

Love and the Path to Self

March 22, 2009

First Unitarian Society of Madison

Karen Johnson Gustafson

At last year's Cabaret Morris and Carolyn Waxler paid handsomely to select a sermon topic for my consideration. Their interest in the ancient Sumerian Goddess Inanna, led me back into the world of mythology which had fascinated me in the mid-eighties when I watched the PBS series "The Power of the Myth" featuring Bill Moyers interviewing the great scholar, Joseph Campbell.

Central to Campbell's message about the relevance of mythology is his statements " All of the references of religious and mythological images are to planes of consciousness or fields of experience that are potential in human spirit. And these images evoke attitudes and experiences that are appropriate to a meditation on the mystery of the source of your own being."

So , on Morris' recommendation I read, Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth, Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer, a translation by storyteller and folklorist Diane Wolkstein. I could understand why one might find this story compelling, fascinating, even, especially in terms of the mysteries of, in Campbell's words, "one's own being".

Unlike the mythic heroes of the monotheistic religions with which we are most familiar, (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) who are mostly males whose job it is to provide direction for human destiny, the gods and goddesses of the ancients were, in the words of Jean Shinoda Bolen "used... to mirror every state and capacity, every mood, thought, act, and experience of the human being." Instead of being primarily preoccupied with the goings on among mortals, they were fully engaged in their own highly charged dramas which, in my modest observation, seemed to be exactly what a being with superpowers should be doing: living large, testing the limits of the life force, risking what those of us who are limited by our mortality, cannot.

Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth, Goddess of Love, Goddess of Grain, War, Fertility, Sexual Love. She was described in the Library of Halexandria as, "healer, lifegiver, and composer of songs; the keeper of emotions -- ranging from loving, jealous, grieving, joyful, timid, and exhibitionistic, to thieving, passionate, ambitious, and generous.

Inanna was eternally youthful, dynamic, fierce, sensuous, the harlot-virgin, never settled nor domesticated, magnetic, yet independent. She was into fertility, order, war, love, heavens, healing, emotions, and song; always wandering, searching for her home, her power. Ultimately, she was the embodied, playful, passionately erotic, feminine; the powerful, independent, self-willed, feminine; the ambitious, regal, many-sided feminine."

Without the kind of rules and commandments that characterize the religions of western culture, imagine the possibilities that would express themselves for one who possessed such qualities!

Her stories and hymns show us where these qualities, unbridled, lead.

Of the many stories and hymns about Inanna, there are two that particularly spoke to me.

The first is that of her passionate courtship with Dumuzi the shepherd whom she initially rejected with sharp criticism. But, in the words of the song, "The word they had spoken, was a word of desire. From the starting of the quarrel come the lovers' desire."

Because I am a mere mortal bound in a western cultural tradition and because I have but one life to give to this congregation, I am bound by propriety to not share much more of the text of this translation. Robert Kimball, Professor of Theology at the Starr King School when I was a student there, said that the driving force in human life is "desire seeking its limit". I can only imagine that the desire expressed in this union was a noble attempt to find that limit.

"Inanna, at her mother's command, Bathed and anointed herself with scented oil.

She covered her body with the royal white robe.

She readied her dowry.

She arranged her precious lapis beads around her neck.

She took her seal in her hand.

Dumuzi waited expectantly.

Inanna opened the door for him.

Inside the house she shown before him like the light of the moon.

Dumuzi looked at her joyously.

He pressed his neck close against hers. He kissed her."

And that's all you're going to get.

Suffice to say that anyone who has ever been or has imagined being caught in the grips of unbridled passion will recognize that, every generation that rediscovers erotic love can look back across the millennia and identify with what is expressed in this ancient text.

Now one might expect that the next story in the Inanna saga would be the one about domestic bliss in which, for a time at least, Inanna and Dumuzi might have tempered their passion and settled into a time of tranquility and the kind of compromise that marriage as we know it demands. And there was, of course her job being a holy priestess which could easily have been a fifty or sixty hour a week job. But such is not the stuff of myths. Such is the stuff of human life and love as we know it, circumscribed by culture and mortality. Indeed it is prudent at some point in life to pick a life and live it.

But not Inanna. The very next story in the Inanna saga is called "From the Great Above to the Great Below". (I am assuming that there was some kind of mundane interlude between these two stories because there are sons who appear in the next story.)

"From the great above, she opened her ear to the great below.

From the great above, the goddess opened her ear to the great below.

From the great above, Inanna opened her ear to the great below."

This story is described in the literature about it as an initiation, a journey to the self, a journey to wisdom. In any case it is a further manifestation of a restless and seeking nature unbound by fear or doubt or excessive concern for consequence to self or others. It seems to be another example of desire seeking its limit – not as in the previous story, sexual desire, but the desire for a deeper understanding that only comes from a willingness to go deep and risk much.

"Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend into the underworld. She abandoned her office of holy priestess and abandoned her temples in seven cities..

