

A Depth Psychological Perspective of

Inanna's Descent

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The story of Inanna's descent into the underworld and subsequent return has typically been interpreted psychologically through feminist lenses, focusing on women's empowerment and re-establishing their connection to a femininity not defined by masculine ideals (e.g., Perera, 1981, Meador, 2000, and O'Hare-Lavin, 2000). Certainly this approach acknowledges the significance of what Perera calls the "feminine experience." I cannot, however, resist thinking that perhaps this myth may have much to offer men as well. In reading and re-reading the myth, I found something within me that resonated deeply with the story as well, something that I am not willing to relegate simply to an "internal feminine." I believe the myth speaks to anyone who undergoes a transformation in which one must release or at least challenge one's values or perspectives, and become vulnerable to the frightening possibility of change. I rely solely on Wolkstein and Kramer's (1983) translation of the myth in this discussion.

It is helpful to contextualize the descent story with two other poems of Inanna because they draw out more of her character: her visit with her grandfather/god of wisdom, Enki, and her courtship of her shepherd husband Dumuzi. The poem of her visit with Enki begins with Inanna leaning against an apple tree and being delighted by her "wondrous vulva . . . applaud[ing] herself" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 12). She travels to the city of Eridu to visit Enki, wearing her crown. There is no question that this woman of delightful vulva is, indeed, a queen. The poem states that during the visit, the beer flowed freely, and they "toasted each other, they challenged each other" (p. 14), until Enki, in a drunken state, gives to Inanna fourteen *me*, "the ordering principles, potencies, talents and rites, of the civilized, upper world" (Perera, 1981, p.17). When Enki sobers, he realizes what he has done, and unsuccessfully attempts to regain what he has given away. One gets the impression that Inanna is not only in touch with her seductive nature, but is aware of her responsibilities as a queen. In securing the *me* from Enki,

she brings civilization to her people. One could argue that this poem shows a side of Inanna that is grounded both in passion and responsibility, one serving the other. Indeed, Meador (2000) describes Inanna as a goddess of paradox, and as such a representation of the complex Self for both modern-day humanity as well as for ancient Sumerians.

In the poem of Inanna's courtship of Dumuzi, we see the tangible aspect of her desire for Dumuzi, an image of first love. Most of us can appreciate the romantic image Dumuzi has of his lover as she opens the door, "Inside the house she shone before him like the light of the moon" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 36). Equally, we can almost feel Inanna's bodily longing for her lover when she asks, "Who will plow my vulva? Who will plow my high field? Who will plow my wet grounds?" (p. 37). And Dumuzi's eager response, "I will!" She is like the mortals in this respect, that she is both seductive and seduced; she both desires and is desired. I understand these two poems from a developmental perspective, that is, Inanna matures out of childhood into adulthood, and into her role as queen. We see her develop into a clever woman who uses her astuteness for the good of her people; yet, she is also a woman who has physical desire, and can love another. The Inanna presented thus far has matured into adulthood.

Perhaps a modern-day embodiment of the goddess at this point might appear as a successful executive, her spouse also a top executive. The children are in the "gifted and talented" program in their school. Perhaps the family is able to afford a rather spacious home in a better part of town as they achieve their goals of success (white picket fence optional). Perhaps at some seemingly random point in this idyllic setting, an irruption occurs, either internally or externally. Perhaps a death in the family, a change in career, or marital discord. Or after conquering the world or achieving the life goals, she or he begins to ask the meaning behind what has been accomplished or accumulated thus far.

Psychologically, this is where the poem of her descent begins. The opening lines of the poem states that "Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 52). The line suggests that Inanna sets her ear to a certain frequency of sound, that she "tunes in" to another voice that is different from what has called her thus far. Indeed, Inanna abandons her seven kingdoms in response to hearing the "Great Below." Setting her ear and abandoning her kingdom begins the process of transformation. While she does not yet understand all that will be required of her in this process, she begins her transformation by abandoning her established kingdoms.

