

The power of the exiled woman: The handless maiden

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Aug. 11, 2008 | El Rio Debajo del Rio

Since the time I first told my grandmother that e.e. cummings had written: "I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing than teach ten-thousand stars how not to dance..." my grandmother ever after called him Saint E-E, and said he was just the kind of leader of the soul the world was longing for.

Week after week, month after month, we see women and the men who support them, chastised and silenced, threatened and spiritually menaced. I have a story for your goodness of soul.

When you and I recently gathered 'round the fire here at river's edge, we talked over an old tale, "The Handless Maiden." And I gave you only the first stave of several as the entire story is usually told over several nights. Thus, we noted the opening scene: **the horrific amputation of the daughter's arms by her father who used his silver axe to maim her.**

And yet, by the end of this tale, were I to tell all its episodes tonight, we would see that even armless, the daughter, the feminine, is inextinguishable.

We would see that the soul is steel, not glass, that the soul is an incendiary force that does not burn everything to the ground, but rather burns away only what is dry and worn out beyond effective use ...

And then, after this *dissolution*, (this being taken apart, in a sense, the old self is now dissolved) which is the first step to transformation since time out of mind, the handless maiden uses the same flame to meld and fire new forms and shapes to learn through and to live in.

Yet, we struggle over this tale with the mutilating father, as we sometimes struggle with a negative father in real life. What kind of man is it who would sever his daughter's ability to reach, to grasp, to hold onto, to bring nourishment to herself, to push away what is not wanted, to create at will, to hold close, to cherish other souls?

We find we can make some sense of the father's actions if we consider the archetypal. The father in ancient tales can be understood symbolically, as representing the dominant force in a culture, the "approved" collective way of thinking... for instance, regarding this tale, the dominant assertion is that the feminine ought not reach, not unfold in her own rhythms; She ought instead be trivialized, and then agree to be sacrificed for low and narrow temporal gains.

There are good fathers galore in our world, and this is also reflected in many ancient tales. Think of the Huntsman

in Hansel and Gretel who is ruthless to the children, refusing to kill them as their stepmother has commanded. Think of the good Philemon who loves every son and daughter he has, including his mint plants and his fruiting trees as though they were his children. Imagine those figures as symbolic of a collective consciousness about the feminine, as opposed to the axe-wielding father. What a difference in cultural attitude.

But in narratives where the father is a deleterious force, he can be understood as symbolizing a certain kind of unconsciousness... one which insists that all persons ought hold his viewpoint only, that he himself must put self-titled "love of diktat" far, far ahead of one of the most holy kind ... "regarding others as equal to oneself, and with love."

In "The Handless Maiden" story, the father believes the only right way to live is by stalking riches, longing for deference, asserting harsh control over all things he fears might diminish his privilege and position.

By holding to these debased values, the father in the story literally trades his daughter away to the Devil... in exchange for power of the purely temporal kind.

The first stave of this story is told in a previous essay about diminishment of women's gifts. Read in an earlier column the essay, "[The Apple Tree](#) [1]." It goes like this

[In] my old country family's version of the tale "The Handless Maiden" (*Women Who Run with the Wolves*), the father meets the Devil in the woods. The Devil says give me what is behind your barn and I will make you wealthy and privileged for life. The father thinks, there's only an old apple tree behind the barn, and agrees to the bargain. Yet, since time out of mind, the fruiting tree has also represented the talent, sexuality, life-giving force of women: the maiden, the mother and the old woman, all in one.

Outside the father's awareness, who is also 'out back' behind the storing place for the harvest, is his daughter.... She who is fertile, she who brings forth, she who - even when having gathered many years - still brings forth sweetest fruits imaginable ... and in abundance rather than only vaguely.

As he is rushing home to tell his wife, his rough clothes are magically replaced by rich velvets and silks. As his wife comes running to meet him, her plain scarf is replaced by a diamond tiara and her rags turn into a gown befitting a queen.

The man explains what a good bargain he has made. But the wife shrieks a death cry, "No! Behind the barn today stood our daughter. You have consigned our daughter to hell!"

And, in a few days' time, the devil shows up to claim the girl. The devil knew all along the father wasn't paying attention and did not register or cherish his daughter's true worth.

The girl's purity of heart continually repels the devil so he cannot take her: He says her hands are too clean. That she must not bathe and she must allow herself to become dirty. But even then, she cries tears and her arms are made clean again. Thus she repels the Devil again as though a force field surrounds her.

So, the devil tells the father that he has to cut off his daughter's arms so that the devil can take her.

The father is horrified, but he follows through, for the devil threatens to take the father's life if he will not sacrifice his daughter. And thus, in one of the most horrendous episodes in ancient tales, the father hoists his sharp axe and severs his daughter's arms.

Still and yet, the devil is unable to take the girl. Her innate feminine depth repels him for the final time.

In the tale, the girl, who has just burst into fruiting with her many talents in life, is disparaged and offered up for lucre, ease of life and material gain. She and the apple tree behind the father's barn are not protected even though each is fully filled with gifts.

