

## *Songs of Sorrow and Desire*

*by Glenda Cloughley*

*There is an old story about a woman who could not bury her dead baby. This poor mother was so overcome with grief at the loss of her only child that she walked the village streets day after day with the small bundle in her arms, crying for her little one to be made well.*

*She asked everyone she met if they knew how to make the baby live again.*

*At first, people were sympathetic. But after a few days some crossed the road and others pointed at her, sniggering, saying she was mad and that the corpse would soon be rotting and smelly. Nevertheless, she asked her question.*

*One morning, she approached a stranger who did not avoid her. He listened carefully to the story of her love for this baby who had died and said he knew what she must do.*

*“Go to every house in the village and gather a mustard seed from each place that hasn’t been visited by death”, he said. “And when you have gathered a palmful of mustard, your baby will live again”.*

*So the woman went in hope, with the baby still in her arms, and asked the question about death at the first house. To her surprise, the man who opened the door said, “Oh yes, we know about death in this house. Only last year our youngest daughter was killed by wolves in the forest. Come in and have a cup of tea and we will tell you our sad story”. So the mother of the dead baby went inside and the family told their sad story and she told hers and they all cried together about the death of their beloved children, and laughed a little as they remembered the sweet smiles and looks with which a little child demonstrates its love.*

*At the next house a young woman answered the knock at the door and she said “Oh yes, death has been here. It is only a month since grandmother died, and we are still in mourning”. So the mother and this young woman’s family sat together around the fire and looked at the grandma’s grumpy face in a painting by one of the children and talked in the deep way that comes quickly when death brings people together.*

*The mother went to the next house, musing about how a human life could be meaningful whether it was as brief as her baby’s or as long as the grandmother’s. And*

*when she asked her question there she was invited inside that house, and an old man and his grown-up daughters and their families spoke to her about the wife of the old man who had died giving birth to their youngest daughter thirty five years ago. The old man and she cried together and felt a little comforted in their shared sorrow, though one grief was very old and the other very new.*

*And so it went. The mother visited all the houses of the village. She drank many cups of tea and made a lot of lifelong friends as she listened to the deepest experiences of other people's lives and told again and again the story of her own beloved baby's death.*

*She gathered no grains of mustard, for death had visited every house. But although her baby did not live again — at least not literally — she was able to bury the little body in peace, for the stranger's advice had led her to know the tender wisdom that comes when the bonds of human longing and human connection are forged in the fires of love and death.*



Although my preparation for this paper began with a meditation on the significance of sorrow and desire in my own life, it has also become a reflection on the fact that longing is the emotion that people most often bring to my psychotherapy practice.

There is the longing that lives in sorrow for something precious that is lost, like the baby in the story. And there is another kind of longing in the desire for something not yet come into being and which may not even be able to be named until it is experienced, like the relatedness that the baby's mother eventually felt towards every person in her village.

Sometimes longing comes looking like grief or alienation, or like anger, fear, guilt, hurt or envy. It also comes disguised as a drive for power.

There is longing to be seen, to be properly heard and attended to, longing to be safe, to feel secure, to belong, longing to be able to express oneself, longing for meaning in life, longing for the world to be a better, happier, more ecologically balanced place — and mostly, longing to be beloved, whether by the lover, the god, or the child, parent, friend or community.

Very often the longing is unspoken or has been dismissed or shouted down and so is unacknowledged and undervalued.

Always, I believe, longing points in the soul's true directions, if we can only read the signs.

The Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche says that the teacher in the story was the Buddha, and that after the woman buried her baby she followed him and became enlightened. (1992: 28–29)

The thirteenth century Persian mystic Rumi began his *Mathnawi*, a wondrous poem of 22,000 verses, with the poignant cry of the hollow ney flute's longing:

### **The Song of the Reed Flute**

Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,  
how it sings of separation:  
'Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,  
my wail has caused men and women to weep.  
I want a breast torn and tattered with longing,  
so that I may tell the pain of love.  
Whoever has been parted from his source  
wants back the time of being united.  
At every gathering I play my lament.  
I've become a companion of happy and sad.  
Each befriended me from his own ideas,  
and none searched out the secrets within me. ...  
The reed is a comfort to all estranged lovers.  
Its music tears our veils away. Have you  
ever seen a poison or antidote like the reed?' (Rumi 1981: 19)

In all human cultures there are myths about gods as well as humans, which tell much the same story as Rumi's reed flute: that the bliss of primal union is necessarily followed by separation, from which can arise the sweet sorrow of remembering and renewal.

