

The secret is that only that which can destroy itself is truly alive.

C. G. Jung¹

I. AT THE THRESHOLD OF PSYCHO-GENESIS

✠ THE PARADOX

For some of us, if not for all, meaning in life periodically finds its way through a piercing and deadly darkness. Hopelessness and despair can descend like a toxic cloud, even in the midst of a joy-filled life, a life of spiritual discipline and intent, and dedication and commitment to conscious growth. Dark moments can strike like a sudden, rending eruption from mysterious and subterranean places. Without warning, the crust of a forever-healing wound, or an old insidious trauma is torn open unexpectedly, and we bleed again. We feel that we have entered into the abyss, body and soul. In the darkest of these times, nothing - no word, no prayer, no loving gesture, no therapeutic intervention - reaches the mark. Everything is lost, crumbled and gray, pointless - our life hopelessly flapping in the maw of a terrifying yet welcome annihilation.

How do we find our way through these darkest of spaces? Jettisoning a way out is impossibly dangerous, a too-heroic feat for this tenuous and precarious state of being. Remaining at this threshold of pain feels intolerable. And yet, given the grace of enough psychic ground, by staying with the intolerable dissonance we can once again restore our faith and experience the rare jewel of equanimity. Here, at an unfathomable but fecund threshold, something can change, something new can come forth.

Faith that arises at points of near-unbearable suffering is a faith born by sustaining absolute paradox. Those who endured the Holocaust and the devastating events of the Third Reich have been able to communicate the profound meaning and acceptance of this paradox and provide us with unprecedented teachings. Innocent suffering in the Holocaust, as in Christ's innocent suffering, has helped to redeem humanity's ignorance and lack of true compassion. The unparalleled gift of such understanding shows us how to survive trauma of inexpressible dimension. In testimony, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer writes:

We cannot be honest without recognizing that we must live in the world "as if God did not exist." And so we recognize this - before God. God himself compels us to this recognition. So our coming of age leads us to a genuine recognition of our situation before God. God lets us know that we must live as those who get along without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us...The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we eternally stand. Before and with God we live without God.²

Others have also offered insights, quickening to paradox as a means toward spiritual and psychic regeneration. Robert Sardello at the School of Spiritual Psychology suggests that the explosion of the first atomic bomb traumatized our consciousness as a planetary people. Considering this situation, Sardello reflects:

The explosion of the Hiroshima bomb in 1945 opened the crust of the earth and created an entry into the Underworld for all of humanity. The anxiety provoked by this event - a mythic occurrence - has profoundly disturbed ordinary consciousness. It has completely separated human beings from past spiritual meaning and brought unresolvable unrest, leading to indifference and to a pre-occupation with comfort. That is to say, since this event, ordinary consciousness has lost its meaning.

What is the soul's response? It is the quality of stillness. The soul becomes completely quiet, for it has entered into the realm of death...there to begin the task of learning how to be awake and fully conscious. It is a test. The aim of this test is to find whether the force of love, no longer arising from attachment to things in the day-world, can be born out of the soul itself. In other words, can love arise where there is nothing to love?³

According to Sardello, our task in facing the threat of total annihilation is to find a way to regenerate our world, both inner and outer, psychic and physical, through the power of love born not of existential security but of the inescapable presence of annihilation. Here, as well as in the example of Holocaust survivors, the presence of a lethal, traumatizing condition prompts and demands the emergence of an even greater vivifying force. A traumatic condition begs a bio-psychic genesis, an instinctive and spiritual arising of new life.

Finding new life through the profound acceptance of death is the paradoxical solution. In paradox, we stand at the threshold of life's resurgence. Holding fast the divergent reigns of painful dissonance, we enter realms of deeper healing.

