

# Persephone Rides Off on A Dark Horse: What Should Demeter Do Now?

by Corla Varney

When my daughter Jessica was twelve years old, I had this dream:

I am at a retreat center with Jessica and a group of her girlfriends. early one morning she asks me, "Can I go horseback riding?" I give her the okay but ask her to wait, saying, "Give me a few minutes to get up and get dressed." I decide to have my morning cup of coffee first before meeting her at the stables. I arrive to discover she has already ridden off - alone on a dark horse. I can't go after her, because I don't know which direction she is headed. I am stricken with grief -- I can't go where she has gone -- I can only wait for her to return.

I awoke heavy-hearted. "So this is how Demeter felt," I thought, "when Persephone left for the underworld!" I reminded myself, "she is not lost, she will return someday, even if she will not be my same little girl anymore."

This dream clearly brought to consciousness my fear of Jessica's emerging adolescence. Whether or not I was ready, her childhood and my role as doting mother were quickly being left in the dust as she rode off on the dark horse of adolescence. I also recognized that her coming-of-age would require a balanced effort between her need to become her own person and my responsibility to protect her. But I didn't know how I could best support her growth and development. What was my new role?

Our society tries to deny adolescents their time to prove themselves and find their potential -- their rightful ride on the dark horse. We want to tame them and fear they are too spirited. We're afraid they'll fall off and get hurt, or we want them to ride our way. We try to deny their dark time, but our failure mocks us in the form of vandalism, drug abuse and gangs. Maybe it's inevitable, this attraction of the dark, and we grown-ups are in denial about the necessity of passage through its murky depths to reach the prize: adulthood. Not formally initiated ourselves, perhaps we fear we haven't successfully navigated this watery tomb.

I didn't want to hold Jessica back, but I couldn't help worrying about her. Would she have a firm grasp on the reins, determining which direction was best for her interests? What would be the best way to strengthen her self-confidence and prepare her for occasional falls and mishaps she would surely experience?

After talking with Jessica, I contacted the Institute of Cultural Affairs in Bothell, Washington and signed her up for their three week Coming-of-Age Journey. This program focuses on the transition from child to youth and provides challenges for youth groups - including team building exercises on a Ropes course, backpacking in the Cascades, mask making and an overnight solo vigil..

I saw this coming of age journey as an opportunity for Jessica to leave her "comfort zone" -- get dirty, go hungry, be cold and uncomfortable -- which would force her to see things from a different perspective. She would need to push up against her perceived limits and call forth all of her reserves, and, most importantly, she would be required to use her intuition as well as her thinking capabilities. In this way Jessica would have an opportunity to dig deeply into the far reaches of her psyche and claim jewels she could treasure for the rest of her life.

I planned to reflect on my own coming-of-age experiences while my daughter was gone. Were they similar or different from what she would experience? Had I processed all the hurts and let downs from that period in my life so that I could support Jessica's development without their interference? Did I understand the current cultural pressure and stress she would be subjected to entering middle school? I also wanted to read or review several books during this time. I had no idea what a powerful journey this would be for myself-let alone for Jessica-for unlike Demeter, I was not going to sit around mournfully waiting for my daughter's return!

I started by reading **Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls**, by Mary Pipher. I suspected that graduating to middle school and becoming thirteen would signal not only big changes for Jessica, but also an all-out assault on her sense of self-worth. Pipher confirmed this concern:

As children go through school, boys do better and feel better about themselves and girl's self-esteem, opinions of their sex and scores on standardized achievement tests all decline. Girls are more likely than boys to say that they are not smart enough for their dream careers. They emerge from adolescence with a diminished sense of their self worth as individuals.

My own experiences coming-of-age in the 1960's mirrored this view. I had been popular and did well in school, but somewhere along the way my confidence was pinched back. Anytime I was too much of anything-too exuberant, too eager to learn, too talented-I received a thorough pruning. When I did a remarkable drawing and envisioned myself as an artist, I was quickly told I wouldn't be able to support myself on "art."