They are instead seen as nothings, present only to serve. It can be said, her gifts, not appreciated or seen, are thereby forfeited. She is not allowed to grasp or live her own deep and pure reality as a force of the feminine. The daughter's gifts are left to spoil on the ground.

This scenario of "keep my ?gold,' but sacrifice my daughter" may sound familiar to some. Opinions and certitudes from the outer collective often at first clash when the literal make-you-nearly-faint-on-the-spot force of "calling" insists men and women be, do, live fully to the ends of their capacities, despite what the unconscious father/collective natters, threatens or does.

In the old tales, as in real life, the negative father often blames the child/woman for being bad and thereby the father says he is rendered helpless to do anything but punish the offensive child/woman. The word choice may be important. The child/ woman is often said to have created an "offense" but often covertly the real issue with the father is that the child/woman is "offensive" to the father's sense of omnipotence.

Such a father's way of seeing infantilizes others, projects badness onto pure inspiration in others, and then punishes others for them having dared to be filled with a palpable and holy force that the father does not understand, that is, *la luz*, the Divine light that throws sparks constantly, and which roams the world just looking for any darkened lamp filled with fragrant oil.

The idea of the father in "The Handless Maiden" tale is that he punishes the daughter for her natural way of carrying new life, for her capacity to grow and develop in cycles and without his say-so.

Calling is like a sun. Thus, like a green living thing, the daughter naturally grows toward what she is called to -- but not in the "hard pruning way" the father insists on. The negative father wants to call all the shots about how, where, why and when she shall or shall not develop, the father literally trying to suborn the huge wind of the Holy Spirit.

Surely a good portion of the soul's most dedicated circuitry runs on the ideas that: Unquestioning obedience and great courage seldom go together. Even more so, unquestioning obedience and amazing revelation, rarely coexist.

Not to say that some do not thrive on unquestioned obedience. Some do. They see uninquiring obedience to be their calling. And all is well. Unless one kind of calling is thought to be the only kind existent; that both kinds cannot be honored. As we know, some are called to remain to guard the land and some are called to launch out to sea to find new worlds. And there is no good reason to have antagonism between these two.

However, in this tale, the father, though he says he loves the daughter, instead destroys her. In his soul and heart he does not know her, nor her soul, has not sought to know either, is not the least curious about any force of feminine that does not fill his narrow and preconceived notions about what a "real" woman really is like, how she ought to act, what particular kind of woman he warms to and wishes all women were like, etc. Thus, he is dismissive. And, in fact, he trivializes and severs this profound cyclical of feminine force of inspiration within

himself at the same time.

Stave Two

I take up the story again to tell you what occurred after the father used his silver axe to chop off his daughter's arms.

Listen...

The old father offered to keep his daughter in a castle of great comforts, and with riches for life. But, the daughter said she felt it more fitting that she become a beggar girl and depend on the goodness of others for sustenance.

And so she had her arms bound in clean gauze, and at daybreak she walked away from her life as she had once known it.

She walked and walked. High noon caused her sweat to streak the dirt on her face. The wind disheveled her hair until it was like a stork's nest of twigs all tangled this way and that. In the midst of the night she came to a royal pear orchard where the moon had put a gleam on all the fruits that hung from the trees.

She could not enter because the orchard was surrounded by a moat. But, she fell to her knees, for she was starved. A ghostly spirit in white appeared and shut one of the sluice gates so that the moat was emptied.

The maiden walked among the pear trees and somehow she knew that each perfect pear had been counted and numbered, and that they were guarded as well.

Nevertheless, a bough slowly bent itself low, its limb creaking, so she could reach the lovely fruit at its tip.

She put her lips to the golden skin of the pear and ate while standing there in the moonlight, her arms bound in gauze, her hair affright, appearing like a mad woman, the handless maiden.

The gardener saw it all, but recognized the magic of the spirit who guarded the maiden, and he did not interfere.

After the girl finished eating the single pear, she withdrew across the moat and slept in the shelter of the wood.

The next morning the king came to count his pears. He found one missing, and looking high and looking low, he could not find the vanished fruit.

The gardener explained: "Last night two spirits drained the moat, entered the garden at high moon, and one without hands ate the pear that offered itself to her."

The king said he would keep watch that night. At dark he came with his gardener and his magician, who knew how to speak with spirits. The three sat beneath a tree and watched.

At midnight, the maiden came floating through the forest, her clothes dirty rags, her hair awry, her face streaked, her arms without hands, and the spirit in white beside her.

They entered the orchard the same way as before. Again, a tree gracefully bent one of its boughs to within her reach and she supped on the pear at its tip.

The magician came close, but not too close to them and asked, "Are you of this world or not of this world?"

And the handless maiden answered, "I was once of the world, and yet I am not of this world."

The king questioned the magician. "Is she human or spirit?" The magician answered that she was both. The king's heart leapt and he rushed to her and cried, "I shall not forsake you. From this day forward, I shall care for you."

At his castle he ordered made for her a pair of silver hands, which were fastened to her upper arms. And so it was that the king married the handless maiden.

In time, the king had to wage war in a far-off kingdom, and he asked his mother to care for his young queen, for he loved her with all his heart. "If she gives birth to a child, send me a message right away," he said.

