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The Motherlines of Asclepius

Ancestral Female Healers in the Origins of Medicine

There is a need to retrieve subsumed women's stories and traditions from Western patriarchal overlays and to recentre empowered matristic ways of knowing in present-day consciousness. This paper is an organic inquiry examining symbols in the myth of the Greek healer god Asclepius and tracing these to earlier sources, while relating its origins to this critical moment in time when species loss, climate change, and widespread violence devastate our planet. I approach the power of the secret accompanying the underground dream temples this god is known for, and discover ancestral female healers personifying the union of microcosm and macrocosm. Honouring the natural and cyclic processes of birth, life, death, and regeneration, I illuminate the deep origins of the caduceus symbol. Considering how medical care and the process of attending to dreams are fields that have been dominated by androcentric worldviews, I ask what dreams may come when empowered women and mothers create definitions of health and wellbeing for themselves and unite in the creation of interdependent futures that may still have a chance to come into being.

Asclepius and Sacred Life on Earth

I first encountered the Greek god Asclepius (also known as Asklepios and Aesculapius) as a doctoral student researching motherlines through the lenses of mythology and women's spirituality. The symbol of the god Asclepius is a single serpent entwined around a staff. It is often associated with the caduceus image, which is used today to promote the capitalist medical system. In this paper, I theorize about the lone snake on the rod of Asclepius to examine the loss of primordial structures of deep relationality connecting human beings with one another, with our animal kin, and our planet. I invite a collective

remembering, reimagining, and reauthoring of symbols and stories that were usurped to legitimize an unstable and destructive patriarchal world and ask how a recentring and reclaiming of subsumed ancestral wisdom may be practised towards more than human healing.

Through a process of "organic inquiry" (Clements 26), I encounter the following as motherlines of Asclepius: the Sleeping Lady of Malta, the social organization of Catalhöyük, mother deities in Sumer and Babylonia, Sheela na gigs, Nordic deities, ancient yogini temples in India, matristic fertility-of-the-earth people of Neolithic Europe, female and mother deities of ancient Crete, Persephone and Demeter myths, and Gaia. I continue to engage the origin story of Asclepius and his legend, and see it as one significant turning point of many that eventually crystallized into ideologies that linguist and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray describes as a "forgetting" corresponding to "a certain sleep," which veiled "the real" (34).

Ancient Greek influence in the development of Western cultures cannot be overstated, nor can the impact of the Western world on all life on our planet be minimized. Although we do have stories of Ancient Greek goddesses, they are not the original stories of pre-Hellenic female deities who were "body-honoring and nature-oriented" (Spretnak 18). Considering this summary, and how Ancient Greek perspectives and practices continue to affect lives and bodies today, there is value in tracing Western modalities of healing back to the symbols and stories of a time in which the value of women's lives rapidly diminished and the contributions of female healers were marginalized or erased. I find this process of reclaiming has much to offer us in the renewal of images for revitalizing contemporary cultural landscapes.

The son of Apollo and a mortal woman, Asclepius became known as the god of healing and medicine, and is often referred to as the first doctor. The Hippocratic Oath, still recited ceremoniously by new physicians today, invokes the god Asclepius in the very first line. The historical and mythic figure Hippocrates eventually became known as a human agent of the god Asclepius and the father of scientific medicine. Although Asclepius is not one of the twelve major deities of the Greek pantheon, he was clearly a very powerful figure. All physicians in ancient Greece came to be known as "Asklepiads" (Downing, "Hippocrates" 4).

Those who wished to be healed in the temples of Asclepius were led by attendants into dark spaces just under the surface of the ground to rest directly on a stone slab, or "*kline*" (source of our word "clinic"), and then left alone to sleep and dream. If the god Asclepius appeared to the dreamer in images, this would signify a transition to wellness. A vast collection of testimonies describes how the god would often appear theriomorphically as a snake or a dog. (Downing, "Asklepios" 17-18) Dogs would lick wounds to heal the ini-

tiates. Snakes often promoted fertility. There are detailed accounts of a great number of miraculous healings in the temples of Asclepius that cured ailments such as paralysis, blindness, and epilepsy. When the god appeared in human form, he enacted radical procedures and surgeries far beyond the capacities of human healers of the time.