In my work as a therapist, several of my patients are at a place in their living where their jobs, relationships, and education have taken them to a point, but are unable to answer their questions of meaning and purpose. Or, as in my experience, my pursuit of a doctorate facilitated the process of setting my ear to another reality. It is usually the beginning of a process in which much of what one believes to be true is challenged.

It is interesting to note that while Inanna abandons her kingdoms, she prepares for her journey by taking up the seven *me* that are worn: a crown, lapis beads, a royal robe, a breast plate, ointment, a golden ring, and her rod. She has yet to completely release her earthly structures and authority at this point. Wolkstein refers to these as talismans which Inanna mistakenly expects will protect or serve her on her journey. She announces her arrival by banging on the gate of the underworld, insisting she be let in, that she has come to witness the funeral of her sister's dead consort, Gugalanna. The first clue that she is in new territory is that the lowly gatekeeper has no idea who she is. When he announces Inanna to her sister, Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld, Ereshkigal demands that she enter the underworld through the seven gates. At each gate, one *me* is removed from Inanna, until she is stripped: "Let the holy

priestess of heaven enter bowed low" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 57). At each gate, as one after another *me* is removed, Inanna protests, "What is this?" to which she is told, "Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned" (p. 58). Upon passing through the seventh gate, Inanna is "naked and bowed low" (p. 60).

Not long ago, in my practice I received a patient belonging to a prominent political family. As we talked, I quickly became aware of an entitlement attitude that pervaded our conversation, which then evolved into my being instructed how I should proceed in therapy. I found my irritation growing into indignation. While I practice in a highly collaborative manner, trusting largely in the patient's perspective as my guide, I was incredulous that this person who sought me out for treatment would immediately begin to dictate to me how I would conduct therapy. I informed him that I did not work that way, and perhaps he should seek another therapist. He looked at me with what I could only interpret as disbelief and said, "You don't know who I am!" Borrowing a line from a television show, I replied, "I know who you are, and to whom you are related. I am one of the few people you will know who will be paid to not care about that." This is the same sentiment with which Ereshkigal commands her sister to enter the underworld. The seven *me* are useless here. What was once powerful and meaningful are no longer so.

Inanna is judged and Ereshkigal strikes her, killing her. She is then hung from a hook and becomes a piece of rotting meat. Prior to her descent, Inanna instructs her servant Ninshubur that if she does not return in three days to seek help from the gods. Perera (1981) notes the wisdom of this action, stating that,

psychologically, [Ninshubur] seems to embody that small part of us that stays above ground while the soul descends, the still conscious and functioning aspect of the psyche

which can witness the events below and above and feel concern for the fate of the soul. It is the part in therapy open to feeling and taking responsibility for action and understanding while most of the patient's energy is below in the unconscious, the part capable of sustaining the therapeutic alliance (p. 63).

While sometimes these descents take place in the process of therapy, others make similar descents into the underworld in other ways as well. Earlier I mentioned that part of my doctoral studies facilitated my descent and what I experienced as a death and impalement on Ereshkigal's hook. During a class on sexuality and depth psychology, what I once understood about myself and the notions I had about sexual identity were challenged. This challenge was, for me, not an academic problem; rather, it was deeply personal. The material I engaged threw me into a place which I still have difficulty articulating. I felt as if I had lost all language with which to make any kind of meaning from my experience. What I experienced was a sort of death. When I entered this program, I knew my notions of myself would be challenged. I did not expect, however, the depth to which I would be challenged, nor the manner in which it came. Maintaining academic requirements became my Ninshubur; by holding onto the necessity to produce something at the end of the course that demonstrated I had at least engaged the material forced me to attempt at least some minimal level of conversation with other parts of my life.

