

**Re-Imagining the Myth of Demeter and Persephone:  
Exploration of the Constructs of Marriage and Nuclear Family**

Rachel E. Seiler, LMSW, ABD

California Institute of Integral Studies

1453 Mission St.

San Francisco, CA 94103

Rae1307@optonline.net

Presented at the Third North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work

June 2008

## Abstract

This paper presents a re-imagining of the myth of Greek Goddesses Demeter and Persephone that holds practice implications for social workers as it provides a springboard for the critical interrogation of our prevailing patriarchal culture's social structures including marriage and family, and of feminism itself. The trend towards conceptualizing women's experiences in universalizing terms that exclude the perspectives of women of color is challenged. This paper also offers guidelines for tracing one's maternal lineage to reveal the Motherline heritage which is a central organizing principle for the experience of continuity amongst women that can illuminate multigenerational patterns and foster rich insight into current relationships.

## Biography

Rachel E. Seiler, LMSW, ABD, is a licensed master social worker practicing in New York State. She is an all-but-dissertation PhD student in Transformative Learning and Change - an interdisciplinary program preparing graduates to conduct action-oriented research and interventions in human systems to engender progressive social change - at the California Institute of Integral Studies. She hopes to contribute to the birthing of a culture of sustainability, justice, and peace through her writing and her work in the non-profit sector.

Re-Imaging the Myth of Demeter and Persephone:  
Social Work Implications for the Exploration of the Constructs of Marriage and Nuclear Family  
and their Impact on the Mother-Daughter Bond in Modern Western Society

**Overview**

The surging contemporary women's spirituality movement is a wellspring of wisdom bubbling up from our deepest cultural history and diverse belief systems from around the world. Social workers can dip into this font for multi-dimensional ideas and approaches that support the mission of the profession: to enhance human well-being and to dismantle mechanisms of injustice and oppression. This paper presents a re-imagining of the myth of Greek Goddesses Demeter and Persephone; the classic story of descent, death and rebirth, and of separation and reunion between archetypal Mother and Daughter that I wrote towards the ends of processing the profound changes in my relationship with my mother since my marriage.

My adaptation of the Demeter-Persephone myth holds practice implications for social workers as it provides a springboard for the critical interrogation of our prevailing patriarchal culture's social structures and of feminism itself: Do the constructs of marriage and nuclear family alienate women from one another and marginalize the mother-daughter bond that was celebrated in the ancient Eleusinian religion as an expression of the central human mystery? Is the assumption that all women feel isolation and separation from other women part of the trend towards conceptualizing women's experiences in universalizing terms that exclude the perspectives of women of color? What models for the creative dynamic of women living in community with one another already exist outside the realm of the mainstream feminist discourse?

This paper also offers a model for tracing one's maternal lineage to reveal the Motherline heritage which is a central organizing principle for the experience of continuity amongst women that can illuminate multigenerational patterns and foster rich insight into current relationships.

### **Objectives**

This paper will support social workers to:

- Understand the current frameworks of marriage and nuclear family within the context of the shift from matrifocal to patrifocal societal structure that is illuminated by Charlene Spretnak's feminist work on the myth of Demeter and Persephone
- Apply a critical lens to our prevailing culture's social structures of marriage and family and their impact on a woman's ability to maintain a continuing, fruitful connection with her mother, or with other women in general
- Actively seek out the voices of diverse groups of women in terms of their experiences of marriage, family, and the mother-daughter bond to guard against the reductionism that equates "women's experience" with "white, mid-to-upper class women's experience"
- Employ the Motherline heritage approach with clients to weave together the stories of matrilineal ancestors as a strategy for exploring multigenerational patterns and continuity of women within families to foster deepened insight into relationships at the personal, cultural, and archetypal levels

### **Re-imagining and Analyzing the Myth**

Here is my re-imagining:

The Goddess Demeter lovingly gives the gift of agriculture to the people of the earth. She sees that their lives are hard, and their food supply sporadic. She has watched fondly as women have learned more and more about Her plants through their closeness to nature, determining which bear fruit that can satisfy their hunger, which soothe and heal, which stimulate and intoxicate. She is pleased by the closeness of the women to each other. She shows the women

how to plant the seeds, cultivate, harvest, and grind the wheat that will be baked into life-sustaining bread. The women's creative energy brings life to their community in many ways.

