with the well-documented male initiatory rites of

passage known to tribal cultures. The young male is separated from his known world, subjected to the terrors of death, given an experience of being both male and female, and then given a second birth out of the male womb and back into the community. What has been rarely documented or has received scant attention is a counterpart rite of passage for women in which they meet the terrors of destruction and receive the phallic powers of regeneration, not from a male figure, but from the Great Goddess who carries both male and female within her own image. What I am suggesting is that, for women, the creative process when engaged in at its deepest level, demands for its own sake, that we undergo this initiation.

A woman engaged in this initiatory process must be willing to be stripped and penetrated, to be ravished and killed by the goddess before she can attain her powers for self-creation. We must pass through the threshold of the dark goddesses to reach the more ancient, unified image of the Great Goddess, to reach a more complete sense of our own psychological wholeness. As in all initiations, there is an experience of separation, a severance from the known world. For me, this meant a withdrawal of my energies from the "male world," a sort of psychic pulling the plug. The initiation is undertaken for retrieval of our ancient female heritage—the bestowal of the powers of self-seeding and the intimate knowledge of death and rebirth. And, if we are fortunate, this experience will inform all of our further creative efforts and give us a new sense of our relationship to others.

The initiatory journey to the Great Goddess requires that we undergo a period of de-structuring and dismemberment. This is the time when we come apart at the seams. The splits happen along natural cracklines, like the weak, stressed areas in a piece of ceramic. The initiation into the mysteries of creativity often begins with a compelling necessity for the de-structuring process to occur. Often it feels like and literally may be "self-destructive." We attack our own surface ego structures, our own ego rigidities, in order to go deeper into the matrix—where boundaries break down and opposites are experienced as reconciled. I knew that I had to break through the sterile gridded images in my work (in my life) in order to reach a deeper, living structure. In the service of this need for de-structuring, we sometimes engage in excessive behavior like eating, sleeping, or drinking too much, or too little. This



helps us break through our carefully constructed thought forms. Or we are beset by "outer" influences that assist in the process: the breakup of a marriage, an accident, or the onset of an illness. The pathological nature of this behavior can be suspended once the nature of its necessity is understood.

It is our waking ego consciousness identified with the life aspect that experiences terror when we feel ourselves so fragmented and taken down into the dark earth for burial. Sometimes there are dreams of being buried or sinking into the earth. Feeling the fragmentation was an actual bodily sensation for me. Thus, my compelling need to be involved with making clay images of my own body parts and piecing them together. There is a sacrifice of surface intactness that must be made, however, in order to reach a new or deeper level of organization.

In my experience there was a primary unbidden episode which plunged me into my own darkest recesses. The efforts to "come back" through the many layers with a piece of the boon intact has allowed for a flowering of true creativity and a precedent is set for further fruition. Each journey down is nevertheless still terrifying and there is always a question about the return, whether it will happen and whether what is brought back can be given discernible form. As artists, we must develop a capacity for passing through the borderlines. There are periodic episodes of "disintegration" that are necessary in this process.

The process of fragmentation, of being ripped apart and buried, is different for men and women. Anton Ehrenzweig in *The Hidden Order of Art* has written extensively about the connections between the mythologem of the dying god and creativity. What has not been written is how the process differs for women. The terrors are different and so is the boon.

For men, the necessity of de-structuring and going into the realm of the Great Goddess brings, according to Ehrenzweig, the terror of castration—it is the "dying god" phantasy. The god is emasculated in order to assume the capacities of the female creatrix. It is a process of opening a womb space which will hold and become the container for the creative activity. For women, who already have the womb space, it means facing the terror of rape and penetration. But not from the male. What we receive in the encounter with the Great Goddess of wholeness is the goddess's phallic powers: so that we may develop the capacity to seed

ourselves. For both men and women the initiatory experience is one of being opened and penetrated. And for both the result is the ability to conceive of one's self—to self-create—to give birth to the divine child who can create, recreate and procreate within her/his own being. This self-created self can then come into true relationship with the self-creative activity of others.

In the process of self-creation, we begin to develop a capacity and toleration for these periods of fragmentation, for going under, for burial, depression, the times when all surface activity seemingly stops and everything goes underground. It is the capacity to winter-over, allowing for contraction, withdrawal and the death of outward activity. During the burial time the seed lies dormant in the cold, ungiving earth just as the split-off parts of ourselves and of the Great Goddess are repressed and buried. They lie underground waiting to be tapped, to be cut loose from the deep matrix and brought up to waking consciousness to be externalized in the form of creative works.

Ehrenzweig describes the powerful tensions of bliss and death that occur in the creative process.

> A feeling of oceanic, cosmic bliss strangely contrasts with the imagery of inexorable suffering and death. What seems to matter is that death has first to be faced and the experience of dying worked through before the oceanic-manic level of liberation and rebirth is reached fruitfully. The uncreative, sterile mind shies at death and the fact of human mortality. For this reason, uncreative man [sic] cannot tolerate the genuine emotional experience of self-destruction which accompanies the creative ego rhythm on its swing downwards, and desperately clings to his surface functions (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 189).