SITES WITHIN PARADOX: HYDROTHERMAL VENTS AND THE BLACK MADONNA

SITE ONE: HYDROTHERMAL VENTS

In 1991, a crew of marine biologists had the unprecedented opportunity to witness the birth of a deep-sea hydrothermal vent. Hydrothermal vents, originally discovered in 1977 in their advanced state of development, are one of the most toxic environments on the planet, emitting lethal concentrations of hydrogen sulfites. The vents arise through volcanic activity at the meeting place of the Continental Plates, known as the Mid Ocean Ridge, where the earth's crust is formed. Here, in the lethal environment of the vents, scientists have discovered extraordinary sites of what some consider to be bio-genesis, the spontaneous emergence of new life. At a depth of 8,600 feet, where there is no light for photosynthesis, new species of subterranean flora and fauna spontaneously arise in prolific numbers and thrive in the toxic environment through the process of chemosynthesis. Vent organisms are unique to their geography and their habitat. They are found in no other location. Since vents were first discovered, over three hundred new species have been identified, and every expedition discovers more. Speculation as to how vent life arises ranges from ideas about dormant larva ignited by the superheated water that follows volcanic action, to inter-planetary cross-fertilization from comets and meteors that have entered the earth's orbit.⁴

SITE TWO: THE BLACK MADONNA

In approximately A.D. 797, St. Meinrad was born of royal parentage in Central Europe. In 822 he was ordained as a Benedictine priest, eventually becoming a hermit six years later. Ultimately, his hermitage was founded as the Einsiedeln Monastery, which now lies within the borders of Switzerland, and is dedicated to the Black Madonna, the Virgin Mary. A universal phenomenon,

the Black Madonna still lies within the sphere of mystery. There are an estimated 400 shrines to the Black Virgin, yet she remains little known, a subterranean figure even within mainstream Catholic cosmology in which she is firmly rooted. As will be more fully explained below, the Catholic Church has little explanation for her blackness, except to surmise that the figures have been long exposed to candle soot and therefore darkened. Seen from a psychological and historical perspective, however, the Black Virgin is an archetypal figure of pre-Christian origins and has always been black. She carries the dark pole of the feminine archetype. As such, the Black Madonna is the religious expression of one aspect of the Godhead, revealing its dark, unconscious, mysterious and unpredictable side.

St. Meinrad's initial approach into the realm of the Black Madonna began with his hermit's journey, delineating the religious expression of his desire for greater intimacy with the unconscious or the Unknown. To establish a hermit's refuge, St. Meinrad traveled deep into a dense and virgin forest: the dark and mysterious aspect of the unconscious, the Black Madonna in vegetative form. Soon after establishing his refuge, St. Meinrad was confronted by an overpowering multitude of spectral demons that arose from the forest. To these fearful figures, he surrendered completely, lying prostrate in prayer and terror on the ground. After a long time, an Angel of deliverance appeared out of the east, and the demons were dispelled.⁵ At the threshold of unpredictable and utter demonic destruction, a redemptive, fecund beginning presented itself. Through his prayerful surrender to the demons of the dark wood, St. Meinrad plumbed the darkest depths of the unconscious - existential terror and a sense of total abandonment - out of which new life, a new beginning, emerged. Here in the dark wood the hermit built the first edifice of what has now become a foremost point of pilgrimage to the Black Madonna. Like Bonhoeffer, St. Meinrad survived the trauma of God's abandonment, in and with God.

SITES ONE AND TWO: PARALLELS

In both situations above, new life appears at the threshold of trauma and destruction: volcanic eruptions generate toxic vents where bio-genesis occurs; and St. Meinrad's life-threatening confrontation with demons brings about a spiritual birth, an event of psycho-genesis. Hydrothermal vents present a biological correlate or analogue to the psychic reality represented by the Black Madonna. At vent sites, bio-genesis occurs in total darkness at the ocean floor, and lethally toxic material is transformed into fuel through chemosynthesis. In the realm of the Black Madonna, we plumb the depths of our being where we confront and transform the toxic psychic substances of fear, betrayal and profound uncertainty. As a result, we are presented with the opportunity for vital and creative growth.

Observation of toxic hydrothermal deep-sea vents and recognition of the archetypal nature of the Black Madonna may offer us vital clues for undertaking the soul task that Sardello proposes. In these examples we find that life, i.e., love expressed at instinctual and spiritual levels, can thrive in spite of, and even more importantly, *because of*, what formerly we believed would bring about a total absence or annihilation of life.

In the ecosystem of hydrothermal vents, life thrives and flourishes through symbiotic relationships where chemosynthesis takes place. The tube worm, for example, takes in hydrogen sulfite (H₂S) and brings it down into a large sac filled with bacteria. The bacteria then process the H₂S and give the worm energy. The tube worm is able to detoxify a deadly substance by bringing it to its symbiont, the bacteria. A cooperative process breaks down and transforms a toxic substance into fuel for survival.