Demeter and her Daughter Persephone frolic in the fields as they burst into in full bloom with narcissus and hyacinth. They twine garlands of myrtle into each other's hair. They bask in the comforting warmth of the sacred mother-daughter bond.

Together, Demeter and Persephone witness the passage of millennia, and countless societal shifts. They watch sadly as the sacred mother-daughter bond is denigrated by the new patriarchy. Mother and Daughter could often be observed dreaming out-loud together about how they could participate in the process of birthing a culture of peace back into the world. They change with the times. They dance and sing together at rock concerts, and join in candlelight vigils and marches for peace and social justice. Their close, vital relationship continues to thrive and they spend much of their time together. They live in an eternal springtime-of-the-soul.

Persephone tells Demeter of her plans to wed. Demeter's heart is filled with happiness for her Daughter, and they set out to plan Persephone's wedding together. Demeter and Persephone share the joys and sorrows involved in planning a wedding that will be a family celebration to affirm life and love worthy of the ancestor's blessings in its exuberance.

On Persephone's wedding day, she and Demeter join on the dance floor during the reception as the strains of The Pretenders' "I'll Stand by You" rise in the room. As their eyes meet, Demeter and Persephone's faces contort in intense emotion. Their free-flowing tears are mixture of elation and heartbreak. Demeter feels a chill pass through her body as she clasps her Daughter's hands. They are speechless for a moment, but as they sway and spin in time with the music they begin to sing. The song's lyrics assume a new and sparkling meaning, as Demeter and Persephone are confronted with being apart for the first time after what seems like lifetimes of togetherness. They hold each other for what seemed to be at once a fleeting moment and an

eternity. They rock each other as their tears keep flowing. Mother and Daughter join in an embrace that both bless a new beginning, and mourns an ending.

The song ends. Their parting is bittersweet. Mother and Daughter know that their relationship will be forever changed. Demeter tells Persephone, "I understand why you must leave my home to establish your own; our society dictates it. Still, you are my Daughter and for every day that we are apart I will mourn your absence. I will recall our relationship as it used to be fondly. I will long for our closeness".

Persephone departs Demeter's home to establish her own with her husband. She carries her Mother's warmth in her heart. She clings to the values and traditions that Demeter imparted to her. She struggles, often unsuccessfully, to balance the demands of her nascent marriage and career with her deep desire to maintain her close bond with Demeter and her clan.

Persephone's husband does not truly understand the nature of her connection with her Mother, and their need for one another. He does not overtly seek to isolate Persephone from her Mother, but his demeanor often conveys his position that Persephone spends too much time with Demeter and not enough with him. Persephone feels conflicted, yet unwilling to sacrifice her bond with Demeter. Demeter endeavors to adjust to her life without Persephone's presence within her home. She cries often. It seems that the dynamic equilibrium of the whole family has been upset. She grieves, and feels the frost of winter within her soul.

Whenever Demeter and Persephone are able to spend time together, it is cause for great jubilation. They often engage in activities that honor women's ways of knowing and being that are marginalized within prevailing culture. Their time spent together walking Wisdom House's labyrinth, sharing a bottle of wine on the beach, food shopping, or planning holiday celebrations and rituals allows them the opportunity to nurture the mother-daughter bond that modern Western society suggests should be supplanted by the husband-wife relationship. It is during these moments that Demeter and Persephone revel in the rejoicing of spring as the bliss of their reunion blossoms in their souls.

Mythology Relating to Demeter and Persephone:

- Is the classic story of descent, death and rebirth, and of separation and reunion between Mother and Daughter (Austen, 1990)
- Long pre-dates the Christian deification of father and son (Spretnak, 1989)
- The violent twist portraying Persephone's rape is a historical reference to the invasion and conquest perpetrated by war-like patriarchal tribes that ushered in the decline of Goddess culture, reflects shift from matrifocal to patrifocal society (Spretnak, 1989)

Current frameworks of marriage and nuclear family that are privileged by modern Western society do not serve to support the mother-daughter bond. Lowinsky quotes Adrienne Rich (1992, p. 53): “There is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement”.