Though not consistently considered a chthonic deity, Asclepius was the only Greek god to experience death and a return to life after Zeus, intimidated by his powers, struck him down. If not a deity of the underworld realms and not a god who dwells on Olympus, Asclepius may be considered a representative of sacred earthly life. Interestingly, Asclepius is surrounded by his wife, Epione, whose name means "soothing" and their daughters whose names carry such meanings as health, healing process, remedy, and radiance. Two of the daughters' names predate Asclepius. The breasts of a great earth mother, Rhea Koronis, were called Hygeia and Panaceia—"source of the Milk of Kindness and the balm of healing" (Walker 766). Authors of the Theoi Project state, "Gradually, the sphere in which Aesculapius acted was so extended, that he became the representative or the personification of the healing powers of nature" (Theoi para. 3). The pre-Greek word Asclepius and its prehistoric origin is considered by classical scholars Emma J. and Ludwig Edelstein, authors of *Asclepius, Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* who write, "Asclepius must originally have been a heroized mortal who attained godhead in prehistoric centuries. Again, speculation on the etymology of the name alone has prompted the assumption that Asclepius was a pre-Greek deity" (66).

The Mother of Asclepius

Though it is common to find multiple versions of myths, there are primarily two stories about Asclepius's human mother. I consider both at once. In the most documented versionof the myth, her name is Koronis. Here again, the use of a name belonging to an earlier earth mother deity is evident. When she discovered she was pregnant with Asclepius, Koronis wanted to partner with a mortal man to create a family. Apollo learned of this and was furious that she would prefer a mortal mate to a divine lover. In a rage, he brutally murdered the groom and had the wedding party killed as well. Apollo then commanded his sister Artemis to slice open the womb of Asclepius's mother and extract his near-term son. After submitting to Appollo's orders and slaying Koronis, Artemis was considered tainted by the evil of the offending mortal mother body and, according to classical philology scholar Károly (Carl) Kerényi, she was also "placed on the pyre" (95). It is important to consider the pre-Hellenic iterations of Artemis associating her with "untamed nature," mothering, and kinship with animals (Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses* 75). However gruesome and

tragic, I find it is necessary to emphasize the impact of this goddess-mother burning pyre and to magnify how the ordinary power of a human female giving birth was violently bypassed. I cannot help but imagine infant Asclepius taking his very first breath and inhaling the smoke of his murdered mother's flesh and the death of nature untamed.

Earth and Cosmos: Saying Her Name

Although the name Koronis is more commonly recorded in history, Kerényi discusses how the true name of Asclepius's mother was not to be uttered (90). He explains a motif of light and darkness in the origin story and unites the mother of Asclepius with the rising of the moon when "the new moon had just appeared" (93). He considers the true name of Asclepius's mother to be "Arsinöe" meaning "The Luminous" (93). Impressively, there seems to be no mother of The Luminous. Kerényi writes, "she had been motherless like the primordial maiden of mythology: *the first woman*" (my emphasis 94). The purpose of the visit to the Asclepian sanctuary in Epidauros, according to Kerényi, was "to meet this divine power half way" (34). What is clear in the origin story that Kerényi reveals is how this sacred human mother figure was so powerful that it was forbidden to even speak of her. The silencing of her name and her stories, along with the wrathful murder narrative, set the stage for intensely patriarchal Greek culture, wherein the healing power of mothering was only available under the surface. To my mind, the co-equal to the lone snake on Asclepius's staff waited in the dark earth, in womblike territories, among roots that communicate through mystery, senses, and dreams. With this image, it is easy to understand why the ailing and grieving people of Epidaurus went underground to seek rest and a return to wholeness.

