Storied Lives:
Discovering and Deepening Your Personal Myth

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Dedication: To the unsilent gods of my ancestors.

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Introduction to the Storied Self

Am I the only one who is confused? I wondered. After all, it was only high school psychology. I understood the theories all right, but shouldn't I be able to put them together into a coherent picture of the self?

Apparently one of my classmates wasn't able to either. After half a semester of frustration, he appeared to have a revelation during a discussion of Freud. Pointing his finger directly at the psychology teacher, he declared, "You have a death wish against me!" This was too much for her. She fled the room, and we ended up finishing the semester with a substitute. Spectacular, the power of wit against what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire had named the banker model of education: deposits straight into the heads of passive students. Eventually I lit the school on fire.

This, my first exposure to psychology, was also my first exposure to a field that simultaneously fascinated me and yet turned me against my perceptions. Not until working on my third degree in psychology did I fully grasp the source of my puzzlement: mainstream psychology's abdication of the

essence, the meaning matrix, the *story* of persons in favor of descriptions of "the mind" from the "objective" view outside. I now think of it as the alienated view of human nature: a nature made unnatural because not participated in except intellectually.

Even in the "hard" sciences a cold bunch of data is not an explanation. When you or I ask *why* something is, we aren't looking for only the facts that actually make up the *what*. We are looking for the inside story, the narrative, the tale of what the facts really mean. Without that story-web of connections they mean very little by themselves. A man in a restaurant suddenly explodes at a cashier he wrongly believes to have short-changed him. The outburst surprises everyone, perhaps even him. What are the facts? The volume of his shout, the timing of it, the racing pulses of those within earshot, etc.; but unless you know that he just learned his wife was having an affair with an accountant, the incident would remain a mystery no matter how much data you compiled. You wouldn't understand it unless you sat down with him and asked for his point of view.

In retrospect I wish the high school vice principal had asked me why I started the fire. He had some facts too: a good student, if one of the "quiet ones" you have to watch; introspective, shy, clean record. He did not know, of course, that a bully had been beating the tar out of friends as well as threatening me. He did not ask, either, and so never realized that it was the bully's locker I lit on fire. The police arrived in time to put it out, but not in time to stop me from knocking out the bully at lunch.

Continuation school offered no psychology courses, but the library contained some of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels. I was impressed enough by Holmes's ability to grasp the stories of clients and criminals alike that I read the entire Holmes opus. I didn't know it, but I was getting a feel for the exploration of personal stories, and therefore of personal myths. (I later learned to my delight that Freud had been a Holmes fan. No wonder his case histories read like detective stories.)

By contrast, most mainstream psychology books read like heaps of still frames disconnected from the film they're supposed to animate. We read about drives and needs, systems and step functions, instinct and eros, stimulus and response; about cognitive schemata, tests and traits, evolutionary modules; but where is the living person in all this? Making a similar point, existentially oriented therapists like Rollo May and Irvin Yalom have insisted that we learn little of consequence unless we capture hints of a person's inner story from active encounters with it. C. G. Jung, who knew this psychological truth, had added a layer of meaning to it by showing how personal stories so often link up with collective ones, with your tale carried within the grand tales—the mythologies—of your time.

Mythologies? Aren't the sciences more precise?

Jung didn't think so. For describing the outward nature of something relatively measurable, science has performed wonders and continues to do so. But to get at the story of a person's life, myth

(Jung believed) was a more useful tool. For myth is not an archaic explanation for weather. This Enlightenment-era prejudice was spread around by thinkers afraid of the messy transformative power of a good deep story. Still earlier, this fear had surfaced as *euhemerism*, the idea that myths refer to actual people or events. This idea was started by Euhemeros, a traveler who noticed how Alexander the Great acquired the status of a god once the conqueror had died. Euhemeros failed to notice that the myth was not reducible to the person it had come to surround.

Whereas fact can serve to categorize and compartmentalize dangerously stirring truths, myth is a collective way to make sense of one's place in the world. The question is not whether we have a mythology or not—everyone does, even rationalists for whom the Big Bang serves as a creation story. The question is whether the mythology still works or has become outdated, devalued, or unconscious.