She gathered together seven of attributes of civilization which she transformed into such feminine allure as her crown, jewelry, and royal robe to serve as her protection.

She instructed her faithful servant, Ninshubur, what to do in case she did not return -- to seek out her fathers, urging them not to let their daughter die.

Arriving at the outer gates of the underworld, she announced herself. Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the underworld, did not recognize her and asked who she was.

She replied: "I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven, On my way to the East."

Neti was skeptical. "If you are truly Inanna, Queen of Heaven, On your way to the East, Why has your heart led you on the road from which no traveler returns?"

And here she gives a plausible explanation. She does not say, "I am indulging my restless spirit and my desire for wisdom". She says "Because of my older sister, Ereshkigal. Her husband, died. I have come to witness the funeral rites."

Neti, still uncertain, tells Inanna to wait, while he delivers her message to his queen.

So he goes to his queen, Ereshkigal, and tells her of the glorious Inanna at the palace gates.

He also tells Ereshkigal that Inanna has seven attributes of civilization in her possession, that she has prepared herself, and then describes each of the seven attributes, from her crown to her royal robe.

Ereshkigal is not pleased. “She slaps her thigh and bites her lip. After dwelling on the news, she tells Neti to bolt the seven gates of the underworld, and then, one by one, open each gate a crack, let Inanna enter, and as she does, remove her royal garments one by one. Ereshkigal also tells Neti to “Let the holy priestess of heaven enter bowed low.”

Once again, I impose my western 21st century interpretation on this and am confirmed in my suspicion that the whole going to a funeral thing is just a ruse for placing herself in the situation that will most challenge the limits of her power.

Neti does as he is told, bolting the seven gates of the underworld and asking Inanna in.

At each gate, Neti removes one of Inanna’s garments, beginning with her crown and working his way down to her royal robe .

“ Each time, Inanna asks, “What is this?” and each time Neti answers: “Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned.”

Then, naked and bowed low, Inanna enters the throne room.

Ereshkigal rises from her throne, as Inanna starts toward her.

The judges of the underworld, surround Inanna and pass judgment against her.

“Then Ereshkigal fastens on Inanna the eyes of death, speaks against her the word of wrath, and utters against her the cry of guilt. Then she strikes her.

Inanna is turned into a corpse, a piece of rotting meat, and hung from a hook on the wall.”

It would appear that the limits of Inanna’s power had been reached.

But she had left a part of herself behind. I believe this is what poker players call, “an ace in the hole.”

After three days and nights, when Inanna had not returned, Ninshubur, the faithful servant went into action. She set up a lament for Inanna, beating the drum for her in the assembly places.

Alone, she set out to plead in turn with each of Inanna’s grandfathers not to let Inanna be put to death in the underworld.

The first two were not impressed.

Then Ninshubur went to the temple of Enki, Inanna's mother's father. She pleaded with Enki in the same manner as she had done with the others.

“Enki, was troubled and grieved for his daughter, Inanna.”

From under his fingernails, Enki, brought forth dirt and fashioned the dirt into creatures that could enter the underworld like flies bearing the water of life which they were to sprinkle on the corpse bringing Inanna back to life.

And so it was done.

Inanna was about to ascend from the underworld when the judges, seized her.

“No one ascends from the underworld unmarked.”

Inanna must provide someone in her place.

There were many possibilities among those who came to greet her.

Ninshabar the faithful servant?

One of her two sons?

But wait, who among those who loved her was missing in the welcome home party?

She was all the way home before she came upon her husband, Dumuzi, whom she found sitting on his magnificent throne, dressing in his finest garments. Dumuzi did not move. He had apparently adjusted too quickly to news of her death.

“Take him! Take Dumuzi away!”

There is more to the story, of course. Love does triumph in a way. Dumuzi is forgiven and redeemed at least in part by being relegated to the underworld for only half the year and returned to Inanna for the rest. His time in the upper world begins today with the beginning of spring.

Like all good myths, this one is about many things.

Here is where I find myself in it.

I believe in the power of erotic love, not just sexual passion, but in the creative, generative nature of all kinds of passion. We must be aware of the ways in which our laws and fears and cultural norms pervert our passions and our desires and limit them in ways that stifle our spirits. What I love about this myth is the way in which it casts aside taboos and opens us to that ancient, elemental power of abandoning ourselves to desire.

And then there is the journey to the underworld, the challenge of going deep, of risking all for the possibility of some expanded sense of self. The closest I have come in my life was in deciding to go to seminary. It was, like Inanna's decision to enter the great below, a decision so irrational, so fraught with consequence, a journey both sacrificial and ultimately redemptive.

We are not all required to risk to that extent. We are, after all, mortals, not gods or goddesses. But I think we might encourage ourselves and one another to test the limits of our desires from time to time to expand the boundaries of each "wild and precious life" – even if it is by breathing more deeply or pausing to be fully present to the sacraments of each blessed moment.