According to Carl Alfred Meier in *Healing Dream and Ritual*, Aristides stated, "Asclepius bade him always sacrifice to the Eleusinian goddesses as well as to Asclepius himself, and the Apellas stele says the same" (108). The Orphic *Hymn to Hygeia* also incorporates a reference to a female healing deity in the lines "Come then, blessed goddess, to the seekers of mystic healing" (108). Meier, likewise, points to an integration of a dualistic divide when he quotes Plato as stating, "[The doctor] ought to be able to bring about love and reconciliation between the most antithetic elements in the body. Our ancestor Asclepius knew how to bring love and concord to these opposites" (1). As various parts of an all healing wholeness, the presence of the wife and daughters further illustrates the importance of images of women as healers to the collective memory of the people of Epidaurus, and positions Asclepius as an ancestor of earlier earth-based matristic societies.

Gaia, or Earth, was once considered the mother of dreams. It was believed

that dreams emerged from her womb. The first people dreaming in Delphi did not need an intermediary until Gaia's python was slayed by Apollo (Downing, "Asklepios" 12). How the consequences of this shift to theophanies influenced philosophies of Western consciousness is described well in the following words by Irigaray:

> After nature or Goddess have vanished into the neuter, the place is opened for the substitution of them by a God, a God in the masculine—a God who sets his absolute entity against the fluidity of the neuter, and also the proliferation of words, of things, of gods. Thus a God, unique and in the masculine, has occupied the place of ecstasy opened and safeguarded by her. From then on, the world is closed upon itself, and the way is prepared for the hell at work today. (5)

Spinning Seeress

When first noting the attributes of Asclepius, I thought of the many women throughout the world who are known for ceremonial use of the staff, including the völur in my lineage who carried distaffs used for spinning thread and divination (Dashú 80). Those who have practised spinning know it is a meditative activity requiring skilled use of the hands. A spiral is created, which has been known to induce trance like states of consciousness. In Norse cosmology, three ageless female deities dwell beneath the roots of Yggdrasil, the evergreen World Tree, spinning and weaving the integral web of life through time and space. The serpent Jörmungmandr, kin of Fenriswolf and underworld goddess Hel, was cast out into the sea by Odin, eventually grew long enough to reach around the world to grasp its own tail in its mouth, which held life and its cycles together. This serpent also has the power to bring life to an end. Ouroboros is a repeating motif originating in an Egyptian funerary text, in which it is sometimes depicted as two serpents. Throughout world mythology, the ouroboros and mother-goddess seem to rise and fall together (Lundskow 55).

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford discuss the evolution of the serpent from the Neolithic era to Hellenistic and Roman periods. In support of their analysis, they write, "As we have seen, in images of the goddess in every culture the serpent is never far away, standing behind her, eating from her hand, entwined in her tree, or even as in Tiamat the shape of the goddess herself" (499). The authors offer an in-depth look at Genesis, the serpent, Eve, Satan, and the rise of opposition between the body and mind. They emphasize, "It was probably inevitable that once the association between Eve and the serpent was made in a pejorative sense (whereas, symbolically, the relation between goddess and serpent had been life-giving), the association of the serpent with the devil,

and of the devil with Eve, would follow sooner or later" (523). When Irish scholar Mary Condren discusses the crushing of the serpent and the end of matricentric Ireland, she writes, "The paradoxical and tragic view of human existence, where both life and death were intrinsic parts of the same process, lay shattered" (23). When compared to earlier images of infinity and double serpents, I sense a lack of movement and vitality on the rod Asclepius carries. Archaeomythologist Marija Gimbutas writes, "To express intensification, the cultures of Old Europe used images of doubles to indicate progressive duplication, and hence, potency or abundance" (*The Language of the Goddess* 161). Spinning and whirling are intrinsic elements of life evident throughout nature in a myriad of spiraling patterns from a twirled and pulsating umbilical cord to the swirling of galaxies.