In India a girl with four arms was born in a destitute village near Bangalore. She was promptly named Lakshmi after the four-armed goddess of beauty, love, and abundance. For non-Indians such an event might seem a random accident of genetics or circumstances, but it made sense to the villagers because they possessed a conscious, working mythology with which to find a meaning in things. Lakshmi is similar in some ways to the Roman Venus (Aphrodite to the Greeks), a loving goddess of inner and outer wealth. Understood through the lens of the local mythology, the gods had sent a message of comfort through this girl's uncanny birth. Implied in this was a hint that it would be up to human beings to incarnate the full spirit of prosperity and beauty. To locals this signal of divine light in the darkness of poverty made all the more sense for the birth having taken place on the very day devoted to celebration of generous Lakshmi.

However revered, mythological systems do get worn out over time, as anyone suspects who has sought refuge in traditional spiritual symbols and creeds only to find them devoid of meaning or feeling. For most of us the ancient names of Zeus and Hera evoke no particular emotion. One could think of an aging religion, to take one example of wear and tear, as a mythology that forgets it is one as it hardens from its original vitality and radicalism into dull literalisms and mindless rules: the epitome of what it originally protested. When I worked as a therapist I often met clients who felt crushing guilt over the fact that, bled of all his Dionysian joy and splendor, Jesus meant nothing to them anymore, and no amount of frantic doubt-concealing fundamentalism would restore his name to life in their soul once the spirit had left the letter behind for good. I could sympathize: having been raised in a conservative branch of Lutheranism, I had felt pangs of guilt and envy as a teenager when my praying friends would rapturously call out, "My Lord, my Lord!" With hormones in full motion, all I could think in my sorrow was that if only Jesus had legs like Tina Turner or eyes like Candice Bergen, I could get on board with it all. No such luck. I respected Jesus as great teacher and divine prophet, but as an object of

worship his upturned bearded face and punctured arms left my heart and my instincts uninterested.

A myth when alive bridges one's personal story to dimensions of experience that reach beyond the personal. A myth is a story of how people like you and me have encountered the sacred currents of the world washing up all around. Myths personify these currents, give them faces and characters through oral tellings and enacted images and rituals. For the Greeks a moment of exquisite personal power possessed a Zeus or Hera quality to it, just as a foul-up in communication seemed to exude the sudden presence of tricky Hermes: gods not as nouns or beings to believe in, but as deeply felt characteristics of life welling up over itself like new wine poured from sturdy bottles.

We might even find that the mythlessness upon which our supposedly rational culture insists is itself an unacknowledged mythic construction. The fantasy of objectivity always brings to mind the famous innkeeper Procrustes, who whacked off the legs of his guests to fit his short bed.

It's possible to study oneself well, be in a lot of therapy, meditate daily, and stay physically and mentally fit, but until we know what myth we live, we remain illiterate, sadly confronted by a pile of books written about ourselves by some unknown author. Being born into a culture blind to myth is a bit like being adopted into a family whose stories cannot explain the sense of differentness you feel. Why am I like this and not that? Why can't I belong? Why are my passions, my dreams, my likes and dislikes so unlike everyone else's? In such a setting you must do extra work to recover your missing roots.

Over time Jung's work with story and myth has spawned quite a few efforts to track down personal myths. Although useful and educational, most of the guidance provided for these attempts has dealt with archetypes and not myths. An archetype is a general, universal pattern of experience: examples include The Hero, The Divine Child, Love, Beauty, the Sacred Marriage, Transformation, Death, Apocalypse, Initiation Birth, Rebirth. These collective motifs showing up in all times and places are like vessels of potentiality waiting to be filled in with the images and experiences of particular individuals and cultures. That's where the specificity of myth comes in., or should. Lakshmi is not an archetype, just as there is no Hera or Athena or Artemis or Zeus archetype. Lakshmi is a mythic figure who expresses the archetypal Love Goddess. In Greek myth she would look like Aphrodite, in Chinese like Kwan Yin, in Celtic like Deirdre or Aine, in Norse like lovely Freya, builder of bridges and bringer of peace through erotic diplomacy. All come with their own stories. Archetypes tend to be general, the factors *behind* how we see and sense, whereas myths get specific and color them in.

As we will see, one's personal myth reflects that specificity. We can be much more detailed in tracking and discovering the mythic level of ourselves than in settling for archetypal abstractions like Queen, Goddess, King, or Warrior. We can see the ancient stories reinventing themselves in our lives,

forever dreaming their myths onward, as Jung so poetically expressed it. Stories live to be retold, not just told over: one reason they grow with the telling.