My mother-daughter relationship:

- We have always gravitated towards deepest mutuality as opposed to painful estrangement
- Yet it cannot be denied that my mother and I have experienced radical changes in our exceedingly close relationship since my marriage
- Our joint exploration of the Motherline heritage we share as mother and daughter opened a portal to deepened mutual understanding and empathy

### **What Is The Motherline?**

According to Lowinsky (1992):

- A name for a pattern, for the oneness of body and psyche, for the experience of continuity amongst women

- A central organizing principle in the psyche of women, “like the stem and the roots of the tree of life, through which a woman is related to the ancient earth of female procreation (pg. 4)”. Engaging the Motherline can empower us and our clients to “take a journey to find roots in the personal, cultural, and archetypal Motherline...Finding our female roots, reclaiming our feminine souls, requires paying attention to our real mothers. lives and experience...Listening to our mothers’ stories is the beginning of understanding our own” (Lowinsky, 1992, pp. xi-xii).

In a class lecture on October 7, 2005 for the course entitled, “Motherline Heritage” Teaching Assistant of Women’s Spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies Karen Villanueva stated Your Motherline is about YOU and all the mothers that went into making you, your maternal lines of inheritance.

### **How to Trace The Motherline**

In a lecture to my “Motherline Heritage” class on November 16, 2005, Dr. Susan Carter, Professor of Women’s Spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies stated that if one’s mother is no longer living, one might:

- Take the opportunity to connect with other living relatives who were close to her, and learn all one can
- Draw upon other ways of knowing such as asking for information through dreams and intuition

Part of the process of tracing the Motherline is the sacred act of invoking the names of the Motherline ancestors. However, the Motherline is not only an exploration of the women in one’s own bloodline as many of these women’s stories may have been lost or forgotten. Some of us are adopted, have had branches of our family trees lopped off in Europe during the Holocaust, or as a result of the horrors of the Middle Passage, etc. In her lecture to my “Motherline Heritage” class on November 16th, 2005 Dr. Carter suggested that if one’s maternal lineage is inaccessible



or inappropriate as per her own standards, an alternative lineage may be substituted, such as exploring spiritual Motherlines or Crone/Mentor Motherlines.

Exploring the Motherline can bring up points of inquiry that one may not realize existed in one's family; social workers can witness and support our clients in this emotional and at-times difficult process. In a class lecture on November 16, 2005 for her course entitled, "Motherline Heritage" Dr. Susan Carter, Professor of Women's Spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies offered some guidelines for one's exploration of the Motherline that we can adapt as needed:

- Questions are the beginning of discovery. Are there any "burning questions" you would like to ask your mother? Or, if your mother is already gone, are there questions you wished you would have or could have asked? Write them down and begin a list
- Offering your time and friendship is a great way to start
- One way to begin an easy conversation is by looking at family photographs together
- Be clear about your intentions in conversation with your mother

Articulating Intentions: Why do you want to talk to your mother?

- To fill in a memory?
- To confirm your experiences?
- To talk to her about her health?
- To resolve a disagreement?
- To air a family secret?
- To gain (or earn) approval?
- To get more attention and nurturing?
- To share your spiritual beliefs?
- To relieve your guilt?
- To be forgiven?

- To take your relationship to a deeper level?
- To appreciate and celebrate her?

After you have considered your reasons, turn them into an Intention. Remember that the questions you ask and your intentions around them will influence the outcome of your conversations and information received. As with any conversation it is helpful to choose a place and time that is convenient and comfortable. It is also helpful to practice active listening.

Some categories or themes to speak with your mother (or other family members) about:

- Health: Not just family medical history and health concerns, can also include questions about the first bra, menarche, first time experiencing sex, defining moments, etc.
- Death and dying: This can be a continuation from the health and family medical history conversation but can also include learning the ages of when family members have died, and your mother's feelings around death, possible afterlife, and funeral wishes. You might ask if she has had any brushes with death and how they affected her. Possible questions: What was your first experience with death? How do you feel about a nursing home? Hospice care? Who would you like with you at your death? Do you have a will? Living will? Living trust? Where are the papers? Who is the executor? Will you write me a letter telling me what's been important to you in your life so that I can read it after you're gone?
- Money: Money can be a lightning rod for other underlying family issues, every family is different. You might start by asking questions such as: What are some of the biggest lessons you've learned about money? What is one of the predominant memories around money from your childhood? What is the most enjoyable gift you have bought for yourself? What's the most money you have ever spent on anything? If you won the lottery, what would you do with the money? You might go on to discuss if there is concern or worry about money. Does your family talk about money? Is your mother confident that she can provide for herself?

- Aging: Because generally people are living longer, aging and our attitudes toward it have changed drastically in the last few decades. Some questions include: How did your mother age? How did you feel about your mother aging? How is it different for you? What kind of old woman do you want to be? What regrets do you have, if any? What are the positive aspects of aging to you? If you were to go back to school, what would you study? If you could go back and relive one moment, one month, or one year of your life, which would it be, and why? How would you like to celebrate your next birthday?

