

motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

excerpts from a talk given at re-vision on mothering sunday, march 17th, 2002 by viv fogel.

Vivienne Fogel (formerly Wynant) is a UKCP Integrative Psychosynthesis psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer. She is also an artist, performing poet, and mother, and has spoken on radio and tv on the subject of adoption, as consultant psychologist, and poet. She supervises and works with healers, shamans and psychics, and is currently, exploring the interface between the realms of psyche and the psychic. Recently she reclaimed her birth-family name of Fogel - to honour her birth-mother whilst still retaining her adoptive middle-name as Wynant.

In her book *Of Woman Born*, **Adrienne Rich**, feminist poet and writer, wrote this:

“My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves and blissful gratification and tenderness.”

As my particular beginnings were of being given away by my birthmother, I swore never to become a mother myself. I saw to it that I miscarried each time I was pregnant. Because I had not been adequately held — nor bonded with - I was utterly convinced that I could not hold or provide that for another. I was wrong. Life was to show me in her very different ways, how I could ‘mother.’

It began when I realised my own ability to create, and give birth to something. That there was a source of movement and creativity within, that was seeking expression. For me, the channel was via painting and poetry. From those first urgent, necessary expressions, which for me were a lifeline, I moved myself through from surviving to thriving.

The women’s movement also provided a wealth of resources and influences: women’s art and writing; Red-therapy; workshops at the feminist bookshop Sisterwrite; eco- politics, gaia-consciousness; Greenham. The Goddess Conferences where I realised that I was not alone in the growing awareness that there existed a strong feminine divinity - and that we were remembering Her, bringing her out of exile. The process of bringing her out of exile also began to emerge for me in therapy. The first therapist who became my Good Feed, my attentive, holding mother and ‘container.’

She later encouraged me to play, treasured my inner images and dreams, and graciously received my creative gifts.

Then there was the analyst who allowed me to hate him for not being the mother I so needed. He was not destroyed when I raged at him, nor did he abandon me.

motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

Finally, the therapist with whom I was really able to re-experience and survive the early isolation, powerlessness, pre-verbal fear of not-thriving. With her I learnt how to move from a healthy dependence towards strong and functional individuation, because I was acknowledged, celebrated and felt 'loved' by her.

It was these various experiences of reparative mothering in therapy, and the synchronous love and encouragement that was happening in my personal life, that prepared me for becoming a good-enough mother in my own right — both in my work as a therapist, and literally. Having my daughter at a late age was one of the most transformative, disturbing and ultimately healing experiences of my life.

Giving birth to children was potentially one of the most dangerous things in ancient times a woman could undergo. Many women died in childbirth, some still do today.

Once nursing a young infant, a woman is at her most vulnerable. The birth of a baby can bring with it — as well as great joy — profound disturbance. It can re-stimulate the mother's own birth and beginnings. The sorceress-shaman, Dona Solédad — in one of the Carlos Castenada's books — described it as: *once a woman has given birth there is forever a tear, a hole in her aura, and in her protection*. This renders a part of her as always open and attuned, sensitive to the needs of her child — and to others.

After the birth of my daughter, my own birth trauma hit me with a vengeance, during the months that she had difficulty in feeding. For nine months she and I were locked into some kind of memory imprint where she seemed to not thrive. I would spend hours weeping and remembering. I felt very alone, despite others, including her father, being there. Around ten months she picked up and started thriving — this was the time that as a baby I left the nursing-home, from being an underweight, under-nourished non-thriving baby, to a force-fed, fattened one, rosy and plump, ripened for the home of my adoptive parents.

It was during this time of nursing my tiny daughter that I started to feel a greater support and comfort that seemed to be coming from some other source, and it was feminine: the Great Mother of All. She came in as a great wise, holding Presence. She spoke to me in dreams, and cradled me in her arms. I drew and painted her: she was my loving mother-in-the-sky.

And she has never left me. She appears in many shapes — sometimes as Tara, the gentle, green Tibetan universal mother; sometimes as Ashera, the strong Hebrew female counterpart to Yahweh. At times, I feel her as Kali, or Lilith, who both destroy and transform. On Friday nights, on the sabbath, she is the Shekinah, the warm homemaking

motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

soul and heart, who lights the candles and breaks bread, having been forgotten the rest of the week. And now as I enter post-menarche womanhood, Hochmah — midwife and crone, is there with her wiseblood.

re-membering

Over the years my daughter would often forget to take things and turn to me in her frustration - why hadn't I remembered? I should have . . . It was my fault I'd forgotten, not hers! Some clients, at a certain stage of development, have a similar expectation, and at times a gratitude when something is remembered by me.

Re-membering literally means to gather back, reconnect with what's been lost, severed, or cut off.

There is a history, or should I say herstory, of the forgotten, dis-membered or split off feminine. Relief sculptures and frescoes of dismembered goddesses, their arms and legs cut off, have been discovered, dating back to Neolithic times. Therapy is often about re-membering, a finding again, a re-connection with something that has been forgotten or lost. Even with severed limbs, the body 'remembers' the missing limb, and in the same way our feminine soul 'remembers'. And the goddess, the female god, who has been split off or exiled — or lost in translation — continues to make Her Presence felt.

A great deal has been written about how patriarchy has erased the goddess and how she is written out, or lost. We have lost the rituals of initiating our children into the community and releasing them from the matrix of the mother. We have forgotten, for instance that women were the original farmers and agriculturalists. Or that they were the first oracles (therapists), seers, mediums, healers and shamans.