Another reason for this book is to counter the sales-oriented rush to trade in old for new. The overriding emphasis in personal myth work until now has been on change, transformation, and the study of one's current myth only long enough to replace it with a new one. It's as though someone got ahold of Shakespeare's plays and decided out of discomfort to rewrite Iago as a good guy or rescue Duke Senior from the forest. Instead of submitting to mythic plastic surgery, why not explore what's up for us now in greater detail, including the urge to get away from it? Why not open the myth up and let it breathe instead of applying "happy living" formulas to it? The alchemists used to insist that the treasure hard to obtain hid down in the dark places, or as Jung would put it, in our complexes. Personal myth work is a chance to stay with and dig into the story deeply enough to find the precious jewel contained within it. As Joseph Campbell pointed out, the gargoyles are there to test the initiant. Running away from them shows an unreadiness to take the deep journey.

In the following pages you will find tools for self-discovery as well as many examples of storied lives. The tools evolved primarily from my training as a depth psychologist, my Archetypal Mythology class at John F. Kennedy University, and a personal myth seminar I conducted over several months. If you have no sense yet of what your myth is or could be, you stand at the beginning of an adventure leading into unexpected depths. Passing through deserts of reductionism and dead ends of cynicism, the patient seeker of motifs, portents, and hints emerges at last into verdant landscapes fertile with the fruits of transformative insights into how very much more there is to a life than we are led to believe.

What Is a Personal Myth?

"I am Oedipus."

When Freud wrote those words to his then-friend Wilhelm Fleiss in 1897, he explicitly linked an interest in myth to the intricacies of depth psychology: the kind of psychology that focuses on the unconscious dimensions of psychic life. So stated Dr. Christine Downing, author of *The Goddess,* in a class she taught at Pacifica Graduate Institute. Dr. Downing understood from the inside what it felt like to live within the myth of Persephone, innocently plucking at a flower only to be dragged straight down into Hades.

I had read Jung's and Aniela Jaffe's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* in which Jung writes of the need to tell his personal myth, with no idea of how specific that myth could be. Nor did Freud fully grasp his own declaration, it would seem; he clearly empathized with the old blind king, but in truth he identified with him all the way down to being led into exile by his daughter Anna, as Oedipus had been by Antigone. Freud was disturbed by dreams of injecting patients with poison, and Oedipus by troubled concerns about the plague of Thebes. Neither could accept that the blight originated from within.

As for Jung, he was moving all his life within the story of the German alchemist Faust, with the shadow (an archetypal figure which Jung painted as a sinister man in black) standing in for the devilish tempter Mephistopheles, former patient Sabina Spielrein as the tragic lover Gretchen, and the collective unconscious as the mysterious realm of The Mothers. "Two souls have I, alas, within my breast!" The Greeks would have recognized Faust as Prometheus, chained to a mountain for a time for giving celestial fire to humanity. Jung had written about being chained to the Caucasus of the unconscious he confronted.

Each of us comes with many sides to our character, many roles, selves, and parts to play depending on time and phase of life. The mythic self is one of them.

Symbolic and Mythic Knowing

Back in the mid-1800s, a French medical student named Pierre Janet made a crucial discovery in the mental hospital where he worked. He discovered that psychological symptoms could serve as reenactments of wounds never spoken about and therefore never healed.

Janet was an altogether remarkable researcher. He coined the word "subconscious" after a patient told him, "I cry and I do not know why." How could she not know why? Through a "narrowing of consciousness" which we now know as repression, and through *redoublement,* the splitting and

dissociation of consciousness so often seen in lingering trauma. Janet took thorough case histories, noted the *rapport magnétique* or "somnambulic influence" of therapist over patient (the transference), moved away from his mentor Charcot's emphasis on hereditary factors even as Charcot was feeding his patients iron pellets, theorized that "fixed ideas" (later called "complexes") kept old wounds from healing, asked patients to overcome internal censorship by writing down quickly whatever came to mind (free association), and assembled a system of diagnosis and treatment to trace symptoms and fixations to their depths ("*profoundeur*"). Janet called this "psychological analysis," a term eventually echoed in 1896 by "psychoanalysis" after ambitious Freud had been to France and returned to Vienna eager to put his own system together.

As Janet learned from all this, unconscious forces do not simply vanish. They reappear in symbolic reenactments, as when a woman whose brother drowned marries a man who also drowns. We constantly and unconsciously recreate unfinished dramas, not because we are naturally self-destructive (as Freud had thought), but to give ourselves a chance to heal from the original trauma by making the story come out differently.

