Spring 81

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

A JOURNAL OF
ARCHETYPE
AND
CULTURE

Spring 2009

SPRING JOURNAL
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Confronting Death Mother: An Interview with Marion Woodman

DANIELA SIEFF

Marion Woodman, LLD, DHL, Ph.D., is a Jungian analyst, teacher, and author of numerous books, including *The Owl Was a Baker's Daughter; Addiction to Perfection; The Pregnant Virgin; The Ravaged Bridegroom; Leaving My Father's House; Conscious Femininity; Dancing in the Flames* (with Elinor Dickson); *Coming Home to Myself* (with Jill Mellick); *The Maiden King* (with Robert Bly); and *Bone: Dying Into Life*. She has been exploring the relationship between psyche and soma through her work and teaching for 30 years. A visionary in her own right, she has worked with the analytical psychology of C.G. Jung in original and creative ways. She is the Chair of the Marion Woodman Foundation and lives in London, Ontario, Canada.

Daniela Sieff: Much of your recent work focuses on the "Death Mother" archetype. Could you describe this archetype?

Daniela Sieff has a Master's Degree in psychology and anthropology and a Ph.D. in biological anthropology. Her academic research, with the semi-nomadic cattle-herding Datoga of Tanzania, explored human behavior through the lens of evolutionary theory. She has produced documentaries, written articles, and completed the leadership training program with the Marion Woodman Foundation. She is currently working on a book of interviews which will explore emotional wounding and healing from the perspectives of depth psychology, neuropsychology, and evolutionary anthropology. This interview forms part of a more extensive interview with Marion Woodman, which will appear in that book. She lives on a farm in Hampshire, United Kingdom.

Marion Woodman: The Death Mother wields a cold, fierce, violent, and corrosive power. She is rampant in our society right now. When Death Mother's gaze is directed at us, it penetrates both psyche and body, turning us into stone. It kills hope. It cuts us dead. We collapse. Our life-energy drains from us and we sink into chthonic darkness. In this state we find ourselves yearning for the oblivion of death. Eventually this yearning for death permeates our cells, causing our body to turn against itself. We may become physically ill.

This energy is most destructive when it comes from somebody that we love and trust. It's the archetypal Death MOTHER, which means we are with somebody who is supposed to love us and all of a sudden —bang! It's what happened in the original trauma; we trusted our beloved mother and suddenly we were hit with the realization that we were not acceptable. We realized that our mother wished that we, or some part of us, was dead.

When Death Mother is released from someone's unconscious that person can say something which seems simple and innocuous, but the physical body is changed. I experienced it most dramatically when I was with somebody with whom I was feeling perfectly safe, but it was an extremely sad situation, and the woman turned to me and fired an arrow that was sheer poison. If I hadn't had such a strong heart, I'm sure it would have killed me—but I did experience arrhythmia, which has given me warnings ever since.

Daniela: You've said that if we experience Death Mother while growing up, we internalize the archetype and eventually it becomes written into our physical bodies. Can you expand on this dynamic?

Marion: If, while growing up, we sensed that we were unacceptable to our parents, if we were not wanted, or if we intuited that we threatened our parents, then our nervous system will have become hyper-vigilant. Our cells will have been imprinted with a profound fear of abandonment; as a consequence our body will numb-out the moment that we feel threatened. As soon as we realize that we are no longer pleasing somebody, we freeze; we are thrown back into our belief that we are unlovable, which then activates our ever-present, but unconscious, terror of annihilation. In such moments the autonomic nervous system says "NO" and the ego withdraws. I call this being catapulted into "possum mentality"; as soon as we sense a whiff of

rejection we are paralyzed with fear, we close down and we stay absolutely still in order to survive. Eventually, that possum becomes a permanent feature in our body-psyche; then life is experienced as a minefield in which we are knocked down by explosions that are inaudible to others. If there is unconscious hostility in the environment, the inner body, acting autonomously, retreats and falls over "dead". At the same time we may develop defense mechanisms that manifest in an armor of fat, oedema, vomiting, anything to keep poison out. Ultimately, our body may turn against itself as it does with cancer or auto-immune diseases. Death Mother has been incorporated into the fabric of our cells.

Last summer, at the age of seventy-nine, following a cataract operation, I developed cellulitis which spread into my bloodstream and became life-threatening. While in intensive care, I had the following dream:

There are two immense lobsters in a huge, long concrete drain-pipe. The lobsters have blood-red heads, and are trying to kill each other. I am also in the drain and I am terrified. There is a black door in the wall of the drain, and I am trying to open it so I can escape. I can't get the door to open. I bang on it with all my might, hoping that someone will hear me and come to help. Nobody comes. I am left with the killer lobsters.

As I understood it, the drain symbolized my blood vessels and the lobsters my blood. Thus the dream described what was happening to me—instead of supporting my life, my poisoned blood was taking me towards death. Moreover, being in the grip of Death Mother I wanted to escape through the black door, and disappear into darkness. On waking I knew that had I opened that door and walked through it, I would have died. Fortunately, it didn't open and I'm still here!

