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Mending the torn soul

by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés

El Rio Debajo del Rio

Levántate, da voces en la noche, al comenzar las vigiliass;

Derrama como agua tu corazón ante la presencia del Señor;

Alza tus manos a él implorando la vida de tus pequeñitos,

Que desfallecen de hambre en las entradas de todas las calles.

Don't just stand there, Rise Up!! Cry out! Cry out in the dark! Cry out at your vigil... Let your heart pour out like water ...let everyone and God see you are bold! Lift your hands! Lift! Your! Hands!... else your little children shall starve on every road.

Lamentations, 2:19

We come now to the final stave of the ancient tale, "The Handless Maiden," a story about a gifted woman severed and pushed into a tumultuous spiritual descent, forced to depend upon soul alone, and eventually finding her way to unleash every good gift within her, but now with confidence, now with greatest, unapologetic heart.. ?

In the past staves of this tale, we saw an innocent woman's hands be severed with a silver axe by her father who'd made a bargain with the Devil to become materially rich.

This daughter of great gifts, now had no hands to implement her life, and she set out to wander, coming first to an orchard that bent to feed her, and then to a king who fell in love with her soul; its vulnerability and its endurance.

They marry, and the king is called away while the handless maiden is pregnant. When she brings a lovely child into the world, the queen-mother's letters to the king telling him that the child has been born, are changed by the Devil to read just the opposite, that is, that the handless maiden has given birth to a monster. The devil changes the king's loving reply which says to protect his queen and his child, to a malicious one that demands the queen-mother murder the handless maiden and her innocent child.

The horrified queen-mother binds the infant to the handless maiden's breast and mother and child flee for their lives. The maiden and child fearfully enter a dark forest, but are led by angels to a place of rest. There they are taught and comforted for seven years; and the child grows beautifully.

Meanwhile the king returns home. The queen-mother shows him the eyes and ears of slain animals, saying his command to murder the handless maiden and his own child have been carried out. The king is grief-stricken, and the queen-mother realizes treachery has been afoot. She reveals that his wife and child are still alive. But the king will not be consoled.

The king vows a purification -- to go without eating or drinking and to travel as far as the sky is blue in order to find his maiden and their child. He sets himself to wander into the wilds, refusing to wash. His beard grows long and dank. He stumbles into the same dark forest as the handless maiden and child... But there, he is mistaken as a beast by hunters, and for his years of wandering he is scarred by direct arrow hits. Yet he keeps on, looking for his loves. Finally, a steady-armed archer badly wounds the king in a flurry of arrows.

Advertisement

The Fifth and Final Stave: Mending the Torn Soul

In my ethnic family's unique version of this story, the tale unfolds this way... It is night and the handless maiden is sleeping at the inn. But, she awakens with a start when she hears far off, the beast-king's cry as he, mortally wounded, falls down the talus slope.

She startles in pain as though the arrows piercing his body have penetrated her body as well. She somehow hears over time and space, brilliant cracking sounds as his body weight crushes the small trees as he falls. She hears her love's labored breathing as he lies sprawled and broken at the bottom of the hill.

She calls out plaintively to the spirits in white who have watched over her from the beginning.

It is they who now lift the unconscious king ever so tenderly and carry him to the inn in the forest that has carved over its door the legend: *Here, All Dwell Free*. There, the spirits in white turn the beast-king face up and wash his wounds, binding them up with herbs and soft cloths... They lay a light veil over the king, and he sleeps the sleep of the dead.

The spirits in white assure the handless maiden that the life force of the king is still alive and that he will, in time, be restored. Relieved, the maiden and her child decide to walk to the well that stands a little way from the inn.

However, in a moment that is, if possible, even more horrifying than the original severing of the maiden's hands, and her being forced to flee for her and her child's lives... the little child runs ahead of his mother on the path to the well, running and running and not heeding her cries to slow down.

The child runs to the well and as though showing off, jumps atop the well's stone ledge... and promptly loses her balance and falls down and down and down, into the deep swirling water.

The handless maiden begins to shriek pathetically, and a spirit in white appears instantly, asking why she does not rescue her child.

"Because I have no hands!" cries the young queen.

"Reach!!" calls the spirit.

"I cannot reach, I have no hands!" cries the maiden

"Reach!!! Reach!!!" bellows the spirit.

"I cannot! I have no hands!"

"REACH!! You must REACH!!!" commands the spirit in white.

And the maiden stretches out her wounded arms, straining with everything in her to reach to her child. ? and as she does, her hands regenerate then and there... the more she reaches, the more her hands take form, first as child hands, then as woman hands....

Thus, her child is not only saved, but lifted out of the water, swept up into mother's arms, held with one hand sheltering the child's head, held with hands against the heartbeat of the mother, for the very first time ever.

Although there are more details to this rich story, the ending of The Handless Maiden story goes like this.... the king, in time, awakens to find a lovely woman and a beautiful child gazing down at him. "I am your wife and this is your child," says the young queen.

The king is willing to believe but sees that the maiden has hands. "Through my travails and yet my good care by spirits in white, by my own striving for what I truly love and cannot allow to die, my hands have grown back," she says.

And a spirit-woman in white brings the silver hands from a trunk where they'd been treasured... and the king and queen and child literally dance with joy.