The Black Madonna has been compared to personages in other cultures and spiritual traditions, including Persephone of the Underworld, Kali, and Isis.⁶ These are goddesses or deities whose rule lies within the dominion of surrender, death and rebirth. From the perspective of the ego, they are lethal forces. But without yielding to this composting and transcendent energy, no transformation is possible and therefore no renewal of life-force. As archetypal energies within the psyche, what these personages accomplish is the breaking down and transmutation of toxic substances, thereby fueling soul growth. Psychically toxic substances, like the hydrogen sulfites that originate deep within the bowels of the earth through volcanic activity, are primitive and primal energies which erupt into consciousness - fear, pain, pride, rage, envy, our intolerance - which can be converted into fodder for spiritual regeneration. Primitive energies become transformed not by denying them, but by working them into new life through heightened consciousness; that is, by fully acknowledging them, as St. Meinrad acknowledged the spectral demons of the dark wood when surrendering himself in full prostration on the earth. Only when we are willing to fully and deeply acknowledge the presence of these dark forces can the Angel - our redemption - come.

DARKNESS AND THE IMAGO DEI

The Black Madonna is revered in many shrines and cathedrals of Western and Eastern Europe. She has existed there for centuries. It is only from the middle of this century that the Black Madonna has been present in the United States, the figures of which are descended from the Virgin at Einsiedeln in Switzerland.⁷

The darkness of the Virgin is enigmatic. Different sites of the Black Madonna offer different stories for her blackness. The story within the tradition at Einsiedeln describes the original figure of the Madonna as needing restoration when long-standing candle soot had accumulated on the white skin of the Virgin. Gustafson, in *The Black Madonna*, includes a first person account given in 1799 by Johann Adam Fuetscher, ornamental painter and restorer. Fuetscher states that the statue of the Madonna he received for restoration was blackened by intensive exposure to church candles, but that beneath the soot was white, flesh-colored skin. Cryptically, and without explanation, he notes that in his restoration, *he painted her black*, that is, as the statue had appeared when originally it came to him for restoration. He does not say why his restoration is to black rather than white, flesh-color. He goes on to say that over the black pigment he painted in eyes and some color for cheeks and lips, but that when the statue was viewed by church members they firmly requested that she be painted *completely* black, thus requiring Fuetscher to paint over the eyes and other areas on the face to which he had lent a rosy color.⁸ Clearly, in her darkness, the Madonna gave something to her petitioners that she could give in no other form.

Marie-Louise von Franz offers another explanation for the Madonna's blackness, one that encompasses the archetypal and pre-Christian dimensions of this special figure. Von Franz explains that statues of the Black Madonna, including that of Einsiedeln, were always black, being original descendants of the Egyptian goddess Isis and her child Horus, who in the Late Roman Empire played an important role. Wherever the Roman Empire spread, the Isis cult rooted; and there you find statues of the Black Madonna. She goes on to say:

...what is stressed about Mary is her spiritual aspect - the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption into heaven into the heavenly Thalamos or bridal chamber - but Isis had a much richer theme. Isis was represented as the highest divine spirituality, but she was

also worshipped as the underworld goddess, ruler of the dead....Isis was a black goddess...nocturnal, earthy...She was a mother goddess who comprised, or contained in her image, the highest spirituality - she is the Mother of God, the new sun god Horus, and wife of the reborn Osiris - and also the darker chthonic aspects of the Great Mother. She unified them all....The Virgin Mary inherited those traits, but in the official teaching she inherited only the sublime and spiritual, the attributes of purity and so on. The other aspects, of earth fertility and the dark side, were never officially recognized.⁹

Given the people's response to the restoration of the Black Madonna at Einsiedeln, it seems apparent that the official church image of the Virgin was incomplete. The people, then, provided necessary compensation for the Virgin's incomplete state in their request for a completely black skinned Madonna and Child.

Whatever the explanation for the Black Madonna's presence, apparently it is the very blackness of the Virgin that gives special hope to those who come to her. She is able to encourage and sustain those who seek her certain solace precisely *because* of her darkness. Within the nature of her being, she holds the paradox: in and through darkness lies a fertile resurgence of life. No doubt, it was the reassurance of this experience that people fervently sought by having her returned to her blackened state.