Daniela: It seems to me that having internalized Death Mother while growing up, when we find ourselves doing something that we deem to be unacceptable, we silently direct our own Death Mother back on ourselves. At such times we aren't aware of what is happening; all we know is that we have fallen into a self-created and private hell.

Marion: Exactly. If we face Death Mother while growing up, we will inevitably internalize her, and if we have internalized her, then we

will either project Death Mother onto others—seeing her in our boss, our lover, or our children, or we will act her out by directing her energy onto others, and/or onto ourselves. Until we begin to examine what we are carrying within own psyches, we risk being possessed by the Death Mother archetype.

Daniela: In terms of our lives, what does it mean to have internalized Death Mother?

Marion: Change is fundamental to being alive—to remain fixed is to rot. If the Death Mother archetype is part of our body-psyche, then profound fear means that we try to destroy anything that might precipitate meaningful change. We will do anything to ensure that our life feels safe and secure, even if it is static, rotten, and dead. Our way of relating to the world is written in stone. Death Mother traps potentially vibrant energy and holds it in a cold, rigid, lifeless form. We are imprisoned by an energy that petrifies and ossifies.

Daniela: Can you give an example of what this might look like?

Marion: When I was five years old I was very quiet, but I had lots of vitality. I was in the kindergarten of Sunday School and found myself being pushed out through garlands of flowers. They were beautiful and I wondered where I was going. People said, "You are leaving kindergarten and you are going to junior school." I replied, "Why would I want to go to junior school? I love kindergarten and I don't want to go to somewhere new!" That has been the story of my life. I did love kindergarten, but my fear of change kicked in whenever I was faced with having to take the next stage in my life.

Daniela: And that trauma was so strong that you lived it time and time again...

Marion: Time and time again! During my training to become a teacher, we were assigned a class to teach. I would be in front of my class speaking, but the room would be filled with a painful silence. I was making the motions with my lips but no sounds emerged. I couldn't understand it at all. After the class our supervisor asked, "Marion, what is happening to you?" All I could reply was, "I don't know. I can't make any sound." At the end of that term I got ninety-

eight marks for my lesson plans, and zero for my teaching. The terror was too great.

Daniela: So every time you go into the new there is terror?

Marion: Every time I am overcome with the terror of getting born into a new reality. In every case, I was moving out of an area in which I could perform well into a new area, and I was fairly sure that some terrible disaster would happen, so I wanted to stay put. Being born had taken me into a hostile and dangerous environment, and that seeded a bone-deep ambivalence about change and growth. But if I was going to live my life as fully as possible, I had to discover the buried parts of my personality. I had to risk the expansion that gives life meaning. However, with the archetypal energy of Death Mother permeating the cells of one's body that is incredibly difficult.

Daniela: The paradox is that the anticipated disaster, which for you was manifest in physical illness, occurred because you were fighting against the new, rather than stepping into it.

Marion: Exactly—but there is the trauma. In every one of those situations I was afraid there would not be love. I was certain that I would be found to be unacceptable in the new domain. It was my own terror which permeated my cells and which came to the surface through illness. It was my self-generated fear that stressed my body and created hell.

Daniela: The danger is that when we are overwhelmed by that terror we give in to Death Mother, which can literally mean succumbing to death. I knew an intelligent and vibrant woman who was terrified of being alone. She was married to an older man and had said that when her husband died she would commit suicide. By the time she reached her 60s her husband had severe dementia. Then she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her immediate response was, "That's a relief!" Six months later she was dead.

Marion: Relief at the prospect of death comes straight out of trauma. Trauma and fear open the door of the psyche to Death Mother, and once Death Mother has walked through that door we are swamped by unconscious lethargy and paralysis. We are over-come with a desire

to sink into comfortable, unconscious womb-like darkness, to give up and end the struggle. That state of existence is more common than we realize, but it's rare for anybody to allow that dynamic into consciousness, let alone to speak it in the way that your friend did.

Daniela: It seems that one of the other things that Death Mother does is to destroy our love for what genuinely moves us. Being fully alive means being able to listen to our hearts, but the Death Mother says "No! You can't love that! Loving that isn't acceptable. You need to love THIS instead."

Marion: That aspect of Death Mother is vividly illustrated in the myth of Medusa. The myth begins when the gorgon makes love to Poseidon in Athena's temple. Athena, born from the head of Zeus, is a father's daughter; her home is in her intellect. By making love to Poseidon in Athena's temple, the gorgon exposes the embodied passion that Athena isn't living. Athena doesn't want her shadow exposed, and so she transforms the beautiful gorgon into the Medusa—a monster with snakes instead of hair, and a look that turns all to stone. Medusa's energy is synonymous with that of Death Mother, and the gorgon was turned into Medusa because she dared to express her love. As you suggest, one of the tragic consequences of repeated encounters with Death Mother is that we are cut off from love.