The king, the queen, and the child return to the king's mother who is also diademed with joyful tears. A second wedding takes place, not only an averring of love, but a telling of all their stories.... about how each soul was cut and severed, leveled and lied to, hounded and wounded, bewildered and grief-stricken, melded and formed, uplifted, protected and polished -- by not only travails -- but also by the spirits in white whose work it was, as it is said by the oldest tellers, to keep watch of the soul's journeys in these dark and wild woods.

The subtext of this story may well be, not The Holy Messianic Journey, but rather, The Holy Messy Journey... for who of us has not suffered greatly in mostly untidy ways? Who has not experienced a severance, whether from love or work, whether cut from the fruiting when we'd in fact been heavy with flowers just a short while ago? Why do we, who are "made in the Image of," we who have been granted a precious soul, we who strive so... why do we have to be culled and exiled and forced to wander?

When I used to say to my grandmother Katerin, "Life isn't fair,"... she'd say, "That's right, life isn't a fair..." Wake up! Life is really just one long, holy circus."

What she was saying, was, This complicated strange world, is Life. Here on earth, often enough, the spirit, the soul, the mind, the heart, and sometimes the body too, are all involved in some kind of three-ring event that leaves one in some part, torn, dented, lacerated, bruised. And transformed, eventually.

One can be fairly certain that even when going through a dramatic descent which causes deep suffering, there are also within the struggle, amazing feats of prowess and grand daring acts, and sometimes these are even garnished with a bit of humor too. Later though, usually after the fact.

The handless maiden began as a naïve person who did not realize even in mundane relationships, in the very collective culture she lived in... that the demonic and dark is attracted *only* to beauty, innocence and giftedness.

Why would the demons of the world, whether in one's rotten overly self-effacing thinking, or "out there" in some crumb-bum person or group that assails us... why would any self-respecting predator want dead meat? It/ they wouldn't. They like tasty talent, fresh hopes, delicious dreams, lush callings. I can guarantee, that anywhere there is beauty of spirit, mind, body, idea, calling, soul, longing, sweetness, kindness... the Predator shows up. Hungry. With fork and knife. Several of each, in fact.

But, in *las luchas*, in our struggles, as in the most ancient tales, attempts by the wasters, spoilers and cutters who try to overtake the soul... ever fail. There is a purity to the soul that not only attracts predators, it also repels them. To remain en-souled, no matter what, is the strongest offense and defense we possess.

To save the child who falls into the well, is to give everything we've got to saving the most precious aspect, the SoulSelf, the new potential that was born by leaving the old father's way of doing things, the old father's malignant viewpoint of the world... and to instead turn toward aspects of soul and psyche that are attracted by both our vulnerabilities and our endurances... and with deep desire to do no harm to us.

Remember, at the beginning, the ancient manuscript from the Holy Book orders us with regard to saving the children, the spirits of the world, the infant who is in some way Divine, the gifted self, she or he who cannot be allowed to fall in the road and not be nourished or tended to.

The voice of a spirit in white reaches out of Lamentations 2:19, shouting, crying, bellowing, demanding: Don't just stand there when your precious soul falls in the well.

Rise Up!! Cry out! Cry out in the dark! Cry out at your vigil... Let your heart pour out like water ...let everyone and God see you are bold! Lift your hands! Lift! Your! Hands!... Lift your gifted self, your precious child self up from certain death. Reach! Reach! What has been severed grows back through your acts of immaculate Love.

Going way beyond one's usual limits, but for critical purpose.... breaking through an old attitude that has no fuel, to a new attitude that does.... different thinking, different action, different direction... those kinds of extreme reaching cause growth, and restoration in a new form... thereby allowing a woman, a man, a child, to not just grapple with every undone or imperfect thing endlessly, but to grasp their own interior and external lives, to get a good grip on their own wit and wisdom, and particularly to keep the most precious thing-- whatever that might be to each person -- to keep that most precious thing... from perishing.

It is not that the handless maiden purposely tried to grow back her severed hands.

It is that she took a sudden oath of extreme crazy heart in order to save her most precious living gift from utter destruction.

Remember? The handless maiden began to shriek pathetically

"Reach!!" calls the spirit.

"I cannot reach, I have no hands!" cries the maiden

"Reach!!! Reach!!!" bellows the spirit.

"I cannot! I cannot, I have no hands!"

"REACH!! You must REACH!!!" commands the spirit in white.

And the maiden stretches out her arms, straining with everything in her to reach to save her child.

Perfect. No less. Nor more. The exact remedy.

Tiny Prayer

Have you ever thought --
"My life is such a mess?"

The ego screams,
"Fix it! Fix it!"

But the soul says,
"Make it holy."

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CODA:

Spanish Lamentation, from Reina-Valera edition, mid-20th century. English translation by this author. Translating from one language to another, must be, I think, one of the mysteries... and musics of the world. With too spare a gift given to me, I try to render the words impressionistically, with emphasis on light... and shadow. Translation, to me, is more like attempting to paint a portrait of a beautiful person using fat, juicy oils, than like trying to copy a photograph of the same beautiful person while using tracing paper and pencil. I hope you will smile when I say that The Handless Maiden's trope is a good one for many aspects of our lives: "Reach, you must reach!" commands the spirit in white."

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