The presence of the Black Madonna fulfills a collective need within the psyche. Her presence informs us that we can, and must, fully embrace the darkness of the unpredictable and unknown. While a thrashing torment may accompany the hopelessness and despair of a profound rupture in our connection to what we know, exactly at this juncture a penetrating vision of faith, and new life, comes into being.

The *Imago Dei*, the image we have of God, is not only what we, from our *egoic* stance, perceive as good. As Bonhoeffer and Sardello explain, we must open wide enough to believe in the goodness and love of God, even when we can perceive no good or loving God in which to believe. As the fecundating and dark side of the feminine Godhead, the image of the Black Virgin helps us to endure and survive this dilemma, born of piercing and deadly uncertainty.

As a counterpart in the natural world, bio-genesis at hydrothermal vents gives precedent to the psychically regenerative nature of the Black Madonna. It presents an apparently impossible yet living paradox: in the most lethal environment - in chemicals more toxic than deadly cyanide, under the crushing weight of water that measures five thousand pounds per square inch (enough to liquidate a tank), at the junction of near-freezing deep-sea waters and volcanic vent-waters reaching up to 750 degrees Fahrenheit, in pitch-black darkness where no photosynthesis is possible - plants, spaghetti worms, sea dandelions, orange sea stars, crustaceans and a litany of others spontaneously arise and thrive. Indeed, new life forms manifest and proliferate as abundantly as on any coral reef found in the ocean. On this point scientists agree: through vent life, a new vision of the world is brought to light. An event of this magnitude cannot be ignored or left fallow, neither in the outer world of nature nor, by analogy, in the inner world of the psyche.

Vent discoveries have prompted interdisciplinary scientific approaches which are mutually focused on the possibility of global detoxification and the discovery of new medical remedies. Greater understanding of the archetypal dimensions of the enigmatic Black Madonna may direct us to similar resolutions at the level of the psyche, both personally and collectively.

❖ THE NEW VISION: THE THRESHOLD OF PSYCHO-GENESIS

St. Meinrad's experience in the forest when confronted by spectral demons describes the daunting nature of an intra-psychic, depth-psychological journey often referred to as *The Dark Night of the Soul*, or *The Night Sea Journey*. In this inner journey, one plumbs the depths of a spiritual *nigredo*, mining a possibly more profound sense of faith. Comments made by marine biologists and other scientists about the experience of their adventures and discoveries in relation to hydrothermal vents are remarkably parallel to the nature of this journey into the deeper layers of the psyche. C. G. Jung's pioneering observations on the nature of the personal and collective unconscious aptly define these subterranean realms in psychological terms. One method by which he describes these realms is by comparing the maturation of the individual personality and the development of consciousness to alchemical processes found in ancient texts on Alchemy. In the alchemical *opus*, the true beginning of the journey commences when the "matter" turns black. One alchemist writes, "When you see your matter going black [in the alchemical retort], rejoice: for that is the beginning of the work."¹⁰ By comparison, Jung postulates that getting to a state of psychological wholeness means - at least for starters - confronting our own blackness: pride, greed, envy, fear, alienation. Without this first step, we cannot find true light, the inner gold.

In addition to facing a personal experience of darkness, one fundamental task in applying Jung's analytical psychology in our own lives is to open to the mysterious and often terrifying depths of the unknown, and through it to an experience of the *numinous*, to the touch of a transcendent force. Through the grace of the *numinous*, the transcendent enters our lives and brings us to a new level of consciousness. Only then do we find the inner gold of which the Alchemists spoke, a condition of which is referred to here as psycho-genesis. The journey through the unknown to wholeness is no ordinary journey. It requires unending courage and willingness to endure what often seems impossible to bear. An experience of the *numinous* arises not only from ecstatic-filled light, but just as often from the mournful darkness of isolation and despair.

The following comments are made by vent explorers. One could make the same or similar comments about the perils, and ultimate riches, of *The Night Sea Journey*, the psychological dimension of the alchemical *opus*.

There's no template for this research. Most of the work here has to be newly engineered...

The abyss is no normal laboratory...

