

THE FEMININE

The Masculine and Feminine Principle

The term "feminism" does not accurately convey the way I want to talk about my sense of myself as a woman. I cling to a broader meaning of the feminine in life, and its opposite, the masculine—beyond gender stereotype. Jung talked of "the feminine principle," "the masculine principle," regarding both of these as underlying the basic structure of human beings, their ways of acting and thinking in the world. He regarded every human being as containing both principles, and although our core concepts of each are initially rooted in our experience of our actual father and mother, there is something more fundamental, something universal about the way we conceive of and express these two opposites. He suggests that this universal element is derived from "the collective unconscious"—those primal instincts occurring in all cultures in every age, manifest in sculpture and poetry, in law and architecture, in cultural and religious ceremonies and traditions.

It is hard for Western minds to reach beyond the literal man and woman and to see the deeper level of masculine and feminine. The heart of Jungian analysis centers on the integration of these two opposites within us. It does not stop at analyzing the outer marriage where these conflicts play out, but turns primary attention to the inner marriage—where the dueling masculine and feminine need integration. This is not the annihilation of one by conquest, but it is the creative uniting of opposites for the sake of birthing something new—an obvious parallel to the conception and birth of a child. Thus, in interpreting dreams, I look at male or female figures as symbolizing some masculine or feminine aspect of myself, rather than looking at them as representing actual men or women. The difference in seeing symbols this way is transformative.

What is the masculine principle within us? It is that which initiates, decides, discerns, penetrates. Left alone, it can become critical, cruel, ruthless, destructive. The feminine principle receives, listens, intuits, waits, perceives. Left alone, it is in danger of losing its power, falling into complaints, blaming, irrationality. Integrated together, it enables a person to act with both decisiveness and patient wisdom—allowing life to unfold, and taking action at the right moment. These are not two types of people—men and women. These are the two sides of each person.

The Feminine as it Developed in Me

I came to these ideas late in life, but they resonate. They help explain my therapy at a deeper level. In therapy, I was focused on my sense of myself as a woman in relationship to men. I interpreted my years as a single professional woman as drawing out a certain masculine quality—traveling independently, airing my views confidently in committee meetings composed primarily of men, taking charge of major events with competence. I always felt equal to the men around me—sometimes superior intellectually.

By way of example, in my Pioneer Girls staff days, I had memberships in a few professional associations, and thus attended national conferences annually. I served on committees of these organizations. Most of the committee members were men, which meant that the job of secretary was often delegated to me. I don't think these men were used to assertive secretaries, however. And I saw the secretarial pen as mightier than the sword of chairmanship. As we discussed a motion, a discussion in which I was an active participant, I was often the one to suggest the wording, and became adept in doing this in a way that ensured the inclusion of my viewpoint, as well as satisfying the concerns of other members. Since I would be the one to report our findings to the larger body, I was given both the responsibility and opportunity to cast our deliberations in a light that reflected my take on things. A little "poetic license" served me well in my task.

Why was I not drawn to the feminist movement? Whereas I saw that housewives needed their consciousness raised, as a single professional, I did not think I suffered from the same slights and obstacles my married peers did. I see now that this was not totally true. My behavior in dominantly male settings such as that described was a strategic accommodation on my part. Men still ruled. I had not altered their basic structure of consciousness. Particularly in religious circles was this the case. In a secular organization, such as the American Camping Association, a much more egalitarian ethos prevailed, and women took real leadership.

Therapy changed my sense of myself as feminine. While my peers in the late sixties were embarking on the fledgling women's movement, and my peers were "going natural"—tossing aside makeup, girdles and elaborate coiffures, as symbolic of their obsession with remaining attractive to men—I was eagerly proceeding to pay attention to my clothes, adorn myself with makeup and jewelry, like any 1950s adolescent. I spontaneously experimented with flirting—and this at a time when flirting was passé_ among the burgeoning feminist enclave at the University of Chicago.

But I loved it. I felt whole. In control of my life. A woman. The external cultural changes in me were crucial. Now they signify to me the emergence

within me of a different spirit, a deepened consciousness. My independence had a boastful edge to it. "I don't need a man." Which was flagrantly false, hiding both my intense desire for a relationship to a man, and my fear that I was incapable of attracting or sustaining one.

I laugh at myself in those days—reveling in the artifices of female intrigue. But I also feel a gentle tolerance. I needed those two years of experimentation and growth. The "real woman" in me was solidly present and would emerge in marriage to a strong man.

The Inner Feminine Woman

Parental influence is strong and it took years for me to incorporate the good passed on to me, and simultaneously recognize the part missing in my development into a woman, conscious of my inner feminine self. Primitive cultures have devised initiation rites to mark this change in self-perception as a "woman of a tribe". Some of those rites are drastic and now decried as killing the true feminine. In my own American culture, I observed the way some mothers find a way to honor the onset of the menses now—but this was not common when I was raised. The 16th birthday, the driver's license, and graduation at each stage of education become markers.