Daniela: Can you give an example of how that might be manifest?

Marion: When I began working with my first analyst, Dr. Bennet, our work went very well. Then I started turning up for my session and he wasn't there, or worse, he was with another client. I concluded that I wasn't very interesting or important, and that he couldn't be bothered with me. After about four weeks of this I was walking away from yet another session that he hadn't bothered to turn up to, when his wife saw me on the street. She called out, "You better come in," but feeling hurt and abandoned, I replied, "No! I won't!'" and I walked away. I just got in though my front door when the phone rang. It was Dr. Bennet. "I want you to come over here at five o'clock for tea", he said. Ungraciously, I replied, "I'll think about it!" He repeated himself, but with rather more force, "You WILL be here for tea at five o'clock." I gave in. When I arrived he said, "You claim that I missed your sessions. Let me see your diary. It is you that have written them down

incorrectly!" I didn't believe him. He challenged me to look at my history saying, "If anybody tries to give you something, you set it up so they can't!" He reminded me of what we had already talked about, "Can you see what you did to that relationship... and to that one... and to that one? As soon as the person truly loved you, you couldn't accept it and found a way to leave. Now you are trying to do that with me. By writing down the times incorrectly your unconscious has set you up to miss your sessions, while being able to blame me for the disintegration of our relationship. You will get rid of me before I get rid of you. You won't take the chance that I'll stay with you, because you are sure that I'll abandon you." He was right. As soon as my deepest love was involved, what came up was my terror of being abandoned. An unconscious and internalized Death Mother was running the show, so I didn't trust my love for others, or the love of others for myself. I was cut off from love in a way that was sabotaging my life.

Daniela: I've heard you say that Death Mother kills the imagination and destroys metaphor through the concretization of that which needs to be explored symbolically. Can you expand on this dynamic?

Marion: Death Mother does indeed kill the imagination through the concretization of metaphors, and the result can be tragic. Metaphors activate a wide array of different brain circuits, so when we are cut off from metaphorical thinking we compromise the process of psychological integration. When we concretize something that needs to be understood metaphorically, we seal it into a dead and isolated world. Additionally, if we cannot relate to metaphors, we are denied access to the archetypal world, whereupon it comes into our lives through warped and toxic routes.

For example, psychological growth is natural; it will happen either creatively or destructively. If our inner Death Mother strangles this process, then the need to grow may be concretized. That could take the form of putting on weight, or, more tragically, it might happen through the development of cancer. In other words, the imperative to grow will find a way to become manifest, and if we don't allow it to happen in its authentic domain, it looks for expression in the concrete world, with potentially tragic consequences.

The confusion between the literal and the metaphorical is symptomatic of addiction, and the results are invariably catastrophic.

We confuse our need for spirit with alcohol. In seeking to live the archetype of union, we get hooked on compulsive and meaningless sexuality. Our unfulfilled desire for nurturance is concretized in an insatiable hunger for chocolate and food. Concretized metaphors destroy our lives. When we turn to the concrete, it poisons us.

More generally, addicts know that something has to die; they know that they need to surrender to something larger than their egos and their fears, but because they aren't able to surrender the defense mechanisms that they developed to survive, they look for seemingly easy alternatives. A binge is driven both by a desire to feel all-powerful, and by a desire to surrender to something bigger than oneself. It is an attempt to go beyond the ego and to connect with the numinous in a way that will instigate a new beginning. A new sexual conquest will bring a fresh start. We finish the bottle of wine in order to forget, and thus wipe the slate clean. We polish off all the chocolate and then throw up, in order to purge ourselves, and so begin anew. But when we succumb to an addictive binge, we are trapped in a vicious circle. There is no change and no learning. We do not connect to the longed-for archetypal energy. We do not uncover our buried self. Instead, we are caught in mindless repetition.

This confusion between metaphorical and literal death runs even deeper in the addict. Addicts who have concretized the psychological edict, "death to the old, life to the new," will be harboring an unconscious belief that it is they that need to die, rather than their behavior. At the deepest level, every addict falls into the insidious clutches of Death Mother. Addictions are ultimately symptoms of an unconscious and concretized death wish.

Daniela: What role does fear play in the concretization of metaphor?

Marion: Whatever we fear we tend to concretize, only to find that what has been written in stone continues to oppress us. My father was a minister and I was very drawn to the world of spirit, however my mother was terrified by that aspect of who I was. She was responsible for the practical side of our family life and she feared for my sanity, and for my ability to cope in the everyday world. In many ways she was right—you have to have your feet on the ground in order to cope with the everyday world. However, in the face of her fear I had to repress the spiritual part of myself. Eventually, it found its way to the surface

through the back door of anorexia. Starving oneself is a sure-fire way to get into spirit: the thinner you are, the lighter you are, and the lighter you are, the happier you are. Starvation can take you higher into spirit than alcohol; every anorexic that I've worked with has harbored a yearning to rise into spirit. But because the spiritual yearning has been concretized, the anorexic is on the road to death.