The deep psyche speaks in symbols. The currents and eddies of the depths which Freud correctly called "primary" precede and animate the ego world of linear expression and logic. The language of symbols appears not only in symptoms but in dreams, in Freudian slips, in certain kinds of forgetfulness, in fantasy, in literature and film and art—and in myth.

Myth is metaphoric, as Joseph Campbell often pointed out. In some ways myth is to a culture what a dream is to an individual: tales told from underneath the surface of daily consciousness. But with this difference: myth includes a collective vision of the hopes and battles that make life worthwhile. Less contrived than allegory, myth is a brew of worldview, group dream, inner wisdom, norm, value, and narrative. In myth appear the basic structures of consciousness given cultural form: assertive Athena wisdom, boundless Kuan Yin kindness, dangerous Frost Giant ego inflations, redemptive Osiris returns of the light. Through its stories shine figurations of the deepest dimensions of human experience, with the chaotic, the nonhuman, the exquisitely human, and the sacred all alchemized and crystallized into oral tellings passed down through time.

"Personal myth" sounds self-contradictory until we understand myth to be a primal language of the soul. To have a personal myth is to be located within a historic tradition as well as in collective fabric of image and sense, and to find oneself joined directly to the fundamental questions of being human: Why am I here? Why do things matter? Where did I come from, and where am I going? How do I get there?

Personal Mythologizing: A Quick Survey of the Literature

Jung had discussed the need to know one's myth and to live it as far back as 1952, when he wrote the preface to the fourth edition of *Symbols of Transformation*. Not until later in his life did he decode the figure of Faust standing directly behind him.

In 1956 psychoanalyst Ernst Kris used the term "personal myth" in the title of a paper to refer to a fantasized or idealized story about one's past. For decades Alfred Adler had been maintaining that a person's "style of life" constituted a kind of working fiction or fantasy system for organizing goals and the sense of self. Neither Adler nor Kris held personal myth as anything beyond the personal, however, a narrowing of focus to be continued by psychologist Dan MacAdams in *The Stories We Live By* (1993).

By 1961 Jung had published the quasi-autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* ("quasi" because Aniela Jaffe wrote some of it and heavily edited the manuscript) to explore his myth, although he did not identify it explicitly there as Faust. In 1965 psychology professor Art Warmoth, having worked with Abraham Maslow, wrote about peak experiences and mystical encounters as a kind of substitute mythology in which direct experience assumes the role of what was formerly collective symbolism. (Both humanistic and transpersonal psychology have tended to emphasize individual experience over communally woven reality.)

Inspired by the work of Jung, mythologist Joseph Campbell began lecturing on personal myth in 1972 and continued on into 1973; some of his lectures appear in the chapter on "Personal Myth" in his book *Pathways to Bliss*. Campbell too discussed myth in terms of a general pattern rather than a reliving of specific stories.

When philosopher and men's movement figure Sam Keen began writing and lecturing on personal myth during these years—see *Your Mythic Journey* with Anne Valley-Fox–he went so far as to say one could actually change one's myth. To some this came as a great relief. Many people feel a heavy reluctance to embrace their myth, especially when it intertwines with early personal wounding. Some regard it as a threat to their sense of autonomy, like Neo in the *Matrix* films being unwilling at first to recognize himself as a redeemer figure because he wanted to feel in charge of his life. In any case by "personal mythology" Keen meant the collection of stories we use to make sense of ourselves to ourselves. For him personal myth work meant self-exploration through storytelling.

In 1979 and again in 1989, psychologist Stanley Krippner organized symposia to bring a humanistic perspective to personal myth and vice versa. One result was the book *Personal Mythology* (1988) by Krippner and psychologist David Feinstein, revised in 1997 into *The Mythic Path*. According to Feinstein, a personal myth involves the ongoing construction of inner reality, but a project with very

concrete outer consequences. For example, from inside the story we draw the people and scenes that serve it, mostly without realizing what we are doing until we find out what the story is. From the start, however, Feinstein's emphasis is on transforming the myth into something else. For humanistic psychology, personal myth work constitutes an individual passageway toward psychic wholeness. Observing this warily, Jungian analyst James Hillman would ask throughout his own work: But what do the myths and the images want? To be "integrated," or to be respected on their own imaginal terms as valid entities in and of themselves?