But I lacked these things and see how I was left on my own to discover my emerging sense of feminine agency through my inner journey—much later in life, past adolescence. Therapy at age 37 was powerful, but perhaps more telling was the attention to inner life that therapy spawned.

Dreams Uncover the Deeper Initiation

Then, when in my 50s, other women began approaching me for counsel, I knew I needed to delve deeper and that deeper track often emerged in dreams. They uncovered a less conscious story—one I had to mine in order to understand its significance.

One such experience was especially powerful because of its resonance both with my own original transformative experience in therapy twenty years before, but also with wisdom gleaned from my wide readings of authors who understood the linkage between my dreams and universal mythic themes. It depicted a tender and moving scene that caused me to name it "The Story of My Initiation Into Womanhood."

Let me start with the setting: I was learning to "love the darkness," greeting it with a line from an old Simon and Garfunkel song, "Hello, darkness, my old friend." One night, unable to sleep, I got up to draw. I needed to make vertical motions in various colors, the dark shades on the left and light pastels on

the right. The drawing reminded me of my inexplicable and experience in therapy, the sensation of life through my body as I lay prone on my bed.

I had no name for that experience at the time, but now I was given a dream that seemed to offer a meaning and also to pertain to my present circumstances. The dream symbolized the process of initiation of a young girl into womanhood.

A young girl was lying on a bed, surrounded by three women: her mother, a dark haired woman and me. The dark-haired woman was waiting to initiate the young girl into womanhood.

I made a drawing of the young girl being initiated, her body stretched out on a bed, her rounded buttocks exposed to view. I could feel the ceremonial solemnity of the occasion, the tender solicitousness of the mother figure standing nearby, and the quivering expectancy of the young girl. I remembered my own experience in therapy years before: the pulsating spiritual-sexual energy resting in my body at the base of my spine, and being released in a moment of overpowering sensation as it moved upward through my body and exited from the top of my head. My own initiation into womanhood had taken place in my therapy twenty years earlier, but the ecstasy and mystery were still palpably present to me. Now the dream seemed to be signaling another initiation—into something I could not yet name, a quality of spiritual consciousness.

Who was the dark-haired woman who was going to do the initiating? I thought I found a clue in reading Marion Woodman's descriptions of the "Black Madonna"—a dark maternal figure who appears in the dreams of many women (and some men). I made connections to my life on three levels:

First, she is the awakened positive mother who is constellated after the purging of the negative mother complex.

I was in the process of entering into a new phase of work with women that required the awakening of my long-dormant maternal qualities. My strong opposition to the "mother complex" had to melt in order to allow an inborn but repressed ability to nurture flourish. Black Madonna energy represented that earthy sensibility which was cut off from my consciousness growing up, perhaps not so much by either of my parents as by the religious environment reinforcing a negative view of feminine earthiness. My intellectual self had thrived, to the detriment of full development of my own positive mothering qualities.

Second, the Black Madonna is black because she has literally or figuratively been through the fire and has emerged with an immense capacity for love and understanding.

The fire was an all too familiar metaphor in my current life experience. I only dimly saw that its fruit would be manifest in a capacity to love. Already, I was becoming more able to simply sit with clients in their suffering, without having to fix everything or reassure too quickly.

Third, the Black Madonna is nature impregnated by spirit, accepting the human body as the chalice of the spirit. She is the redemption of matter, the intersection of sexuality and spirituality.

It was my body—the temple of the Spirit—that was speaking to me with such urgency during these months, and which thereby was insisting upon being acknowledged and honored as giving voice to deep inner wisdom of the unconscious. It would take a lifetime to mine the mystery of this integration of matter and spirit.

Companioning Other Women

Around this time I was given another dream that extended the meaning of this mystery as I began listening to women navigating their own inner journey.

I am driving along a road in a wilderness recreation area. I am headed toward "Pioneer Lodge"—an Indian medicine lodge, which holds the mysteries of healing. As I continue, I drive through watery sections, some quite deep. My vehicle appears to be amphibious for it has no difficulty navigating.

I come to a forest glade where there is considerable water. I have been noticing a number of animals. Each appears, one at a time, and is identical, the size of a large dog or cheetah, but furry and gray like a woodchuck. Though I initially have some apprehension, I see that the animal is benign and poses no threat. When it goes into the water, it develops a large snout and looks like a hippopotamus. I find it amusing.

In the glade, I manage a U-turn, brushing quite close to one of the animals. I drive back to the lodge and park. Inside there are all the signs of life—a cozy interior, but the person in charge is not home. I remember using his towel.

Working on this dream with my analyst, I drew a picture of the animal, which he suggested might be "my animal" the way shamans have a symbolic animal as part of their healing. The animal, when in water, developed the snout, a sign of having a "nose" for the unconscious. Intuition. I wondered, can I trust my instincts in counseling others?