Daniela: Although one side of anorexia is a concretized desire for spirit, would you say that at the opposite pole anorexia can also symbolize the experience of having endured profound emotional hunger during childhood?

Marion: That is fair. Addictions have many layers to them; they are replete with opposites. They are a manifestation of the desire to live what we have been unable to live in any other way; at the same time they may offer us an image of what we have suffered. On yet another level they represent a slow, but relentless, march towards premature death.

Daniela: You've said that insatiability is another of Death Mother's characteristics. Could you talk about that?

Marion: One layer of insatiability derives from the fact that in chasing after concrete goals we can never be satisfied. Chocolate does not provide the nurturance we seek, but we mistakenly believe that if only we can get a little more of it, then maybe we will finally be satiated. The rise into spirit provided by alcohol crashes down to hell when we wake to find ourselves lying in our own vomit, but maybe if we have another drink we can get back up. As Emily Dickinson says in her characteristically concise and poignant way,

> To fill a Gap
> Insert the Thing that caused it —
> Block it up
> With Other — and 'twill yawn the more —
> You cannot solder an Abyss
> With Air.

When we look to the concrete to satisfy the needs of our soul, we are attempting to solder an abyss with air; thus we become trapped in a vicious spiral of insatiability.

Another layer of insatiability comes to the fore within the context of our human relationships. When Death Mother has been internalized, our lack of faith in life constellates a compulsive drive to grasp what we think we need. A child's authentic spark may be petrified into submission by repeated encounters with the Death Mother, but ultimately there is no such thing as triumph by force, even if that force is elegantly disguised. Domination is domination and the body-psyche that has been tyrannized has learned its lessons well. In its desolation, it compensates by becoming possessive, clinging to objects or people, investing them with magical powers. Dependent on these talismans for a sense of vitality, the body becomes ferocious in its demands to possess and control them.

In this fragile and wounded state we cannot allow others to be who they are. We need to manipulate them. What people call love is often an unconscious quest for power. How many children have heard their parents say, "I only want the best for you", when what the parents actually mean is, "I am too scared and insecure to allow you to live your life!" How often are we nice to somebody—burying our anger and disappointment and professing our love for them—when we are actually trying to manipulate them into staying around because we are terrified of abandonment and loneliness? Paradoxically, an overwhelming desire to please turns us into a walking power principle; by pleasing others we are better able to manipulate them, albeit unconsciously.

If we were not wanted, we feel that we need to force our way in. People with nothing hold on very tight, suffocating those who cross their path with a compulsive and insatiable neediness. People who have something to hold onto can relax.

Daniela: In my experience, the archetype of Death Mother is intertwined with that of the victim. When we have Death Mother in our psyche our tendency is to see ourselves as victim, thereby exacerbating the cycle of hopelessness and despair.

Marion: No question! Real suffering burns clean; neurotic suffering creates more and more soot. When we are trapped by Death Mother, we are imprisoned by the neurotic suffering that creates nothing but soot. We are caught in a vicious cycle that is incredibly hard to break

out of; Death Mother constellates the victim which then attracts the killer in ourselves.

One way that becomes manifest is through the belief that we are being punished when illness or depression disturbs our nice, cosy lives. The idea of punishment derives from Death Mother and it is rooted in the lifeless perspective of the victim. If we are genuinely trying to work with our wounds, then it looks quite different. In the first part of my adult life I was an English teacher. I taught for twenty-five years, and I loved my students and my life; but during that time I gradually developed oedema. I felt that I was being punished for some unknown crime. I had starved myself in an attempt to remain thin to no avail. In my eyes, my body had become bloated and ugly. However, I was responsible for what was happening because I was making the wrong choices. Unbeknownst to me I was allergic to a myriad of foods, but I was too disconnected from my body to know what it needed. To find my way I had to let go of my vision of myself as a victim, and figure out what was wrong with MY choices. I had to grow up.

But before I did that, my condition slowly deteriorated to the point where I was sleeping for 2-3 days a week. It was only when I became utterly desperate that I was prepared to risk change. My dreams had suggested that I would find the answers to my oedema through the training I would do in Zurich en route to becoming a Jungian analyst, and I was in such agony that I left the teaching job that I loved and took leave of my husband—not knowing if our marriage would survive —and went to Zurich. It was a turning point. In Zurich I finally began to connect to my body and to listen to it. It was a crucial step in my journey towards living my own life, and paradoxically, I wouldn't have taken that step without the oedema. Making the wrong choice ultimately opened the door to life.