The trip to inner space [deep sea waters] in many ways is more treacherous than a trip to outer space. The pressures are enormous...

Each trip [down to the ocean floor] is an opportunity to discover previously unknown life. It is a slow trip, but one brimming with excitement...

You travel down...through the inky blackness of the deep sea and you get to the bottom and you see this growth of life. There's [sic] thriving communities. There's so much activity going on. It's like no place else in the universe.

Each and every dive we find something and discover something that we've never, ever seen before...

One of the real challenges of working in the deep sea, and one of the reasons it's so exciting to us, is it probably represents the most extreme environment on the planet, particularly when we're dealing with hydrothermal vents.

Our appreciation for how little we know about life on Earth has really been manifest since the discovery of the vents...

Within all creation myths of the world, the *Imago Dei* brings new life into existence. In considering our present "creation myth" of hydrothermal vents, the possibility of bio-genesis transpires even under the most lethal conditions. As vessels of the divine spark, it is also our nature to bring new life into existence through the development of the psyche into fuller and greater consciousness. This hard-won development necessarily includes an acceptance of death. Death itself brings us to a fuller experience of life, not from the standpoint of the ego, but from the standpoint of spiritual growth, where we surrender our smaller will to the mystery of the Unknown. A full acknowledgment of death prompts us to the procreative possibility of bringing new soul life, a deeper love, into the world. Those like Bonhoeffer who have experienced extreme trauma with a profound understanding of what they have endured, found their way to an unfathomable faith which grew from an incomprehensible abyss of demonic chaos and destruction. Their spiritual legacy is a beacon to the world, their innocent suffering a redemptive act for the collective. In our day to day lives we, too, are confronted with the challenge of redemption whenever we are overcome with a personal experience of trauma, or a sense of alienation and despair. Bio-genesis in the toxic environment of hydrothermal vents reflects, in the natural world, the possibility of a psycho-genesis generated by accepting, and transforming, toxic sites of our personal experiences of darkness.

EPILOGUE

After years of living a life of growing consciousness and simple spiritual devotion, one would think that the path of life becomes easier to navigate, that an inner light will radiate at the flick of a switch. This is not my experience. Nor, I am convinced, is it the experience for many other people of similar circumstances. Only by grace have I been spared the personal and direct experience of horrific traumas - natural catastrophe, personal holocaust and genocide. Yet, by the very fact that I am alive and therefore not without wounding, I am vulnerable to the periodic visitations of a quietly eruptive and deadly darkness, to the terrifying chaos of complete uncertainty.

Experiences of despair and loss of connection - even after breakthrough, life-changing events, extensive analysis, and a profound sense of communion with the forces of nature and spirit - have led me to believe, and growingly accept that my own path leads me repeatedly on pilgrimages to the inner shrine of darkness, not because I am morally deficient, not because I am depressed, and not because there's some form of enlightenment or personal maturation that I am just not "getting." Rather, I am led to the shrine of darkness because, in spite of a desire to consistently experience the peace and happiness of a certain spiritual liberation, the mournful face of God abides within me and wants to be seen, and loved, through my eyes. At this shrine I have learned to love when I experience nothing to love.

NOTES

1. *Psychology and Alchemy. Volume 12. The Collected Works of C. G. Jung.* Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, par. 93.
2. *Letters and Papers from Prison.* (1981). Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Macmillan, 145-6.
3. "Soul Tasks of the Coming Age." Robert Sardello. (November/December 1992). *Common Boundary*, 42.
4. All references to hydrothermal vents are taken from official transcripts: *Deep Sea Deep Secrets.* September 1998. www.discovery.com.
5. *The Black Madonna.* (1990). Fred Gustafson. Boston: Sigo Press, 2-3.
6. *Ibid.* Chapter 4.
7. Saint Meinrad Archabbey. St. Meinrad, Indiana. www.saintmeinrad.edu/friends/history.htm
8. *op. cit.* Fred Gustafson. (1990). Boston: Sigo Press, 41-42.
9. *The Cat: A Tale of Feminine Redemption.* (1999). Marie-Louise von Franz. Toronto: Inner City Books, 40.
10. *Mysterium Coniunctionis. Volume 14. The Collected Works of C. G. Jung.* Translated by R. F. C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, par. 729, n. 182.