When I excelled in water-skiing, I was told I wouldn't want to end up with hefty thighs. "Be a good girl" and "think about what others will think" seemed to be what was most important. Since I did my best to appear happy, not wanting to burden my parents who had financial and health problems, they had no idea how stressful and tumultuous those years were for me. Pipher supports this observation when she warns us that: "Parents who send their daughters the message that they'll be overwhelmed by problems aren't likely to hear what's really happening."

My next endeavor was to read Emily Hancock's **The Girl Within**. Hancock's research indicates that women take a more circular approach to individuation than the more linear trail taken by men. She explains:

"Instead of crystallizing an identity during adolescence, women as adults, reach back to girlhood to retrieve an original sense of self. Each woman's identity -- the identity each felt was authentic, real, and true to who and what she was -- had been present, intact, in the earliest part of her life and had in the meantime been obscured."

It wasn't hard for me to see how I had lost a great many pieces of myself in the process of growing up. At the age of nine, I loved to wander off alone in the woods where I drew sustenance from the wildness I encountered there. How long had it taken me as an adult to recognize that I had to return to the wilds periodically, to find clarity and peace of mind? I realized how important it was for me to help Jessica remember what held her passion at the age of nine and ten, before the onslaught of acculturation. She had loved to read and write and absolutely glowed while in the spotlight - at any podium or on any stage. Would she discount or disqualify this later?

As I read more, I wondered whether or not the format of a coming-of-age journey based on the Hero's Myth was really optimum for girls as well as boys. In **A Bridge to Wholeness: A Feminine Alternative to the Hero Myth**, Jean Benedict Raffa also focuses on the differences between the female and the male journey to individuation. Raffa

explained how the heroine's quest is different from the hero's in that it usually does not begin in the outer world. For a male, "the primary task was outer work, and he needed to develop and test his personal skills in the outer realm before he would be able to generate a connection with the inner world." But for a female, "the opposite was true: inner work was the primary task before [one] could acquire a meaningful connection with the outer world." A female can of course do all the things a male does in the outer world, but this will not assure that she achieves wholeness. Unless she begins her inner work first she will be "doomed to frustration."

Raffa's description of her youthful fixation with the black stallion, which she described as "the epitome of powerful masculine energy, combined with dark, feminine, instinctive passion" reminded me of my dream of Jessica on the dark horse. Suddenly I realized what I feared most: Jessica's emerging sexuality. I was worried about what kind of impact her beauty would have at this stage in her life. Reviving Ophelia had seemed focused on the problems of ugly-duckling girls, but said nothing about the young beauty, the twelve year old mistaken for seventeen -- coveted and feared at the same time by boys of her own age, while encountering blatant sexual advances by older boys. I also worried about the double-standard still apparent in society that says "nice girls don't, but you know, boys will be boys. "

I remembered an incident which happened to me in the first grade, that I had never talked about, and denied blatantly at the time. One day during morning recess, I went out to the far end of the playground with a little boy, and we pulled down our pants to show each other what was between our legs. Innocent enough. At lunch recess my best friend Vicki came rushing up to me with a look of absolute disgust on her face saying, "I can't believe you would do that!" I denied it completely. I will never forget how smug Tommy was, and how no one seemed to think less of him for his part in our little "secret." Of course I would feel the sting of the inequity of this double-standard many times again, but I remember how this first incident had hit me in the gut like a shovel, the pain muddying my sense of my inherent goodness and making me wish I would be buried somewhere. I didn't want to tell my mother about it, and that night I agonized in the bathtub about what an ugly thing I had done.