It could even be said that women probably developed language itself, as they talked and hummed together during their collective work, making their pots, weaving, cooking, or mothers comforting their infants, whilst the man had to keep silent during the hunt. Robert Graves (in *The White Goddess*) talks of the ancient poetic language of ambiguities as compared to the patriarchal linear and one-dimensional language of today. (And in therapy, and with dreams, the language of the unconscious is one we learn to read as symbolic, with multi-layered meanings, rather than concrete and reductive. Soul speaks through poems).

motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

A mother does not have to intellectually know about these things, she may never have heard of the goddess, she may know nothing about matriarchal societies and rites, but a mother knows instinctively as if her body and soul moves in — to quote Adrienne Rich again, “*an unbroken generational connectedness.*” The folklore, sayings, stories are passed down from generations of women, there is a lineage of mother-wisdom, or mother-wit, as it was known, but it is much more than that.

I came across this piece of information in a book the other day: *‘Scientists have discovered a component of mitochondrial DNA that has been passed down unchanged from mother to daughter since the beginning of human existence. Thus it is present in all women’.*

(John Noble Wilford: New York Times May 92).

It seems to explain something about the extraordinary parallels that exist between mother and daughter — even if they have never known or lived with each other.

This was also my experience of my birth-mother Jenni — whom I met for the first time last year, and who sadly suffered a cardiac arrest as a result of a heart operation. We’d been building up a gradual long-distance phone calls and letter dialogue from where she lived in California. After almost fifty years of denial and a closed heart, she started to soften, and we planned to meet. Instead her heart stopped, she was rushed onto life support and I flew to meet her. Meet isn’t the right word: I saw her, this woman who’d given birth to me, all tubed up, on life support, puffy-faced, swollen hands. Something in me recognized her, and I could see and understand something that I’d never known before.

Later, looking around her apartment, I discovered other similarities that astounded me. The same photos of her grouped with her women friends as on my kitchen notice-board of me with mine. On her fridge there were some article cuttings, cartoons and poems — rather like on mine. Similar books and pictures. Similar ways of storing things. Jokes blu-tacked inside the cupboards.

When I met some of her women friends, (and there were others I spoke with on the phone that I did not get to meet), I was struck by how intelligent, and interesting they were: women I would be glad to have as friends. (As I am glad of my women friends). They called my mother proud, stubborn, fiercely independent, challenging and loyal. They loved her. She was an inspiration, passionate and tireless. As I gazed at the awards that she’d won for service to the community and as I explored her shelves, I began to understand my connection with her and gradually Jenni took shape.

In her excellent book on adoption, *The Primal Wound*, (not to be confused with the John Firman Psychosynthesis ‘bible’) Nancy Newton Verrier writes about the difference as she

motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

sees it between attachment and bonding. *"I believe it would be safe to say that most adopted children form attachments to their adoptive mothers. This is a kind of emotional dependence, which may seem crucial to their survival. Bonding, on the other hand, may not be so easily achieved. It implies a profound connection, which is experienced at all levels of human awareness."*

Winnicott describes it thus: *"... it seems as if a mother may be biologically, hormonally, and emotionally programmed to bond and respond to her baby at birth in the same Way that she was able to do when the foetus was in the womb."*

If this bond is broken - both mother and child will experience grief. The infant has missed something which cannot be replaced even by the most motivated of adoptive mothers. As wounded daughters and sons we know this. As therapists, we know this, as we face our clients with their disappointment in us. It is this realisation, of the lack, that prompts us to move, to reach for what's missing or has been lost or severed in our lives. The metaphor is that as we bring Her out of exile, the missing limb can be re-membered.

I conclude with a poem I wrote recently and this is for all mothers:

motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

Without Question

1

*My mother — the mother who gave birth to me,
pushes herself around in her chair, using her good leg.
On bad days she does not know me, calls me
by another's name, asks me about school.
Her dead friends visit her, her late husband,
and she converses with ghosts.
It is the living she cannot bear.*

*The mother who parented me for 18 years,
died suffering.
I thought I loved her. I knew I hated her.
I did not come from her — her whale sick
body with its clammy repellent smell, the medicated
creams
she asked me to rub into her.
We bore each other as best we could,
and when she died I felt the loss.*

*My stepmother - an anxious bird pecking
away
at the shattered fragments of her guilt —
haunted
by the young son she left behind.
She clawed hoping to fix herself to me,
and raged demented when I shook her off.
She rasped her last breath in torment,
unable to mother him — or me.*

*My gentle mother-in-law - who tries patiently
to right all wrongs, to soothe her angry son,
and calm his disappointed ex. She placates,
unruffles,
puts the balm of reason and good sense
onto proud and prickly wounds, whilst her
men sit
unplacatable, and judge and blame,
and do not see, and do not move.*

2

*My daughter lies sick and delirious -
she has lost her voice. I nurse her,
weak myself, hating her, loving her.
She came from me. I give to her.
There is no question. We do not forget.
Mothers nurse their children, protect them,
would die for them. This is understood —*

There is no question: we sacrifice.

*We give ourselves up — so that we can
give.
We have created - so we are responsible.
We put aside needs and postpone dreams
- there is no question.
Do not be fooled - it is not easy
as we struggle and cry to salvage our selves.*

*We are the muscle and the backbone,
the solid ground, the silent caretakers,
the invisible backdrop.
There are so many of us —
strong arms to return to.*

*And so it has always been:
giving birth, holding our tiny men,
teaching our beautiful daughters.
A power so ancient and huge
that She must be repeatedly cast out:
Ashera, Mother Goddess, and Lilith,
Destroyer and Protector of Mothers.*

*And all of us mothers longing
to be held, to be stroked,
to be heard, to be known.
to be mothered.*

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motherlove: bringing the goddess out of exile

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