Ninshubur entreats first the sky-god Enlil and then moon-god Nanna-sin, both whom refuse to help. Perera (1981) suggests that both gods refuse out of their alliance to "tidy laws" that leave little room for "those individuals and appetites daring to move beyond collective, conventional confines" (p. 65). Wolkstein & Kramer (1983) echoes Perera stating that neither Enlil nor Nanna-sin have any "appreciation or understanding of why Inanna might have gone on such a journey. Both . . . are angry that Inanna should pursue a direction that is different from

theirs" (p. 159). It is significant to note that both Enlil and Nanna-sin are paternally related to Inanna.

It is from Inanna's maternal side that rescue comes in the form of her grandfather Enki, the god of the deep and wisdom. Perera (1981) notes that Enki's realm is located between the underworld and the earth. Perhaps it is fitting that the one who rescues Inanna is the very one from whom she stole the fourteen *me*. They have a history with each other, and perhaps because of this history that Enki holds respect for one who could trick him out of his *me*. He responds not out of his devotion to logic; rather, he responds emotionally: "Inanna! Queen of All the Lands! Holy Priestess of Heaven! What has happened? I am troubled. I am grieved" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 63).

Enki forms two mourners from the dirt under his fingernail, mourners who are genderless, and sends them to attend to Ereshkigal in the underworld. There they sit with her and mirror with empathy Ereshkigal's grief and mourning. Perera (1981) observes that the mourners "express the suffering of existence that Ereshkigal now feels; for consciousness has come into her realm and with it consciousness of pain" (p. 70), and I wonder if it is Inanna who has somehow brought with her the painful consciousness that Ereshkigal now suffers.

Perera (1981) describes the relationship between Inanna and Ereshkigal as bipolar, meaning they are two aspects of the same goddess. Inanna is now dead, and it is Ereshkigal who is suffering in the underworld. Likewise, Meador (2000) is aware of the complexity of Inanna (and I think here she means the Inanna who has been transformed after her return from the underworld) when she says

more than any other goddess or god in the Sumerian pantheon, Inanna embodies the totality of "What Is." In that regard she represents the attempt of the Sumerian psyche to

contain and to organize their apprehension of the chaotic, indecipherable, ineffable mystery of the known and unknown universe. She is their version of a personification of the whole of reality (p. 12).

Elsewhere, Meador says of Inanna that she is

an attempt to bring together the seemingly chaotic forces of the universe into one unifying, and therefore orienting, personification. . . . [She] is the supreme expression of the unity in the plurality of the universe. . . . Inanna is a unique outbreak of a particular consciousness attempting to embody and define itself. She is an expression of the Mesopotamian psyche that manifested itself in this paradoxical, complex, divine woman (pp. 16-17).

Could it be that Ereshkigal's pain is the complexity of Inanna in underworld form, that what we witness in this myth is a bifurcated goddess and that during the course of this mythic episode, each will become whole.

The mourners succeed in rescuing Inanna. She is brought back to life, and according to the poem itself, in an unusual twist she is allowed to return to the earth on the condition that she find someone to take her place. The judges of the underworld make what is perhaps the most poignant statement in this poem as they release her: "No one ascends from the underworld unmarked" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 68). Indeed.

Inanna returns to her kingdom accompanied by demons to assure she will indeed send a replacement. Upon her return, Ninshubur as well as her two sons acknowledge her return by throwing themselves in the dirt at her feet. When Inanna approaches her beloved Dumuzi the king, he failed to acknowledge her presence. Wolkstein & Kramer (1983) hypothesize both Inanna's and Dumuzi's thoughts:

Dumuzi: I ruled the kingdom, kept order while she adventured into chaos. Now she wants to reclaim her authority on earth. Her unsettling journey and demons bring turmoil into the kingdom. They are her concern, not mine. I must continue to carry out my all-consuming task of governing the people and state of Sumer.