In Human Development classes, sixth and seventh graders are now being informed about AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the mechanics of the male and female bodies, and how babies are conceived and develop. All this information is worthy and important, but what kind of value judgment is being extended along with it? Although there are discussions about birth control practices, abstaining from sex until one is married still seems to be the overt conclusion for "good girls." At the same time there is an onslaught of messages and images from our consumer culture to look and be sexy. What does a mix of fear of disease, fear of sex, desire to be sexy, and desire to be popular do to an adolescent's view of herself? Without conscious help from mothers and other older women to honor and celebrate the physical and emotional changes they are going through, how can girls grow comfortably into their womanhood and see female sexuality as truly beautiful?

In **Emerging from the Chrysalis: Rituals of Women's Initiation**, Bruce Lincoln raises an interesting question: "Who is it that initiates young women when they come of age?" Although he is referring to the five traditional societies within his study, his question raises many serious issues about our modern culture. Lincoln argues that if it is men who initiate the women, then the focus is on "indoctrination" and "subjugation," and quite possibly involves an assault. Whereas, if it is women who initiate women, the focus is on "affirmation," "commiseration" and "unity." In many cultures young female initiates experience both oppression from males and support from females, taking on the "totality of the social order." Therefore the rites take on the battle of the sexes present in the broader society.

Since in our culture there are no clear rites of passage for girls (or boys), I fear the result is the same as if there were -- in the end, girls are indoctrinated and subjugated according to the views of the broader society. In our case, society is clearly patriarchal and negates feminine attributes, such as emotion, intuition, and the need for relationship. This all screams at the seriousness of our present situation. We must act. We may not be able to administer appropriate rites of passage for all youth, but with the help of our daughters we can spend conscious time and effort developing ways to counteract, or at least balance out the social order. With a strong dose of affirmation of what it is to be female we can strive for full human potential, for everyone's sake.

Jessica returned from her journey with "insightful" descriptions of her experience like "backpacking was mass hard" and "the sweat lodge was way cool!" And predictably, she displayed a renewed appreciation for small things, like clean sheets, pizza, Mr Pibb and her younger sister. More importantly though, she returned with a greater sense of herself, of her boundaries and her permeability. She shared intimations of this in her journal. She wrote, "I will not sit on a cloud with wings and white clothes draped around me like an angel, I will run with deer along the winding river to feel the meaning of life." I was also heartened to hear she intends to be nobody's darling. Her future plans include starring as the lead in a feminist movie by age twenty. Then she wants to go to Harvard and study politics so she can fight for the rights of all people. Ah yes, a sense of responsibility to her community is emerging as well.

I would highly recommend this experience to parents and youth alike -- but it isn't the end-all solution. As parents, Jessica's father and I can't place all the responsibility for her education on the teachers and administrators at her school. We need to play an active role in her initiation as well. Since she isn't returning to a culture that recognizes the change in her and will honor her sacred position as a woman, she will still need our ongoing attention to help resist unconscious cultural influences. The trick of course will be to find a balance between her need to become her own person and our responsibility to protect her.

Jessica's return brought the realization that initiation is just as much for parents as it is for initiates. Parents need to spend this time in reflection as well, focusing on what they might rather not look at: their own childhood and adolescence, things they prefer not to admit, and unrealized or forgotten dreams. It's a time to do some thorough house cleaning in those dusky, dark corners of the soul. Parents should be as free as possible of any static from past experiences, fully present and ready to receive their returning youth with open arms and open ears. This is the role of parents in initiation.

---

Corla Bertrand Varney is the director of Raven Dawn Rites, which offers adults empowering eight day wilderness Rites of Passage. She has apprenticed with Sedonia Cahill of the Great Round and with Stephen Foster and Meredith Little at the School of Lost Borders. Corla has a BA in Cross-cultural Approaches to Healing and Spirituality from Western Washington University.

#### References:

Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Ballantine Press, New York, 1994.

Emily Handcock, *The Girl Within*. Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1989.

Jean Benedict Raffa, *The Bridge to Wholeness: A Feminine Alternative to the Hero Myth*. LuraMedia, San Diego, 1992.

Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging from the Crysalis: Rituals of Women's Initiation*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1991.