It was C. G. Jung who pointed to the "healing effect" of amplifying individual suffering by finding its relation to a big story. (CW18, ¶231) The story of the woman who could not bury her baby is about the wisdom of Jung's observation.

In this article, I trace the patterns of longing for the beloved through the sorrow and desire I hear being sung in individuals' lives as well as in some of these myths. I believe that these patterns are very important because in the

darkness and pain of the soul's longing lie the seeds of the most beautiful poetry as well as of hope, which can lead to regeneration.

There is much about this in the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, the lover-twins who have had only one brief separation from the time of lying together in their mother's womb until the political murder of Osiris by their evil brother Seth. When Isis learns of her husband's death she tears her clothes, covers her hair with dust, puts on mourning clothes and goes, alone on a vast journey, to find the body of her beloved man. As she searches the delta of the Nile River she cries:

'Heaven weeps!  
Earth trembles at this deed! ...

My tears flood the land.  
They burn my face.  
Do not forsake me, Osiris.  
Come to your sister.  
Take away the pain in my body.  
You who never found fault with me.  
Do not leave me.

Heaven has fallen through to earth.  
I walk the roads searching for you.  
Fire burns in my heart.  
I grieve that you are alone.  
I stretch out my arms to greet you'. (Wolkstein 1992: 10–11)

The generative power of love's sorrow is apparent in a hymn people sang to Isis on "The Night of the Tear Drop", when she caused the waters of the Nile to swell through her weeping:

Thou givest life unto the flocks and herds, and all the land drinks thee when thou descendest ... When thou comest the whole land rejoices. (Walker 1983: 455)



The same kind of story is set in the garden where Jesus was laid in a borrowed tomb. The Gospel of John tells how Mary Magdalene goes to the garden in the early morning and finds that his body has vanished. In the following love song, I tried to convey her sorrow and the potency of her longing:

## Magdalena's Song

Al tirkhak mi, meni  
Al tirkhah mi, meni  
Kihazakar ha, ahava me-marvet\*

Magdalena was crying  
As she searched the land:  
They've taken my man away,  
And I do not know where he lies.

My love, I remember  
Lost-in-dance and slow love in the night.  
Now is a well of sorrow,  
And the song of desire.

Al tirkhak mi, meni  
Al tirkhah mi, meni  
Kihazakar ha, ahava me-marvet\*

Be not far from me/Be not far from me/Love is stronger than death.<sup>1</sup>



There is an Arabic story that is not so dissimilar to this. It concerns Rabia, a woman who had the rare distinction of becoming a saint in Islam.

Rabia was orphaned as a child and sold into slavery, from which she was eventually freed because of her spiritual gifts. She lived in Basra, which is now a great oil port in Iraq. Some biographers say she was a musician: a player of the ney flute that Rumi sang about 500 years later. (Smith 1994: 24)

When I first heard about Rabia, I was told that there were two stories about her: one that she was a celibate ascetic, devoted entirely to God; the other, that she was the most famous prostitute in all the lands of the East. Either way, it was said that men visited her in the night. But as she swore them all to silence about the secrets of her loving, the town gossips and curious neighbours could divine no more about what went on in her house than their own observation — that each visitor went away strangely transformed and glowing with light. After I heard this story, I wrote a song:

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew text is adapted from King David's prayer, which follows his cry of abandonment — "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" [Psalm 22] — and a line in *The Song of Songs*, which says that love is as strong as death. (Thanks to the late George Stern for the translation.)

## Rabia of Basra

Rabia of Basra  
Is famed through the East  
For pleasures of love  
That make men shine.

Her fragrance is honeyed  
Her clothes are bright silks  
Her face is a jewel  
Her hair's black as a raven.

You can see her sing  
You can hear her pray  
But her love is a secret  
That no man will tell

And she sings through the day  
She sings through the night  
And the word of her song  
Is the name of God

La Illallah Ilahah  
Allah! Allah! Allah!

And outside her door  
A prince is waiting  
To sample the pleasures  
Of love in the night.

She has asked him to wait  
While she finishes her prayers.  
You can see her sing  
You can hear her pray.

La Illallah Ilahah  
Allah! Allah! Allah!

“Oh Rabia. Rabia!  
Let me come in!  
I'm a man of importance,  
I don't like to be waiting!”

“Come in from the night  
Come sit by my side  
While I finish my prayers  
For the love, for the light.”

As she sang her song  
Love took him away,  
And all that she sang  
Was the name of God.