It takes courage and perseverance to arrive at this place. We have to be willing to face the darkness that is in us. As von Franz wrote:

> Every dark thing one falls into can be called an initiation. To be initiated into a thing means to go into it. The first step is generally falling into the dark place and usually appears in a dubious or negative form—falling into something, or being possessed by something. The shamans say that being a medicine man begins by falling into the power of the demons; the one who pulls out of the dark place becomes the medicine man, and the one who

> stays in is the sick person. You can take every psychological illness as initiation. Even the worst things you fall into are an effort at initiation, for you are in something which belongs to you, and now you must get out of it. "The Feminine in Fairytales", *Spring* 1972, p. 64)

So long as we are blind to our inner tyrant, we blame an outer tyrant when we fall into darkness. The focus of our blame can be a person, a political system, a social system, or it can be our own body. But the moment we turn to blame the initiation fails and we remain buried in the darkness. We sink ever more deeply into the clutches of Death Mother.

Daniela: If we remain buried in the darkness, thinking of ourselves as victims, then we develop a propensity to see Death Mother when she is not there. On occasions somebody will say something with a clean and loving energy, but due to our wounds, shame, and victim-identity, we perceive the comment as coming from Death Mother.

Marion: The point that you make is important. As you say, there are times when a person is directing loving energy at us, but due to what we have internalized we mistakenly feel the action as that of Death Mother. That can happen in a myriad of ways. We may misinterpret somebody's comment or actions; our conditioning means that we hear what is not there. Or we may have a teacher who has opened us to our deeper selves and who has helped us find life, but who for whatever reason can no longer be there for us. Then we can experience that withdrawal of life-energy as Death Mother, when it is nothing of the sort. Either way, if we are to grow, we have to remain awake in order to differentiate what is actually happening, and to own what is ours.

Daniela: Similarly, once we become adults, the degree to which we are petrified by Death Mother's attack depends just as much on our own wounds and vulnerabilities as it does on the energy that is directed at us. At times, somebody will attack us with one of Death Mother's arrows, but because the arrow doesn't target our most wounded and shame-infused spot, it has little effect and we are able to protect ourselves in a healthy and clean way. Other times Death Mother's arrow will lock onto our own particular wounds, and we will collapse. Thus, when we are hit by Death Mother, if we can avoid blame

and look inwards to our own response, we have an opportunity to learn about our wounds and defense systems, and that then gives us the chance to take more responsibility for our lives and to grow.

Marion: That is true. The experience of Death Mother will be different for every person, and we are most susceptible where our trauma has left us wounded and vulnerable. As you say, if, when we are hit by Death Mother, we can look inwards instead of getting stuck in the dead-end cycle of blame, then we gain an opportunity to reclaim a little more of our lives.

Daniela: In the myth of Medusa, Perseus—whose task it is to kill Medusa—is warned not to look her in the eye; instead he guides his sword by looking at her reflection in his shield. Similarly, you've said that we can't look Death Mother in the eye. Why?

Marion: It is too dangerous! If we look Death Mother in the eye, we may be overcome by our trauma. We could be turned to stone. We may end up with cancer. So we work with her in reflection. We journal. We work with dreams. We do bodywork. We look at what is happening in our lives. We use a reflective shield because otherwise we are at grave risk. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
>
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind —[1]

Facing Death Mother directly leads to blindness—or worse.

Daniela: In the journey of healing, as we work our way towards the heart of our wounds, we eventually arrive at what is darkest in us. Unless we face that ultimate darkness, it is impossible to take responsibility for ourselves. Surely there comes a time when we need to meet Death Mother directly, if we are to reclaim our lives?

Marion: Ultimately we may have to face Death Mother head-on, but NOT before we are ready. I had no consciousness of what I was facing until my second encounter with cancer. In all my years of analysis I never linked my illnesses to the fact that deep in my cells I harbored the knowledge that as a girl, I was an unwanted child, and that consequently a part of me wanted to die. I knew it, but I couldn't open to it at a deep enough level to make a difference. Instead, I spiralled around that reality—each time seeing its reflection from a different angle.

When I was diagnosed with cancer for the second time I was ready to face it head-on, but by then I had developed huge compassion for myself and for my mother and my father. My mother certainly did the very best she could for me, but deep in her heart she was a suffragette, and in marrying a minister of the church she lost her freedom. She couldn't love her own femininity because the consequences of being a woman meant that she had been unable to live her own life and thus she struggled to love a female child. So I had several reflected encounters —spiralling back round and gradually coming closer, until eventually I was ready to face it. It took years and had I tried to speed it up, it would have killed me.

Daniela: But ultimately we have to confront Death Mother if we are going to claim our life!

Marion: Someday perhaps, but it is not a journey to be undertaken lightly. We need to be ready and we need guides. My guides were Jung, my dreams, the images that came through my bodywork, and poetry —especially the poems of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson's images enabled me to understand what was happening, and reading her poems chronologically I saw that it was her compassion for her mother and her sister that got her through her life. I began to see my mother's struggle. I became immensely grateful to her for doing her best for me. I also saw how my father had done his best. I realized that the child I was had also done the best she could.

Daniela: What is it that turns a person into a conduit for Death Mother?