In 1981 Christine Downing published *The Goddess*, and by doing so gave the discussion of personal myth a deepening that would carry the work beyond self-help and pop psychology. Eschewing the chance to offer a typology of deities to try on (viz, Jean Shinoda Bolen's often-praised *Goddesses in Everywoman* published in 1984, to be followed five years later by *Gods in Everyman*), Downing told their stories in a way that connected them intimately to women's experience while respecting their status as essentially archetypal presences.

1990 saw publication of Campbell biographer Stephen Larsen's *The Mythic Imagination*. Although Larsen emphasized constructing a personal myth ("conscious mythmaking") more than uncovering one, he too was aware of the possibility of being unconsciously possessed by the power of an unworked myth: an especially large risk in a culture blind to myth and to the subjective in general. Rollo May had pointed out the dangers of this blindness—e.g., widespread meaninglessness, inner emptiness, seizure by isms, worship of authority—in his final book, *The Cry for Myth*, published in 1991.

In 1993, the year McAdams published *The Stories We Live By*, Jungian psychotherapist D. Stephenson Bond came out with *Living Myth: Personal Meaning as a Way of Life*. For him, a living myth keeps us related to the environment on the one hand and to the psyche on the other while countering the widespread sense of our lives as plotless and meaningless, a result of the breakdown of our culture's formerly working myths. However, Bond believes personal myths to be uncommon and sporadically encountered rather than something everyone arrives in life surrounded by.

James Hillman understood this differently. All this time he had been harboring a more or less private view—the "acorn theory"—he had shared with a few friends but no one else. In 1996 he came out with it in the New York Times bestseller *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. "Each person enters the world called," he declared, called by the soul or *daimon* or "acorn" of the vocational oak tree we are meant to grow. Doing what he refers to as reading biography backwards, his book provides many fascinating examples of how the inklings of their calling appeared early on in the lives of famous people. Think about Winston Churchill and his childhood stuttering. Mainstream

psychology would read his later public career reductively, as a form of compensation; by contrast Hillman argued: Of course he stuttered! Something deep within him already knew he'd save England by the power of his voice one day. Or take young Yehudi Menuhin smashing a toy violin—not out of an uncharacteristic petulance, but because his *daimon*, the calling he came in with, knew even in childhood that it required the real instrument.

Mythologically speaking, just who is the bearer of the calling? How do myths get personal?

Your Mythic Self

Your personal myth is the mythic, the collectively storied, facet of who you are. It would be equally valid to say that you are part of it. Your personal myth images your transhuman side in storied form, and you live within that story as it unfolds. Personal myth is *the story you are inside of* and that bears on your sense of yourself, your relationships, your occupation, your vocation, and your place in the world.

And so another question: Is one's personal myth created or uncovered? Do we make it or discover it?

My sense is that it's both, but that it's something we come in with. It's reflected in our name, the circumstances of our birth, the place we grew up in, the family constellation we're familiar with. However, it's possible to hold personal myth either way: as a working fiction for making sense of a life, or as fabled role and destination toward which we gradually walk. Either way, it remains open to—even yearning for—creative elaboration.

Be elaborated it must, for as depth psychology has taught us over a century of therapy sessions and cultural analysis, what we ignore and deny in ourselves will eventually return to haunt us. And as Jung's work demonstrated, it will haunt us as a rigidly literalized replay of the same old tale, like weary Sisyphus forever pushing his rock uphill and forever watching it tumble down.

When Freud began telling the public about the unconscious, many people shuddered and took refuge in quick mind cures. A similar fear lurks behind the popular and cheerful idea that when we are living a "wrong myth" we can change it into a better one, rather like putting on a more fashionable garment or changing one's European name to that of a Hindu saint. As though you could change your ethnicity, natal chart, or DNA. The underlying impulse seems to be a rush to find a more comfortable self instead of really getting to know the current one.

Furthermore, most cases of having a "wrong myth," perhaps every case, turn out upon closer inspection to be a constrictive overidentification with one of the current myth's cast of characters. Feinstein offers the example of Scrooge, whose materialistic mythology wasn't serving him. In my

view it served him marvelously because the whole point of the Scrooge tale is the motif of redemption. Without his nighttime conversion the tale would have been pointless. The very determination with which Scrooge clings to his selfishness brings to light one source of the widespread poverty which Dickens wrote to protest. We are lucky no one told Scrooge to revision or transform his myth until it was ready to do so itself.