- Self-image and beauty: What things do you like most about being a woman? What messages about beauty and self-image do you feel you received from your mother? What physical attributes did you inherit from your mother? From where do you get your sense of self-worth?

- Resolving conflict: Ask general questions and see where this goes. How did you and your mother handle differences? Did grandmother and her mother get along? How was conflict handled between your parents? Siblings? What's one of the most difficult or trying times you've gone through in your life? How did it turn out? What memories, independent of me, come up for you when you recall past anger and conflict that is still unresolved for you? Who are the easiest persons you've ever gotten along with? What made it easy to be or talk with that/those person(s)? When have you felt strong and proud of yourself for getting through a difficult time? If you have a strong and open relationship with your mother, you might also ask if she feels there are any unresolved conflicts with you, and how those might be revisited and eased.

- Family secrets: You might start by asking, what's one of the best or most fun secrets you've been a part of? Or, under what circumstances would you want me to tell you a secret? Depending on how the conversation goes, you might also ask, what really happened when...? Or, what have you always wanted to ask me but were afraid to?

- Romance and intimacy: When you were a child, did you ever see your mom and dad kissing and being affectionate with each other? What did your mother tell you about sex and romance?

When and how did you learn about sex? Are there positive patterns you learned from your mother about love and sex? What made you decide to be with/stay with dad?

- Spirituality: Do you believe in God? If so, how do you envision God? Heaven? Hell? When or where do you feel most connected to a higher power? Do you believe in ghosts, spirits, guides, and “other worldly” teachers? Where do you turn when you are unable to make sense of tragedy or loss? What is one of the most mystical or spiritual experiences you’ve had? Where do you feel most connected in your life? What if God is a woman? What are your favorite religious holidays? Why? Have you ever witnessed a miracle? What intuitive hunches have you had that you’re glad you followed? What do you think happens after death?

### **Making Meaning: Applying a Critical Lens to Our Prevailing Culture’s Social Structures of Marriage and Family**

- The models of marriage and family that are elevated within modern Western culture can serve to exacerbate such feelings of loss and alienation between mother and daughter
- According to Noble (1991) the current models for marriage and family stand in sharp contrast to those of Catal Huyuk (Old Europe) or ancient India
  - Women in these ancient communal societies lived together, not in isolated units with a man and her children, and practiced their religion together as a fundamental way of life
  - No one woman was (or was expected to be) dependent on a single man for her survival
  - There is no evidence that suggests that relationships between men and women were anything but harmonious
- According to social work theorist Mimi Abramowitz (1996), our contemporary social structures are still based upon the patriarchal family ethic that emerged during the early 19th century primarily as a means of controlling and regulating women’s productive and reproductive labor, placing them in their husband’s home and subordinate to him as the male head-of-household

Lowinsky (1992) suggests:

- When women tell the stories of their own lives, we discover that we don't usually cut ourselves off from our mothers when we reach adulthood
- The mother's place in her daughter's life is not superseded by a relationship to a man as psychoanalytic theory has assumed, but that the mother-daughter bond is a continuing and important aspect of adult women's lives

Questions worthy of attention from social workers:

- Do our prevailing culture's constructs of marriage and the nuclear family issuing from a patriarchal family ethic really facilitate the kind of continuing important role of the mother-daughter bond as described above?
- Do these social structures follow the ancient tradition of celebrating the mother-daughter bond as an expression of the central human mystery?
- If not, how would modern life be different if they did?

**Going Beyond the Personal: Actively Seeking the Voices of Diverse Groups of Women in terms of their Experiences of Marriage, Family, and the Mother-Daughter Bond to Guard against the Reductionism that Equates "Women's Experience" with "White, Mid-to-Upper Class Women's Experience"**

Carol Christ says, "Experience is not only a resource; it can also be a limitation" (1997, p. 39). Like her, I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman of a certain age, background, and experience. Deeper inquiry into the experiences of women from traditions and backgrounds that are different than my own may serve not only to enrich my understanding of a fuller realm of possibilities in terms of these dynamics, but may also further a critical interrogation of feminism itself.