Inanna: I placed him on the throne, gave him his position. I loved him and he left me to attend to affairs of state. While I went to deal with matters affecting my deeper soul, he used my powers to make himself [sic] more important. Once I was his whole world; now he refuses to descend from his throne to help me (p. 162).

One can appreciate both perspectives, but it is Dumuzi's fate to replace his lover. The feminine has returned and it is the masculine that must now make the journey to the underworld to share in this fate of transformation. In requiring Dumuzi's submission to underworld forces, the myth is lifted out of a gendered story, for both man and woman must undergo this experience. Some go willingly, as in Inanna, and others like Dumuzi resist. The myth seems to make the point, nonetheless, that this descent is necessary for life to go on.

Perera (1981) makes the point that Inanna's resurrection and return to earth are transformative; she is no longer bound by a masculine definition of femininity, that is, demure, sweet, or deferential. She is, instead, connected to a deeper sense of her own power out of which she is no longer hesitant to act.

[Women] let their own needs be turned aside when they are seen as motherly or commiserated with. They lose true relatedness to allow themselves to merge, but such merging is simply a way of avoiding confrontation. It keeps a woman's strength, which she needs to foster her individual integrity, in the underworld (p. 83).

This point need not remain only with women, however. Anyone whose voice is diminished may find in this myth a model for revitalizing one's power. Many of my patients are women who live under the burden of masculine ideals of what and how women should be; yet, I also am aware that many of the men I treat are also under the same burden. Just as women bear the tyranny (?) constrictive gendered notions, so also do men. I find that the men I treat are just as affected by the Inanna story as are women, and that they find it somehow freeing.

Reactions toward women who undergo this experience include words like "bitch" and "cunt." The origin of the word "cunt" comes from the Germanic, meaning a hollow place or container. It is also a derivative of the Oriental goddess Cunti and is connected with words such as cunning, knowledge, and wisdom (Meador, 2000). The word became derogatory during modern times, to reflect a woman who acted out of her own wisdom or knowledge. One need only look to the modern example of Martha Stewart and her "castration" in the legal system for becoming too powerful. A woman (or man) who undergoes this descent and returns is transformed into someone who is able to speak outside conventional wisdom from within their own knowing.

Perhaps the myth offers a model by which any one of us, man or woman, might allow our constructed notions of self to be challenged and even killed to allow space for other less constricting constructions of self develop. O'Hare-Lavin (2000) speaks of the struggle many women have in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in relating to a "higher power," saying that the models for higher power seem to be mostly male role models, such as "Christ, Buddha, Moses, Icarus, King Arthur" etc (p. 198). She suggests that women's journeys in recovery might be different from men's, positing that the Inanna myth might serve as a "lower power" in which women might find strength. Likewise, I wonder whether men might also benefit from seeking a

lower power. Hillman (1992) critiques modern psychologies that focus on the peak experiences as being “one-sided” and “simplistic,” and do not take into account other aspects of life such as decay, catastrophes, or “inert stupidity,” resulting in a psychology that is “naïve, if not delusional” (p. 65). Such could be said of any approach that focuses most, if not all of its energies on experiences of height.

In my descent and subsequent partial return, I find myself trusting less in Apollonian logic, and am somehow in touch with a mystery that I continue to struggle articulating. This mystery, which is kin to what Perera (1981) refers to as a connection to the rhythms of life that are “preverbal and pre-image,” has become more of a guiding force in almost all areas of my work; perhaps understanding and articulating this rhythm in the various aspects of my life is my life’s work. In my academic as well as professional work, I find myself trusting more in this mysterious rhythm to lead me, and in doing so have found that the work I do, while it may at times not adhere to strict logic, has become more meaningful both to me and to my patients. Is it possible that such descents move us in closer contact or connection with an instinctual part of ourselves that had previously been ignored or invisible? By giving Inanna a place of significance in the psychological pantheon that honors her age and wisdom for both men and women, we can then make room for a connection with our instinctual life to inform and empower our life work.

References

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