When we consciously engage in the creative process, as Ehrenzweig points out, we must have the capacity to face the anxieties and fears of self-destruction that accompany the creative process; it is the paradigm for the full emotional acceptance of the reality of death and opens us to the concept of rebirth. After the initial journey to the Great Goddess, further experiences of fragmentation and burial can be tolerated because a trust develops in the existence of a deeper level of coherence. The fragments become a synecdoche where each part stand for the whole, just as in the imagery of the goddess from the paleolithic era where the vulva carved on the cave wall implied that that one part contained the whole mystery of the creative cycle.



Archaeologically, the Great Goddess is found in the deepest recesses of caves or in the deepest stratigraphical layers of the earth. In our psyches she exists at a similarly deep imagistic level where all dualities are dissolved. To find her means going into the liminal places where we are in a state of suspension, torn loose from ego identifications; we hover at the borderlines between male and female, life and death, madness and sanity. The Great Goddess does not separate the powers of life, death and rebirth. In her image they are all part of a oneness.

It is very important for anyone engaged in a creative work to establish both an inner and an outer container within which that work will be done. This container becomes the alchemical vessel or, in the language I am using, the womb/tomb of the Great Goddess which can hold all the initially fragmented parts. Without a strong container, the ideas float, the images and pieces don't have a place to become grounded. Outside containers have a time and space dimension. These can be an academic or institutional context, a studio space, a deadline for a show or an article, a marriage, a relationship, the therapeutic hour. The inner container is the psyche itself, that inner space where all the fragmented visions and ideas are held and projected. It is the matrix within which the deep associations are made and the possibility for image-making occurs. It is the cave of the Great Goddess where all the images of the natural world are portrayed. The inner container of the psyche is limited only by our capacity and willingness to enter the mystery, to become fragmented, to endure chaos and trust that we will be reconstituted.

For the artist, the creative work itself can also be the container, the burial womb which contains and expresses all of the fragmented images and ideas, subjecting them to a re-integration. The Great Goddess who shatters and buries also helps to integrate the fragmented pieces. At the level of the Great Goddess, integration is possible. In her we have a vision of fusion. In her realm, there are no boundaries. In the experience of her, some process of unification occurs and we can begin to make the return, bringing parts of the vision or memory with us. Upon the return, symbolic representation can take place transformed and translated into ideas, a dance, works of art, paintings, poems, fiction and the newly emerged more integrated Self.

## Conclusion

For both men and women engaged in the creative process, there is a psychic and a mythic necessity for making the descent to the realms of the Great Goddess. The experience of wholeness that occurs in the realms of the Great Goddess gives us a vision of the profound levels of integration that are possible. For the artist, this entire process is undergone in the service of the creative project. There is a major distinction between narcissistic withdrawal and inflationary self-absorption and the necessary separation and entrance into these realms for the purposes of bringing forth new forms.

The encounter with the initiating pre-patriarchal Great Goddess means passing through all the phases of her mysteries: the breakdown/breaking-through of surface structures, the fragmentation, death, burial, seeding of the new and subsequent reconstitution. After this initiation, we are given our creative divinity in her image; we become the self-creating goddess. Like Demeter who knowingly thrusts the mortal child, Demophoon, into the immortalizing fires, we are successfully able to work this transformative magic on our own new creations without the stopping interference of a frantic, fearful mortal mother.

The initiation mysteries of the Great Goddess confer upon women two particular boons: the phallic powers of self-seeding, the capacity for self-creation and self-fulfillment, and a deep experiential knowledge of the creative process that takes us through subsequent dyings, seedings and birthings, bringing us always into a new relationship with ourselves and others.

The Great Goddess has existed in our mythic imaginations for millennia. It is very important that we remember her. To interpret these most primordial images of the Great Goddess from the paleolithic and neolithic eras as mere fertility cult or as Venuses—both reductive images of a mother/lover duality—is totally to miss or dismiss the profound implications of what is being shown: our original image for the whole act of creation was embodied in female form. These portrayals of the Great Goddess show her to be multi-aspected, not just a mother or a sex-object. She is both self-contained and self-fulfilling, holding within her body the whole round of life and death and rebirth. The images of her reflect for us the very real experience of initiation into the mysteries of creation. She expresses the concept of the cosmos as feminine and she comes from a profound human need to express this reality through the creation of a whole symbolic system of female imagery. What she holds for us is a necessary image of female divinity and wholeness. What she promises in her initiation is fulfillment.



This ancient Great Goddess is literally the ground, the foundation, upon which our Western culture has been built. It is as if the images have been indelibly etched into our human consciousness over and over again. It is amazing that we have "forgotten" this knowledge and certainly it must be synchronous that these images which have been literally hidden or buried for millenia are beginning to be un-earthed in our "modern" times. It is the Great Goddess that initiates us into the profound mysteries of creation. Each time we enter into a creative act we are split open again to her rhythms, the great cycle of fragmentation, death and burial, seeding and regeneration.

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