Kundalini, DNA, and Cosmic Healing

As I am a longtime practitioner of Kundalini yoga, the distaff, rod, and sceptre all represent to me the tree of life, which mirrors the central axis of the spine, or in yogic terms, the sushumna. The vital energies moving around the sushumna are referred to as manas Shakti and prana Shakti or Ida and Pingala (Saraswati Ch. 1, Loc. 288, par. 1). When illustrated, these subtle energy pathways appear identical to the image of a staff, or sceptre, entwined with spirals or serpents. If a line is drawn along the two serpents to represent the energy centres of the body according to Kundalini philosophy, these subtle energies hold a remarkable resemblance to what we now know DNA looks like when magnified. Healing visions of DNA-like structures are described by indigenous healers all over the world, as anthropologist Jeremy Narby indicates in his book, *The Great Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*. Narby discusses his field work experiences with shamans in Western Amazonia and studies in molecular biology to reveal the connection between DNA and indigenous healers. Though initially skeptical about this connection, he ultimately agrees with other researchers making the DNA and shamanism connection such as Mircea Eliade. He writes, "They talk of a ladder – or a vine, a rope, a spiral staircase, a twisted rope ladder – that connects heaven and earth and which they use to gain access to the world of spirits" (17). Narby proclaims to have seen these snakes himself and concludes, "They were alive" (157). Although the caduceus is a symbol recognized from Ancient Greece, it appears in some of the oldest known stories as an image of regeneration illustrating our relational and creative human capacities as inseparable from nature and cosmos.

Gimbutas repeatedly notes that too little attention has been offered to much earlier snake symbols found in figures and paintings of women, priestesses, and goddesses from various excavation sites she refers to as "Old Europe"

(*The Living Goddesses* 42). Although the caduceus is associated with the god Hermes as often as Asclepius, the winged rainbow goddess Iris—a lesser mentioned and lesser known messenger between the gods and humanity—was also often depicted carrying the symbol. An Athenian red figure vase painting dated to the fifth century BCE depicts Iris holding the caduceus in her hand as she breastfeeds infant Hermes. Iris is the divine messenger in the Iliad, but Hermes replaces her in The Odyssey. She is there nourishing life in the very foundations of Western traditions but then disappears. In Irigaray's critique of pre-Socratic philosophy and its multiple omissions, she writes the following:

> He claims to teach the true when he begins his instruction with: I say. He does not begin his discourse with she said, even though it is she, Goddess or nature, who inspired him. In fact, he repeats or he transposes the meaning that she, or they, transmit(s). But he appropriates it and presents himself as the master of the message received in secret from her. (35)

Serpentine Motherlines Weaving

A snake headed-pendant was excavated from the Hal Saflienei Hypogium, where the "Sleeping Lady" was discovered (Savona-Ventura 101). Perhaps one of the oldest images of the double serpent caduceus is pictured on the libation vase of Gudea portraying Mesopotamian vegetation deity Ningishzida, who has been considered both a male and a female deity. Archaeologist A.L. Frothingham associates Ningishzida with "The supreme Mother Goddess who gives birth to mankind" (190). On a relief referred to as *Inanna with Staff* pictured in Dianne Wolkstein and Noah Kramer's *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*, Inanna holds the staff entwined by two serpents in one hand (36). Sumerian mythology offers the story of Inanna's transformative descent through seven gates to meet her sister Ereshkigal, who dwells deep below. Although Inanna meets death there, she is resurrected by spirits of nature. Eahr Joan, curator of *Re-genesis Encyclopedia*, describes the stories from ancient Sumer and Mesopotamia as "fairly recent." Joan's work reminds us how mythological themes repeat throughout time and across cultures. Oral transmission of birth-life-death stories occurred long before cuneiform came to be. The myth of Inanna provides ample evidence to indicate how the myths of Ishtar and Isis, Persephone and Demeter, and others were later influenced. Although it is impossible to know the extent of meaning in stories that were not recorded, we can follow the continuity of patterns, motifs, and symbols to engage inquiry with our own minds and bodies.