Marion: Death Mother is born out of despair. It is incubated by the crushed hope of an unlived life. Death Mother is the shadow side

of disappointment. When you look into the eyes of Death Mother you see that they are glazed over with hopelessness. You see a blank look; there is nobody at home. You see an unconscious, frozen, and profoundly wounded body-psyche devoid of authentic feeling. You see somebody with a desperate need to be in control. You see somebody who is driven by will-power.

A person who acts out the Death Mother archetype will have had to split off much that was vibrant, creative, and unique in herself. In fact, the adults who carry the most ferocious manifestation of Death Mother may have been the most creative of children. Tragically, their intense imaginations collided with the rational, rigid world of their parents and teachers who demanded they "be good", where "being good" meant, "Swallow your anger, initiative, and creativity and reflect me, rather than expose all that I have had to push into the shadow..."

An alternative way to act out the Death Mother is for parents to demand that their children live all that they could not live. In this case, the unconscious message transmitted by the parent is, "I have no life, but you will live what I worked so hard to achieve. You will live what I died for!" When these children try to speak their own truth they find themselves looking into the eyes of Medusa, while hearing the insatiable cries of "More, more, more!" "More of what?" the children ask. "The life I never had," comes the answer. When a parent looks to a child to live his or her unlived live, the actual child is obliterated and goes underground.

Often the development of Death Mother is crystallized when we catch a glimpse of the destruction we have wrought, but are unable to face our deeds. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes the "Pale Criminal" as one who cannot face what he has done,

> An idea made this pale man pale. Adequate was he for his deed when he did it, but the idea of it, he could not endure when it was done.

Similarly, Macbeth, while contemplating the murder of Duncan, says,

> If th' assassination
> Could trammel up the consequences

...but of course the consequences cannot be trammelled up, and having murdered Duncan, Macbeth rues,

> I am afraid to think what I have done;
> Look on't again, I dare not.

Many parents are unable to look at what they are doing to their children. Many know that they are failing to be "good enough" parents, but because their own wounds prevent them from changing, they can't bear to think about it. Having banished their failures to the basement of the unconscious, they continued to act out Death Mother's energy, thereby handing her ever-more power. Eventually, they may go past the point of no return. Macbeth speaks for them when he says,

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far that should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er

Daniela: Interestingly, there is an explicit reference to Medusa in Macbeth. On discovering Duncan's body, Macduff cries,

> Approach the chamber and destroy your sight
> With a new Gorgon

And the murdered Duncan did indeed transform into the Medusa in the psyche of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, leading to the cold-blooded slaughter of many of their subjects, and ultimately leading the Macbeths to their own deaths.

Marion: Isn't that silencing? The archetypes in Shakespeare are so exact! The lesson from this is that when we have been in contact with Death Mother we *have* to ask where that energy is in ourselves—we have to bring our subterranean death wish to consciousness, and we also have to look out for moments when we are "attacking" others with Death Mother's energy. If we don't own Death Mother we will live it out!

Daniela: One way to sum it up might be to say that when we are wounded during childhood, we become vulnerable to Death Mother, whereupon our lives become ruled by shame and its concurrent fear of exposure. We fear being exposed as inadequate for who we are. We fear

being exposed as inadequate for what we have done. We fear being exposed as inadequate for what we have not done. We fear that our supposed inadequacies, if exposed, will lead to our abandonment and annihilation. Once we are ensconced in this toxic and shame-fuelled world, we act out the Death Mother that we have internalized. We develop an embodied, yet unconscious, longing for death and, at the same time, we attack, or abandon, anyone who might expose what we have worked so hard to keep buried. We also try to compensate for our terror of abandonment through the unconscious and insatiable drive for power.

Marion: Exactly! Fear is key. If we have faced Death Mother while growing up, and if we have incorporated the resultant terror, we develop an unconscious, yet profound, fear of life itself. We find it ne'er on impossible to surrender to our lives, believing that the consequences will be fatal. We understand receptivity as capitulation; all we can envision is plummeting through chaotic darkness into an abyss that has no bottom. We do everything in our power to avoid that imagined outcome. Even when the door of our cage opens, we struggle to find the courage to walk through it.

Daniela: You contrast the Death Mother energy, which kills life, with the energy of "Death in the Service of Life". Can you elaborate on the difference?

Marion: The energy of Death in the Service of Life is utterly different to that of Death Mother. The energy of Death in the Service of Life is represented within the Hindu tradition as Kali, the goddess who wears a necklace of skulls that can instantaneously change into blooming flowers and then back to skulls again. She is usually depicted with four hands; one of her right hands says "Don't be afraid" and the other offers you a bowl of rice. However, one of her left hands holds a sword and in the other is a human head. Kali brings love, ecstasy, and life, but she also brings darkness, terror, and death. She is the natural cycle of life and death. In the European tradition this energy is best represented by the Baba Yaga of Russian fairy stories. The Baba Yaga's hut lies deep in the forest, and her door is always open to the darkest part of that forest. Her hut turns on chicken legs, dizzying our normal perception. In many stories the fence that surrounds her hut is made

of human bones, and interspersed along the fence are twelve stakes. There are human heads on eleven of them, leaving one empty for the next victim. Traditionally, the Baba Yaga asks the "difficult" questions. She eats naive people who think life should bring them only happiness. She gobbles up the uninitiated, to whom suffering is unacceptable. She devours those who see life in terms of dualistic categories such as white or black, good or evil, life or death.