La Illallah Ilahah  
Allah! Allah! Allah!

And all through the night  
The loving was blessed  
And when morning came  
He shone like the sun.

The ecstatic prince  
Left the queen of the light  
And all through the East  
Sang of Rabia's love.

And when he had gone  
I stood near her door.  
As I heard her pray  
Love took me away.

La Illallah Ilahah  
Allah! Allah! Allah!  
Allah! Allah! Allah! Allah!  
Allah! Allah! Allah!

There is a sacred Arabic phrase, *ishq Allah*, that means the desire of the universe to come together. (Douglas-Klotz 1995: 190) This phrase includes the desire of sexual love, and is also a name of God.

I think Rabia and Mary Magdalene must have known a great deal about these mysteries, which are also the *mysterium coniunctionis* of alchemy.



Of course, these patterns are recognisable in individual lives, as well as in stories of gods and divine lovers and saints, of which we are all little mirrors.

In this part of the world, for example, there was a girl among whose earliest memories are those of waking into an experience of complete bliss. This is how she described her experience:

In those moments, which happened all through my childhood and occasionally when I was a teenager and young woman, just before sleep or when I would wake in the night, I would feel myself pressing softly against and held by something enormously large — perhaps as big as the whole universe. It made me feel very special, and it was absolutely comforting and enfolding and soft. It was like being held by someone very loving.

The conscious ecstasy would last only an instant because as soon as I realised I was in it, it would go, leaving me feeling still held and connected but not quite inside the wonderful presence.

It was a kind of game to know I was in it, as though I was seeing it out of the corner of my eye. I mean, if I didn't look at it full-on I could keep it there by not really admitting to my awareness of it with my conscious mind. But sooner or later it would go because it was impossible to resist the desire to see it.

After this girl had grown up she tried to learn about the world outside and to adapt her intelligence to the tough politics of the organisation in which she held a senior position. But in her early thirties, she became severely depressed and suicidal as the biological clock ticked on and she had no real love or prospect of children in her life.

Then one night, near the end of a terrible, lonely winter, an old friend — a former lover — invited her out. She drank a lot of wine and cried for hours in his company as though a huge dam of feeling inside her had burst.

She took the man home to her bed, and in the morning he went and she returned to sleep. She described to me how she then woke like a baby, inside the presence, and drifted in its sweet, timeless bliss.

After this experience, the depression and confusion lifted and over time she was able to fashion a life more in keeping with her own nature.



Not long after the birth of Daniel, my first son, I wrote a song about experiences that seem somewhat like that young woman's.

### **The Stillpoint**

In the space that holds  
The moment of love  
A bell can ring forever  
And there's no having sung  
There's no yet to come  
There is only the ringing now.



In the stillpoint  
With my milky new babe in the night  
There's a holding so close, so full  
Time stops in the space that contains us.

In the stillpoint  
Alone and so lost, in dark dreams,  
I fall through the end of the abyss  
To peace and to light and the stars.

In the stillpoint  
You reach for my body and hold me  
There's no evening, no morning, no other –  
Only warm skin, then knowing and love.

In the stillpoint  
As we look at the Earth from afar  
We ask: What is this space that holds  
Our beautiful spinning planet?  
It's the arms of the Universe.

In the space that holds  
The moment of love  
A bell can ring forever  
And there's no having sung  
There's no yet to come  
There is only the singing now.

For many people, there is so much suffering in longing it is hard to see what Rabia knew: that the primary human state is not separation but the union of being together in “the space that holds”.

This is amply illustrated in the psychoanalytic literature, as well as in the annals of poetry and mysticism. I am thinking for example, of a famous comment by the English psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott:

I once risked the remark “There's no such thing as a baby” – meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a baby and someone. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship.  
(1964: 88)

Many writers in the fields of infant research, object relations, self psychology and Jungian thought have elaborated Winnicott's ideas about the process by which this baby goes on to develop a capacity to live creatively in the world by playing in the presence of a care-giving adult who mirrors but doesn't get in the way of the child's experience. In fact, the literature on the origins of

both a secure sense of self and the capacity to live creatively as an adult, as well as writings on serious personality disorders, suggest to me that there is something essentially wrong in the grim philosophical view that existential aloneness is the fundamental human condition.

Meares and Coombes (1994: 58–67) have described a “drive to play” in children that depends upon the presence of another and also implies the underlying drive to individuation or becoming fully oneself.