As we talked, the analyst pointed out how my intense relationship to my own father had inundated me with "too much spirit" and that my dream was compensating by having me enter the forest and the watery places (signs of the

feminine) and encounter the furry animal. The simple words, "too much spirit," uttered softly by the analyst, reverberated within me as deeply true. Something broke free inside me, allowing me to go into the feminine at a deeper level than ever before.

Was there something I needed to look at in the way I had been parented that might uncover the fullness of my womanly feminine self? I decided to take a look at that history with clearer eyes and heart.

The Parenting Source—and Its Outworking

When I began writing about my parents' marriage two years ago, trying to see it from inside as much as possible, I saw the underlying threads of the masculine and feminine principles at work in them. The intertwining was fairly complex: Dad born partly blind, and shadowed by a protective mother, and balanced by a lighthearted entrepreneurial father, turned to literature for his concept of ideal womanhood—Dante's Beatrice. Taking steps toward independence from his parents was a priority for him; his conversion at age 23 established the first wedge separating him from his mother. One could argue that his embrace of an experiential Christian faith—as opposed to the more formal liberal intellectual assent to faith of his mother—was essential to his being able to become a man independent of her strong influence. He did not marry until 28.

Robert Bly in *Iron John* describes the necessary severing that must take place between a man and his mother in order for the son to enter manhood. He uses an ancient fairy tale, "Iron John," to depict the task the young prince must accomplish to free the "wild man" (Iron John) from his locked cage. The young boy must find the key in order to unlock the cage. Iron John tells him, "The key is under your mother's pillow." Bly enlarges on the theme, pointing out the necessity of stealing the key, not merely asking for it tamely and politely, in order for the boy to set free his capacity for virile strength.

I have felt that my Dad was in danger of being overprotected by his mother, that he made concentrated attempts to bond with his father, and longed for independence. His religious conversion, followed by his choice of a ministerial vocation and marriage to a Maine farm daughter, all contributed to his severing of ties that might have kept him undeveloped.

The heritage passed on to me and my brother is mixed. Dad could not teach Phil sports; he was not mechanically minded; he made limited use of carpenter's tools; he was physically frail. And yet he hitchhiked to Kansas with my brother at least once, possibly twice, sleeping outdoors in a haystack together. But most of his adventures were of the mind.

How did my brother then navigate the rite of passage through puberty to manhood? Joining the Navy at seventeen must have helped, producing a sudden immersion into a masculine world, a world that made grown men cry during Basic Training under the onslaught of tear gas.

So my brother Phil is a brother, a husband, a father. How had he worn these roles is the story he was left to unravel. Both of us had been formed by our heritage—the parsing of which has occupied me continuously in the past decade, as manifest by my writing.

The feminine for me was modeled by my mother who grew up swathed in traditional farm life with its rigid separation of roles by gender, requiring considerable strength and independence for the female. She harnessed and rode the horses, drove the hay wagon, pitched hay, fed and pigs, killed chickens. My competencies differ, but the attitude feels familiar: “I can do this.”

But men were in charge in her childhood, and that included my father when she married, even though he had to rely on her physical strength and her eyes for so many things. So I introjected my mother’s inner masculine as I moved into my profession, taking charge and directing, and my father’s inner feminine was my model for listening and patient waiting in my present vocation. As time takes me farther away from Mother and Dad’s death, the more I recognize the imprint of each parent on me. At the same time, I feel more in touch with the unique stamp of my separate self, distinct from either mother or father. And in so doing, I sometimes feel I am more like my brother in my basic characterological structure than either of them.

Walking My Own Path

Towards the end of my therapy, one especially vivid dream stands forever in my memory:

I am walking through a sunlit pine forest. The air is like Colorado, the smell of pine reminiscent of childhood scenes in New Hampshire. I am walking on the vivid rust-colored carpet of pine needles beneath the tall pines bending gently in the wind. The sky overhead is cerulean blue with massive cumulus clouds aloft. My parents are strolling leisurely beside me. We approach a fork in the path. I watch as my parents go off toward the right together, while I walk on ahead over a mounded rise up toward the blue sky. I know that I have been set free to make my own journey. I am leaving them lovingly.

The dream marked a momentous choice I was making in my new awareness of myself as an adult woman—to walk my own path, away from the

powerful shadows of my mother and father. It would be many years before I could unravel the legacy they gave me. Meanwhile, I was set free to begin a new journey, one that would lead to a deeper experience of love than I imagined possible.

Afterword in 2019:

My brother died a few months ago, moving me to read the words here with more objectivity. I see the way each of us worked with the legacy we received in a variety of ways. I catch a fuller glimpse of the intricate patterns leading to my entry into marriage—a marriage whose fiftieth anniversary we are at this moment celebrating!

It is a good time for me to pause and appreciate the distinctive character of the melding of the feminine and masculine as it is interwoven in daily experience for my husband and me. We have taken the forty days of Lent to consider day-by-day in conversation the ways in which our own interweaving process has developed in the past, and what it means for our future—as we live on into our old age.