We might wonder why Inanna's sister, Ereshkigal, whose name means

"Lady of the Great Earth," resided in the underworld and how she got there. Assyriologist Samuel Noel Kramer indicates how, like Persephone, Ereshkigal was seized and taken, too (Kramer 76-79). However, Baring and Cashford indicate in *The Myth of the Goddess* that the original goddess of the underworld was "serpent goddess of the deep" Nammu. (223) Here again, we must hold paradox and consider the spiritual potency of cultural images. As Wolkstein and Kramer write, "A passageway has been created from the Great Above, the conscious, to the Great Below, the unconscious, and it must be kept open. Inanna must not forget her neglected, abandoned older 'sister'—that part of herself that is Ereshkigal" (161). Resembling how one went to the temple of Asclepius alone to be healed, Inanna chose to enter the gates of the underworld alone. Whether feelings of desperation or determination begin a journey to underground realms, mythology often indicates to us that these realms offer a regenerative healing of a split, rupture, or divide.

The Regenerative Womb

How the womb and the tomb are related seems quite significant in Asclepian healing. Gimbutas has compared the famous voluptuous "Sleeping Lady" sculpture in Malta with the rites in the temples of Asclepius, as she describes the uterine and egg shapes of the underground temples and tombs there. Of the Asclepion, she writes the following.

> This rite probably derived from Neolithic practices that likened sleeping in a cave, temple, or underground chamber to slumbering within the goddess' uterus before spiritual reawakening. For the living, such a ritual brought physical healing and spiritual rebirth. For the dead, burial within underground chambers, shaped and colored like the uterus, represented the possibility of regeneration through the goddess' symbolic womb. (*The Living Goddesses* 62)

Perhaps this points to what is mysterious about the Eleusinian mysteries and the miracle cures Asclepius is known for. Gimbutas further notes how "both the Minoan and the Greek Demeter were the same goddess" and describes how the goddesses became "eroticized, militarized (especially Athena), and made subservient to the gods," which contributed to ideas of "female deficiency" still influential today (*The Living Goddesses* 160-64). Alexis Martin Faaberg traces the myth of Demeter and Persephone to anthropomorphic images of a triple goddess on the Phaistos Cup found at the Minoan palace of Ancient Crete and comments: "The snake-like plumage sprouting from their heads alludes to their regenerative powers" (259). Gimbutas mentions the Minoan snake priestess

figurines performing a ritual with exposed breasts and snakes winding around arms and hands and explains: "Found in a floor cyst repository, a storage area for sacred objects, these figurines further stress regeneration and the chthonic aspect" (136). She further describes cave sanctuaries to be "an important part of the Minoan archaeological repertoire" (138).

Physician Mother Gula

Asclepius was not the first healer, and Hippocrates was not the father of medicine. According to Kerényi, dogs and snakes can be seen as one and the same in the Greek mythology (32). The licking of the wounds by dogs in Asclepian temples prompted me to research deities with dogs. Bau of ancient Sumer later became Gula (Great) and is also known by the following names of assimilated female deities: Azugallatu (Great Healer), Belet Balati (Lady of Health), Ninisina, Nintinugga, Nimdindug, Ninnibru, and Ninkarrak. Joshua J. Mark, contributor to the *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, describes her as "the patroness of doctors, healing arts, and medical practices" (1-2). As he further describes, "Her iconography depicts her always with a dog, sometimes seated, and surrounded by stars. She is associated with the underworld and transformation" (1). Barbara Böck explains, "Originally, the Babylonian pantheon included several independent healing goddesses who, during the period from the third to the second millennium BC merged into the figure of Gula" (2). Böck describes Gula as a mother healer and explains how she assumed aspects of the goddess Inanna as the "great physician" who "gives life" (12-15).

Regardless of positionality about a matriarchal past, we can trace the threads of history backward through Western consciousness to cosmologies in which women were deified for having the power of the moon in their wombs and the ability to shed life-giving blood. Discovered in Turkey, the "Seated Woman of Catalhöyük," with two large felines at her sides, is strikingly similar to the images of Gula and her dogs. Ocher red is the colour of life in rooms painted with birthing images discovered at Catalhöyük. The dead were buried underneath the floors of living spaces, again offering themes of birth, death, and regeneration (Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses* 11). The egalitarian organization of life and evidence of close kinship between these people are inspiring and meet a reclaimed definition of matriarchy detailed by scholar Heide Göttner-Abendroth, which considers specific social, economic, political, and cultural criteria:

> It is true that in patriarchal societies women are ruled by men. But matriarchal societies are in no way a simple reversal of this scenario. In matriarchies, women are at the center of culture without ruling over other members of society. The aim is not to have power over

> others and over nature, but to nurture the natural, social and cultural life based on mutual respect. (par. 9)

Mothers of Gods: Love and Sacred Sexuality

The dissertation of Harvard scholar Hector Ignatio Avalos compares the healing practices in temples of Asclepius with the temple practices of Gula and Yaweh (xxvii). Asclepius is sometimes referred to as ancestor and chief rival of Christ. He was born to a human mother and divine father, performed miracle cures and was considered a saviour, died and returned to life, released demons, etc. (Downing, "Asklepios" 21). *In Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church*, cultural historian Charlene Spretnak discusses the "bizarre extrapolations" about the chastity of the Mother of Christ, and how they "evolved to soothe the fears and insecurities of males who have been raised with patriarchal socialization" (207, 209). If we can trace elements of the Christ narrative to the myth of Asclepius and recover fecundity and relationality through the motherlines of both, perhaps we can begin to unveil a renewed cosmology of wellbeing for the future that honours all life and reveres all bodies.

Although Demeter is often thought of as a deeply grieving mother figure mourning the abduction, or rape, of her daughter Persephone by Hades of the underworld, women's spirituality scholar Mara Lynn Keller draws attention to Demeter's origins as an Earth Mother "of divine sexuality and procreation" (47). She explains that a central purpose of the mother-daughter mythologem was "to instruct girls about their fertility and the unfolding patterns of women's lives" (43). Keller discusses how the deep and enduring love between mother and daughter survives the worst of patriarchal overlays (45). I know this enduring love as a mother of sons, which calls me to consider in depth the enormity of loss and trauma experienced by motherless Asclepius and urges me to illuminate why this myth still matters today.

Looking at the relationship between Demeter and Healer Mother Bau, I consider how Marija Gimbutas describes the Egyptian frog deity Heket as "primordial mother of all existence" (*The Living Goddesses* 28). She relates her to Bau in representing "fecundity and regeneration after death" when discussing skirt-raising rituals in ancient Egypt (28). Goddess scholar Starr Goode further describes the Greek Baubo in the story of Demeter as an ancestor of Bau and mirror of the froglike Sheela na gigs, which have been found on the the walls of church ruins in Ireland. She considers these figures "recurring symbols of the energy rooted in the vulva" and her "ever renewing power of life" (91-92). She further explains:

> It is Baubo, the old servant, who brings Demeter (and thus the ne-

> glected, dying earth) back to life by making the goddess laugh. How does she accomplish what all the gods of Olympus failed to do? By lifting her skirts in an act of *anasyrma,* a ceremonial gesture of naked vulvic display. Here, the act of display conveys not a terrifying power but rather an invocation to joy. (91)

Lifeblood: Asclepius, Medusa, and Dionysus

Perhaps dream temple healings also evoked image perception and memory stored within the body. In his book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, Leonard Shlain attempted to answer the question, "What event in human history could have been so pervasive and immense that it literally changed the sex of God?" (viii). His answers point to neurological changes: "When a critical mass of people within a society acquire literacy, especially alphabet literacy, left hemispheric modes of thought are reinforced at the expense of right hemispheric ones, which manifests as a decline in the status of images, women's rights, and goddess worship" (viii).

If Shlain's argument is accurate, the suppression of sacred female power began around the time when pictograms evolved into cuneiform script. This may explain my initial reaction to reading the myths of Sumer and encountering empowered female deities alongside patriarchal overlays, especially in the actions of god Enki, who does not seem clear about whether he should befriend the Queen of Heaven and Earth or seek power over her. In one part of the myth, Inanna seems to celebrate all the *me* Enki gave her to load up her heavenly boat. She is scripted as saying, "He gave me the staff.... He gave me the descent into the underworld. He gave me ascent from the underworld" (Wolkstein and Kramer 16, 127). However, upon the boats return, the story contains what I see as clues pointing to the principles of a matristic society being kept alive by the people of Uruk within a patriarchal overlay:

> As the *me* whom Inanna had received from Enki were unloaded, they were announced and presented to the people of Sumer. Then more me appeared —more than Enki had given Inanna … and these, too, were presented to the people of Uruk: 'Inanna brought the *me*.... She brought the art of women. She brought the execution of the *me*.' (emphasis in original, Wolkstein and Kramer 26)

In the heart of the myths from Sumer, a strong female presence does not seem to need permission from any male god. At the same time, a demand for approval from male gods is documented in the clay. I find Shlain's descriptions of a neurological transition from image rich, orally transmitted, and bodily ways

of communication to the analytical fixed power of the authoritative written word resonant in this example.

It is fascinating to consider Shlain's position about the left hemisphere of the brain being predominantly masculine knowing how Asclepius used the blood from the veins of the right side of Medusa's body for raising the dead (Downing, "Asklepios" 16). Gimbutas also discusses the fear of women's power and the magic of Medusa's blood as she describes how blood from her hair-snakes caused death, whereas blood from her veins renewed life: "The death-drop of Medusa's blood may have been a transposed and distorted memory of women's powerful moon-blood, and Medusa's terrible mask could reflect menstrual fears and taboos" (26). I agree with Jane Meredith who writes, "It is time serpents were released and wildness broke the stone face of what is acceptable and we saw behind the masks" (Ch.9, Loc. 1041, par. 15). Feminist scholar Donna Haraway highlights a need for Medusa in our time in her recent book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*: "Perhaps Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, can bring us into the holobiomes of Terrapolis and heighten our chances for dashing the twenty-first-century ships of the Heroes on a living coral reef instead of allowing them to suck the last drop of fossil flesh out of dead rock" (Ch.2, Loc. 1233, par. 1).

Shlain's discussion of the Greek god Dionysus offers another example of just how feared women's power was in ancient Greece. Dionysus was also cut from his mortal mother at the time of her death. Apparently, Zeus sewed Dionysus into his thigh and rebirthed him. Shlain also questions the origins of Dionysus: "Virtually all the Dionysian characteristics mentioned: figs, bulls, Muses, the moon, dance, music, moisture, serpents, sexuality, regeneration of the earth, the cultivation of plants, and the nonverbal expressiveness of the mask, were originally under the aegis of the goddess" (139). We might wonder what kind of impact wild and ecstatic Dionysus as a goddess might have had on the Western world. Perhaps harmful labels like "hysteria" and its successor "borderline personality disorder"—in which there continues to be a three-to-one female to male gender ratio—would not exist (Sansone and Sansone).

To Do No Harm

In *Greek Medicine as Paideia*, Werner Jaeger writes, "The Greek ideal of culture was the ideal of health" (45). To my mind, there is no ideal of health that excludes the wellbeing of at least half of a population. Distorted perceptions of female bodies and women's needs, created by male fantasies, certainly harmed women in ancient Greece and continue to cause harm today. In Aline Rouselle's *Porneia*, she discusses the consequences of Plato having "referred to the womb as a dangerous animal roaming around the body" (69). This idea is consistent

with the "wandering womb" mentioned in Nancy Demand's article "Hippocratic Medicine and the Epidemics." She explains that "Hippocratic anatomy viewed the womb as free to wander about the body, causing mischief wherever it settled" (55). As a woman and mother who values integrative medicine, I once applauded the values implied in the Latin "*primum non nocere*," associated with the Hippocratic Oath. However, to "first, do no harm" certainly requires some deeper consideration for bodies not male (Lloyd). In the absence of balanced knowledge about all bodies and their differences to inform how medicine is practised, the Hippocratic Oath is hypocritical.