Daniela: If we want a generic term for the archetypal energy personified by Kali or Baba Yaga, could we call it "Apocalyptic Mother"? The word "apocalypse" derives from the Greek word meaning "to reveal", or more specifically, "to uncover that which has previously been hidden". We also understand apocalypse to mean the coming of a day of judgment, after which the old will be destroyed and a new order will prevail. It seems to me that this is what a meeting with the Baba Yaga, or Kali, entails; a revelation of what has been hidden, death of the obsolete and birth of the new.

Marion: Yes! You have coined a phrase which does capture that archetypal energy.

Daniela: How do we differentiate between Death Mother and Apocalyptic Mother?

Marion: Death Mother prevents new life coming through. She turns life into stone. She encases us in the mantle of lifelessness. What you have called "Apocalyptic Mother" shatters that stone. All change, all growth, presupposes the death of the old. The death induced by Apocalyptic Mother is excruciating, but it instigates change. Apocalyptic Mother precipitates the death of values which are rooted in fear and power. She creates space for the life we have yet to live. She brings about what Death Mother strives to prevent.

The difference between Death Mother and Apocalyptic Mother is best depicted by the contrast between murder and sacrifice. Both kill energy, but the motives behind them are quite different. Murder, committed by Death Mother, derives from the ego's need for power, control, safety, and domination. It is driven by a need to prevent us from living our reality for fear that we will be found lacking and annihilated. Sacrifice is rooted in the ego's surrender to the guidance of the Self in order to transform destructive, although perhaps

comfortable, energy patterns into the creative flow of life. Sacrifice, demands the life-affirming "YES!", which requires all our courage and faith and love to utter.

A life that is being truly lived is constantly burning away the veils of illusion, gradually revealing the essence of who we are. Apocalyptic Mother burns us in her hottest flames to purify us of all that is not authentic. Her energy is impersonal. She doesn't care how painful and terrifying that process is. Her only purpose is to serve life.

How we respond to the Apocalyptic Mother determines whether we experience her as friend or foe. Early in our journey, when Death Mother's strangle-hold is particularly ferocious, and when consciousness is afraid to open itself to the otherness of the unconscious, we experience ourselves as victims of the apocalypse; in time, as we bring Death Mother to consciousness and begin to experience life beyond her clutches, we may gradually come to see ourselves as partners in the apocalyptic process.

Daniela: I once had a dream that spoke to this:

I have given birth to a radiant baby boy, but I am confused and surprised, because I hadn't known that I was pregnant. In fact, I'm not entirely sure when I became pregnant. Then I realize that my son was born nine months after the gardener raped me.

When I had this dream, I was struggling with my inner journey. It was time for me to sacrifice old and toxic ways of being which I no longer needed, however I was fighting against change with all my might. In the end my therapist had to deliver a fierce and painful kick before I would let go of my old ways and allow new life to come in. In this dream my therapist was symbolized by a gardener—somebody who sows new seeds and then protects and nurtures them as they grow. Being raped by the dream-gardener reflected the fact that my therapist was having to be the conduit for the apocalyptic energy, and it also showed that I was not going to open myself to that energy unless I was forced to do so. At times, if Death Mother's energy is to be dissipated, Apocalyptic Mother has to challenge it in an unequivocal way.

Marion: I totally agree. Change means change. Stark honesty, however painful, is needed on this journey toward the Self; the unconscious will not tolerate anything less. One must be willing to

face many cruel truths: those we keep hidden from the light of day, and those we keep hidden from ourselves. Not only do we have to die to a false image of ourselves, but we have to change our outer life accordingly. We may have all the insights, but if we do not incarnate them, they are in vain. We may have to die to our job, to particular relationships, to our faith. Death is agonizing and lonely. If we cannot go there willingly, then at times we need to be kicked, and being kicked by somebody who has our best interests as heart is a hell of a lot better than being kicked by illness or loss!

Daniela: What do we have to do when we meet Apocalyptic Mother?

Marion: The key is to stay awake, to listen to what comes into consciousness, and to open to it. If there is to be healing and growth there can be no cover-up in this meeting. Whether we grow or wither in this encounter depends on whether we cling to our ego's rigid standpoint, or whether we choose to trust the Self and leap into the unknown. Change and healing depend on listening with the inner ear. We have to stop the incessant blather and really listen. Fear keeps us chattering—fear that wells up from the past and fear of future repercussions. This is the place where truth can set us free if we can hear it and if we then have the courage to act on it. If, on meeting Apocalyptic Mother, we can stay awake and face our truth despite our pain and terror, we reclaim a little more of our authentic life. If we fail to stay awake, and shut her in the dungeons of our unconscious, we will sink back into the clutches of Death Mother, whereupon we will eat, drink, smoke, or drive ourselves to death.