This is the link to Jung, who was always interested in the purpose of experience and who reintroduced the notion of teleology into the language of psychology. A telic attitude seeks to answer the purposive question “What’s it for?” rather than the causal inquiry of “Why?”

I think that longing is the telic emotion: it is the psychological condition that points to where we are going, if we can only read the symbolic language in which the way is inscribed. I don’t think enough is said or written about this.

The way in therapeutic work, as in all of life, is apparent in longings past and future: in the sorrow and also in the desire to express who we are in the process of creative living.

I am thinking of a woman in her late forties who, on leaving a destructive marriage, was overwhelmed with grief at never having expressed the erotic aspects of herself. She spent a year of painful longing mixed with frequent failures of hope. And then she met a young man who fell passionately in love with the wild, yet poignant eros that shone out of her. She did not ever think of this as a prospective marriage. And although she was alone when it came naturally to an end, she remained deeply satisfied by the creativity and self expression that had come alive in that relationship.

I have observed similar un-lived aspects of a woman’s nature being expressed in a deep relationship with another woman, and also in strong friendships between men.

You will be sensing by now, I guess, that what I am writing is not, in a primary sense, so much about sorrow and desire as it is about love: about being a lover (of whatever and whomever we love) and also, that it is about the more difficult thing — about opening ourselves to the best and most

certain of all psychologically and spiritually maturing experiences, which is to be beloved.

There is a catch, of course. And that — as the girl knew in trying not to look full-on at the beneficent presence in which she was held — is that we can't reach consciousness and stay permanently in the bliss.

And so there are unions and then there are the sorrows and desires of necessary separations and abandonments — all depicted in the dynamic pattern of psychological maturation, in almost every love poem, in the mystical experience of the Soul held and then forsaken by God, and in the shape of the Tree of Life upon which the Kabbalistic teachings of Jewish mysticism are based.

This is, I think, a more primordial archetypal pattern than the hero's journey — the so-called "monomyth"<sup>2</sup> — for it is supposed to be the foundational experience in every psyche's development.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work out so well. Not long after the Song of the Reed Flute in the *Mathnawi* Rumi says:

If love withholds its strengthening care  
The lover is left like a bird without wings. (1981: 20)

I have spent some years studying the Greek myth of Oedipus and Queen Jocasta, and the psychopathologies of the abandoned, deprived child who is born to be king. In my therapeutic work and in other songs I have written, I hear the sound of this baby's despair at the separation from his mother, as well as the unanswered sorrows and desires of Jocasta's life which ends in suicide and precipitates Oedipus's self-blinding. These are not the kinds of separations from which new life comes easily.

But the pain of losing a baby, and the difficulty of burying his small body, is something I do know about, and have been able to learn from — partly because of my wonderful family and the compassionate friends who listened and made many cups of tea as they shared a thousand and one stories of their own, and partly because of the life that came after the death.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Campbell, (1968: 30n) and also James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*, (1939) whom Campbell cites as the author of this description of the myth of the hero.

The lyrics of the following song were written in the middle of one night not quite half way through my pregnancy with my little son Rafael. As I mused on a vase of early spring poppies while drinking hot milk and honey to settle my heartburn and fear of another loss, Rafi moved inside me and I felt hope and a certain mercurial good humour enter my being.

### **Gestating, at 2am**

Soft in my rounding form  
Quickening Mercurius — Ah Mercurius  
Ah, my sweet baby Quicksilver  
Flicker the wings on your feet again  
Flutter your butterfly feet

Some babies live, some they die  
I remember the little red boy we buried  
I remember another of only nine weeks  
Silently flowed the tears  
And the thick black blood of loss.

Ah, Mercurius  
Quickening Mercurius — Mercurius  
Ah, my sweet baby Quicksilver  
Flicker the wings in my womb again  
Flutter your butterfly feet.

Now come the movements of life in my body  
Now the vessel is sealed  
Now is a stirring to mischief I feel  
Rolling yourself on my stomach again  
Heartburn at 2 am.

Mmm, Mercurius  
Incubating snug inside — Mercurius  
Ah my sweet baby Quicksilver  
Flicker the wings on your feet again  
Flutter your butterfly feet.

With hot milk and honey I watch  
An opening poppy flower  
Petals of crepe labour all night  
Into the mystery      Into the alchemy  
Comes gold into the light.

Ah, Mercurius  
Quickening Mercurius  
Mercurius  
Oooh, my quicksilver babe  
Flutter your butterfly feet.  
Oooh – Oooh