And he rode away not realizing what Devilish challenge lay ahead.... for the Devil was not dead, but had only been sleeping....

We see in this part of the story (and there are three more staves yet to come) that like many a woman or man, who has been severed by the "old narrow way of thinking," that although she is injured badly, her soul is still *clarus y diffundo*... clear, distinct, and ever brightening.

Once her arms are severed, she is offered by her father, not refuge, but rather to enjoy a life of ease. Her father says that she ought stay with them, and that will for nothing. This palliative is a common leitmotif in stories about the journey of the wounded soul seeking to return to its wholeness again. In another tale, "[The Jumping Mouse](#) [2]," a small creature making its way to follow the "most beautiful sight in the world," comes to a village of old mice, who say, "Stay with us, act like us, agree with us, and you will be safe with us."

The handless maiden, like the brave small creature in the story "Jumping Mouse," also refuses. The soul knows it is in the midst of a dangerous time of transformation when it is essentially 'skinless' and highly vulnerable. The soul knows that the danger isn't so much from those who would punish, humiliate, scorn, impede. Rather the greatest danger comes from taking soporifics and agreeing to live anesthetized, instead of continuing to bravely wander, to reply on grace and angels to care for the wounded soul.

There is something in us, once we are bad hurt, that says: No, I would like to try to go where the wind of Spirit leads me; I will wander, not lost ... but rather, learning. I will take refuge only in that which is far greater than me, but not in the already gilded squalor of the ambitious father's way of seeing soul as commodity to be traded.

The troubled soul often knows that to "remain with" the "usual" will bring only more of the usual scar tissue. What is needed is not the ordinary, but the extraordinary. Experiences beyond the rote, beyond the regulated.

I've often thought that the Christ wandering off to pray in Gethsemane, away from the others, that that too was what was needed in a troubled time of exile, an extraordinary conversation with Creator. The others fell asleep in his time of travail. He was already living disenfranchised from his own culture, and in the extreme.

But, nonetheless, he was going forward, completely unprotected. His compadres could not follow him, for they hadn't enough consciousness yet to see "the condition his condition was in." Regardless, the choice to be "away" in order to "find one's way" is the exact medicine needed.

I think of Demeter too, fatigued unto death about Zeus's infidelities. She wanders off into self exile. She climbs down into a crevasse and goes under a mountain to live, away from all others, to what? To see. To truly see again. To try to find extraordinary means to be re-envisioned, to be nourished by invisible hands. And once

she has found her equilibrium again, she resurfaces, as they say in the old poems, "shining like the sun."

This tale that I will continue to tell you until the telling is done, is, I believe, a poignant one for the pushed around, the pushed out, the ridiculed

for in all the years I've worked with torn souls, whether they came by their hard injuries through natural disasters, cruel twists of fate, spiritual crises, wrong turns, huge inborn gifts that would shatter them before they would one day be able to coalesce them... I can say, for certain, that even ragged and dirty and without grasping the reasons for matters unfolding in every direction, there is an orchard, a rich orchard of delicious, juicy, sweet perfectly ripe fruit....

That in exile, there is also in such unexpected ways, a feast of a kind that one never expected; there is the very kindness of nature that bends to feed the spirit, there is recognition by Creator that one of its own is wandering and needs sustenance, and that that nourishment will not arrive by common means, but uncommon pathways, via and odd and unusual persons, by way of unexpected means. The wandering, the exiled, will not be let to fail. They will be fed, always, by mysterious means. Look for it. And especially look for the uncanny usual, and for the wildly unusual, for those are often the places the holy is most well hidden.

And may I say to you also, to reassure you, but also to help the fruit laden branch bend toward you....when everything says, protect, protect, protect, one must even then and especially then, set out, not knowing, but feeling, sensing and daring to believe that the spirit in white, that is, the genius one was born with... what is called angel, Guardian Angel, specifically is with us.

We may not know the way, but the big linebacker angels do. That you can count on.

When next we meet, I will bring you the next stave about the journey of the wounded soul in exile, "The Handless Maiden," wherein the maiden's arms are replaced in an odd and temporary way... and even in the final stave yet to come, there will be yet another crisis, and another call to love and trust, as is always the path of the mystic as well.

Till then, the pears are just coming to harvest now, rosy blush, sweet greens, bright freckled yellow pears. Like the orchard in the tale, there is something incomprehensible, something heartbreakingly generous, something that loves us despite what any one else does or says, no matter what lacks or deficits, no matter what strengths and passions we carry... no matter what mayhem we are living in, no matter what intense worries we are shellacked with daily, no matter how unable, severed, wandering, exiled by others or by self we have become, there is a mysterious force that will nourish us gently, and deeply, until we are satisfied

As Saint E.E. said: A wind has blown the rain away and blown the sky away and all the leaves away -- and the trees stand ..." That's the operative prayer: *And the trees still stand.*

We do.

We all do.

As you know, tall trees often lean into each other, and support each other, young and old. In that way, as one of my dear hermanas, Sr. Char, says to me, I hope you will *please lean on my prayers.*

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[1] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/2018>

[2] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/2025>