African-American intellectual bell hooks says, “I had not known a life where women had not been together, where women had not helped, protected, and loved one another deeply” (1984, 2000, p. 12). Luisah Teish echoes her:

Now I began to take special notice of the women in my community. It seems I had a mother on every block. This, of course, was a double-edged sword. On one side, I would not go hungry or fall down sick without “Auntie, Cousin, Sister, or Big Momma” So-and-So doing something about it. On the other hand, if I committed a transgression six blocks away from home I could get at least five scoldings and two whippings before I got home to receive the final one. When a woman had a baby in my neighborhood, the neighbor women „slaughtered a fatted calf. so to speak, and fed her other children, cleaned her house, and visited regularly for the next two weeks. (1985, p. 11)

Daughters of color may not experience the same alienation from their mothers after marriage that I have addressed throughout this paper. Modern models for the creative dynamic of women in living in community with one another may exist outside the realm of the feminist discourse that is still dominated by white, mid-to-upper class women:

- There is an unbroken circle of women’s lives from Africa across the Atlantic into the Americas (Rushing, 1996):
  - African women expect their closest emotional bonds to be with their natal family, the women they grew up with, and the children they bear
  - Comparatively weak emotional bonds between husbands and wives
  - This pattern of marriage and family life repeats in African-American women through extended family relationships, beauty parlors, the pivotal role of women in Black churches, etc.
  - Although many Western white middle and upper class women may harbor similar leanings, they are expected by society to bond with and relate primarily to their husbands

To assume that all women experience isolation and separation from other women and that their mother-daughter bonds are compromised after marriage is to fall into the trap of conceptualizing women's experiences in universalizing terms. This trend towards understanding women's experiences in a homogenized way has been a major part of the feminist movement from its earliest days that has functioned to marginalize non-white women, and deter them from identification with feminism.

Mujerista theorist Isasi-Diaz, says "serious flaws in the Euro-American feminist movement have led grassroots Latinas to understand 'feminism' as having to do with the rights of Euro-American middle-class women, rights many times attained at the expense of Hispanic and other minority women" (2004, p. 60). Women of color have not only been dissuaded from identification with and participation in the feminist movement by a sense that it does not address their concerns or validate their experiences. They have been outwardly shunned, or driven away by white feminists.

According to hooks (1984, 2000), a central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that all women are oppressed. This implies that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive factor in the lives of individual women. Privileged feminists have rarely been able to speak to, with, and for diverse groups of women because they do not understand the interrelatedness of gender, race, and class oppression or do not take it seriously. They reflect the dominant Western patriarchal discourse that insists that gender is the sole determinant of a women's fate. Clearly, deeper engagement of these interconnected issues is needed.

### **In Conclusion: There is Much Work to Do**

I hope this paper has planted the seeds of a continuing discourse that can unfold around how we as social workers can:

- Use the Motherline approach to help clients explore the ways the mother-daughter bond is impacted by factors endemic to their maternal heritage
- Critically engage the constructs of marriage and the nuclear family that are enshrined by the patriarchal sociopolitical climate in which we live
- Guard against reductionism in feminism and actively seek out the voices of diverse groups of women in terms their experiences of marriage, family, and the mother-daughter bond



## References

- Abramowitz, M. (1996). *Regulating the lives of women: Social welfare policy from colonial times to the present*. Boston: South End Press.
- Austen, H. I. (1990). *The heart of the goddess: Art, myth and meditations of the world's sacred feminine*. Berkeley: Wingbow Press.
- hooks, bell. (1984, 2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Cambridge: South End Classics.
- Christ, C. P. (1997) *Rebirth of the goddess*. New York: Routledge.
- Isasi-Diaz, A. M. (2004). *Mujerista theology: A theology for the twenty-first century*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Lowinsky, N.R. (1992). *Stories from the motherline: Reclaiming the mother-daughter bond, finding our feminine souls*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc.
- Noble, V. (1991). *Shakti woman: Feeling our fire, healing our world. The new female shamanism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Plaskow, J. & Christ, C. P. (1989) *Weaving the visions: New patterns in feminist spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Spretnak, C. (1989). *The Myth of Demeter and Persephone*. In Plaskow, J. & Christ, C. P. (Ed.), *Weaving the visions: New patterns in feminist spirituality*. (pp. 72-76). San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Rushing, A. B. (1996). "On Becoming a Feminist: Learning from Africa." In Terborg-Penn, R. & Rushing, A. B. *Women in africa and the african diaspora: A reader*. (pp. 121-134). Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Teish, L. (1998). *Jambalaya*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.