Sooner or later, we all meet the Apocalyptic Mother. We meet her every day in the parts of us that need to die in order for new life to come in. We meet her in our crumbling job, our disintegrating marriages, our failed projects, our lost loved one and our fading youth. Whether we face her in those meetings, or push her back into the darkness of our unconscious, is our choice. Do we respond as frightened children, and run back to Death Mother in the hope of regaining control and the illusionary security of a static but dead life? Or do we find the courage to ask, "What is going on here? What is my reality? What is my responsibility?" and thus open the door to becoming the vibrant, creative, and unique adult that we were born to be? Eventually, we

may be forced to answer the Apocalyptic Mother's ultimate question: "Do I want to live?" If the answer is "Yes!", then it no longer matters what anybody else did to me. If the answer is "Yes!", we have to be prepared to take action.

Daniela: It seems that when Apocalyptic Mother is asking, "Do you want to live, or do you want to die?" we are simultaneously meeting Death Mother head-on. At the deepest level the line between Death Mother and Apocalyptic Mother becomes imperceptibly thin; Death Mother forces us to answer the ultimate question asked by Apocalyptic Mother. Ultimately, whether we meet Death Mother or Apocalyptic Mother is unimportant. Instead what really matters is whether we remain conscious during that meeting. More crucial still is whether, during that meeting, we say "Yes!" or "No!" to life.

Marion: Absolutely! I experienced that during my second encounter with cancer. Initially, I was caught in the despair of Death Mother. I saw the cancer as a death sentence. I wrapped myself in a psychological eiderdown and sunk into that prognosis. Then something flipped. I met Death Mother head-on, which meant linking my childhood wounds to my unconscious death wish. With that understanding I woke up.

Daniela: So, ultimately, cancer was neither Death Mother, nor was it Apocalyptic Mother—instead cancer was just cancer, and it was the energy that was constellated in you which swung between death and apocalypse.

Marion: Yes! It's the attitude with which we respond to that encounter which makes the crucial difference. My first reaction, as always was, "This can't be endured. This is so terrible I will surely die." I was terrified. Yet at the same time there was a spark in my core which declared, "I will not give up! I will not!" When that spark finally ignited into a flame, I opened to what was deeper in my unconscious. I understood the origin of my unconscious death wish, and I could begin working to combat it. I began to believe that I was going to live despite what my doctors were telling me. It was just before Christmas and I was blessed with a precious gift from my unconscious—a truly numinous dream: I was a shepherd on the hillside which overlooked the stable in which Christ was born and I saw a heavenly host flying

towards me. A great, big, blond, sexy angel took me in his arms and declared, "Fear not, for I bring you glad tidings of great joy." That encounter was powerful enough to shatter my terror. On waking, I knew that I finally had to trust my own path. I knew that I had to give up the remnants of my desire to control my life. I knew that I had to let go of the last vestiges of my perfectionism.

Daniela: So when we have the strength and compassion to look Death Mother in the eye she transforms into Apocalyptic Mother?

Marion: Despite years of analytical work, I was still living my life as though it were a maze. A maze is a puzzle to be solved. It has dead ends. You may get lost in a maze. You may run into a minotaur and be killed. Before the cancer, the wounded part of me was always looking for the traps, dead ends, and minotaurs. Following that dream, despite being in the midst of a cancer diagnosis, my life opened as a labyrinth. A labyrinth looks superficially like a maze but it is different. There are no dead ends, no traps. There is only one path, and it takes you by a circuitous route to the center. In cancer, in the deepest, darkest recess of Death Mother's domain, was the ultimate gift of trust and joy. I was finally able to surrender to life, because at long last I KNEW there was a center and that if I kept listening, opening, and walking forward, my path would lead me to that center. Life had a different quality after that—there was no more fear. It fell off me like dirty rags. So to return to your question—when I was eventually ready to confront Death Mother head-on, that energy did transform into the Apocalyptic Mother. In the heart of death, I found the gift of life.

NOTES

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Acknowledgements

A deep and soulful "thank you" to Marion Woodman for her generosity of time, spirit, and wisdom and for sharing so much with me. I am richer for having had this opportunity to work with her. I am also extremely grateful to Ross Woodman for all that he has contributed to this interview—his input was precious and made a real difference. While preparing for this interview discussions with Sarida Brown, Barbara Chapman, Judith Harris, Maya Reinau, and Tina Stromsted were invaluable. A heart-felt "thank you" to them all. Bruce Lloyd accompanied me on the internal journey that I travelled while working on this interview. I am deeply grateful for his support.

—Daniela Sieff, May 2009