The ghosts of patriarchs in ancient Greece continue to haunt modern medicine and to disrupt appropriate research for understanding the unique health needs of female bodies. Dr. Alysson McGregor discusses this in a TED talk titled *Why Medicine Has Dangerous Side Effects for Women.* She shares how over the last century laboratory testing and clinical trials of drugs have been performed almost exclusively on male cells and male bodies while pointing to medical studies that indicate at least 80 percent of the drugs withdrawn from the market today are due to side effects on women. She states, "Women are not just men with boobs and tubes. They have their own anatomy and physiology that deserves to be studied with the same intensity." We simply do not have appropriate definitions of what health and wellbeing mean for women, which begs questions about what life may be like if all bodies were considered equal and different bodies equally revered in contemporary models of healing and healthcare. As Elaine Showalter states in *Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender*, "Hysteria is no longer a question of the wandering womb; it is a question of the wandering story, and of whether that story belongs to the hysteric, the doctor, the historian, or the critic (335). In the etymology of the word "medicine" is the Latin "*medico*" from "*medeor*," which means "I heal, cure." ("Medicine") Clearly, the contemporary capitalist medical system itself is in need of healing and a cure.

Mind, Body, and Temple

Can we live postmodern lives that are embodied, relational, ecologically and cosmically attuned? As a women's temple practitioner, I am deeply curious about the authentic roots of yoga in pre-Vedic cultures. When practising with the energies of female deities from the Hindu pantheon, especially Durga, I have experienced and witnessed potent transformation. The Garbhagrha is the central shrine of Hindu temples and translates to "womb of the Goddess" (Amazzone 146). Art history professor Padma Kaimal has studied some of the oldest temples in India to see what she might discover relating to balance between male and female elements. She has discovered design aspects of

some temples as "an explicit invocation of female generative organs" and has described how unroofed spaces seemed to point upward to "frame views of cosmic bodies" (79).

When looking at the current extinction rate of both animals and plants today, it seems vitally important to explore ways of seeing such as Judy Grahn's. She includes the human and nonhuman world in her assertion that "we are all equally human, because we are all equally metaformic" (Grahn, "Cultural Obversity" par. 19). In her metaformic theory, human culture originated with the entrainment of human beings to both the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle (Grahn, "*Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs*?" xiv). In this critical time in human and planetary history, with so little time to ignore our common ground, I choose to tend a unitive image of feminisms as "interwoven" in ways that "address contradictions and unequal relations without ever losing hold of what is shared" (Mani 236). Although we have reached levels of abstraction today that seem insurmountable, perhaps we can simply agree that we all come from a mother and begin to see the vital importance of resacralizing our motherlines.

Swedish artist and activist Monica Sjöö posits that the "The Indian Kali was the Irish Cailleach" (222). Imagining how these powerful deities reemerging in our cultural consciousness today share the same blood root is a moving image of relational tension to support our inextricability as feminists, regardless of sex or gender. I agree with Sjöö that "ancient holism must be reconstructed in our own minds, by our own minds, helped by historic knowledge and imagination" (223). To this, I will add the importance of knowing our sacred earthly origins through the borderlands and third spaces of our complex postmodern identities and bodies. How might our great-great grandmothers meet and greet each other without the barriers patriarchy has created? Perhaps we can begin our reclaiming work together here, imagining this.

Toward Healing and Sacred Earthly Life

The healing practices in the temples of Asclepius were attempts to suture the horrifying ruptures created in the severing of humanity from our motherlines. Though glorified and positioned as a hero, Asclepius was a divine human profoundly wounded in a tragedy that became ours collectively. It is my conviction that the process of recovering subsumed ancestral mother knowledges, from as many lineages as possible, cannot be bypassed if renewal of life and sustainability are shared cultural, societal, and global goals. As we continue to meet extraordinary opportunities for transformation today, may we restore primordial wisdom by looking back as well as forward. This is not "a simple attempt to reinstate the Goddess religion of the Neolithic era" (Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses* xi). It is a necessary retrieval of models of deep relationality—a

collective cultivation of resilience and embracing what possibilities may still exist for interdependent living today and tomorrow. Our illusions of being separate from the natural world and each other are falling away because they must. In this shifting, may we remember the regenerative capacities in the depth of our motherlines. There are multiple wisdoms available to help restore equilibrium and create postpatriarchal futures.

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