Little wonder so many of us carry an unconscious fear of even discovering our myth. What Arthur wants to be betrayed by Guinevere again or witness another fall of Camelot? Would you choose the lethal, unrequited love of a Lady of Shallot? What playful Coyote wants to be smashed by the rolling rock in an old Navajo tale? At bottom this is the same fear as that of accessing an old sorrow or an old anger or hurt: What if it takes me over?

Consciousness makes all the difference. We run a far greater risk of being taken over by returns of the repressed, whether personal and "inner" or mythical and collective, when we turn away from confronting them. Not knowing one's myth is the surest way to experience it as fate. But when we confront it, it begins to change. The very act of turning toward some surfacing story or buried complex softens it and transforms it as *the story changes from the inside*. Maybe this time Lancelot will die and Elaine will become first knight. Or neither will die and both will get married, to each other or to someone else. Promethean Jung drank plenty of burgundy in his time, but his liver never gave out, let alone found itself pecked by an eagle or a vulture sent by Zeus. The elements of the story will all come into play, but when given a proper welcome, their hard literality softens and gives way to more symbolic replays, more metaphoric stagings.

That welcoming consciousness can also be exercised by the quality of the choices we make within the story. Steinbeck's myth was Lancelot. He knew this partially, but he never knew it entirely. The night before he married a singer named Gwen (!) after having conducted a secret affair with her, he suffered nightmares warning him not to go forward with the marriage. Had he understood this aspect of his myth better he could have chosen otherwise; but he did marry her, and the marriage turned out to be a disaster for both of them. It nearly always is disastrous when the myth pushes itself forward unconsciously and literally. To be unconsciously identified with a myth is to be its puppet; to understand it deeply is to cut the strings and rewrite the script from within the storylines. The stage remains the same, but the plot can turn out differently.

Another common fear of encountering one's myth is the fear of an inflated ego. Abraham Maslow called this the Jonah Complex. Who am I to think I have a Zeus, Hera, or Lakshmi side? How dare Christine Downing think of herself as Persephone? Well, who are any of us to believe we have any direct contact at all with the sacred dimensions of existence? Because that is what a personal myth

does: it works like a tribal mask by which we put on the attributes of the totem, guide, or god. The great mystics and spiritual seers have told us for millennia that, contrary to what religious clerics and their self-preserving institutions maintain, we all come in with a spark of the divine. The personal myth is the code that unlocks whatever story the divine is manifesting in our life. We could also think of our myth as a sparkling membrane through which the archetypal world and the daytime world flow into each other. The person-shaped distillation they leave behind is what we normally think of as biography.

Personal myth: the biography behind your biography. Your myth could be an ancient one, but its reactivation always says something about the time and place you were born into. For that reason the myth gives you a preset collection of choices for personalizing your response to the collective situation.

But do we have only one personal myth?

Nested Myths

For centuries a mythic presence has haunted my homeland. After the conquest of Mexico, a story began to grow about how a lovely young woman named Maria or Laura gave birth to the child or children of her lover, only to be cast aside for another. When he declared that he would take his offspring with him and depart, she was said to have brought them to a lake or river shimmering below a full moon. There she drowned them, crying out, “O my children!” As a result, she lost her mind. When she died, she was destined to wander near bodies of water at night, crying out for the lost little souls until she finally found them. In Mexico she is called La Llorona, the Weeping Woman.

Like many old stories, this one has a way of coming back to life when the proper conditions occur. In the Weeping Woman’s case those conditions include a recent conquest of territory. La Llorona sightings have occurred in all the Mission cities of California, and she reappears in dream, in artwork, in folklore, etc. whenever new territory is paved down and asphalted over. Andrea Yates, who loved boating and swimming and being near water, was dubbed a modern La Llorona when she drowned her biblically named children in a bathtub in Houston. She was prone to post-partum psychosis that went undiagnosed. Her husband Russell worked for NASA, whose mission remains the “conquest” of space. Set the stage and the myth reawakens.

I was born near San Diego Bay under a full moon. My birth mother did not want to have children, but my father had threatened to leave her unless she did, so she arranged a secret adoption and told my family and my father that I had died at birth of heart failure. According to the adoption paperwork, she suffered one sharp pang of loss and regret at the moment of relinquishment. I do not know if she cried out, “O my child!” but I do know her name, which was *Lorna,* and the odd fact that she had been born without night vision. Succumbing to Alzheimer’s, she lost her mind and died still

trapped by her myth. She refused to see me, so we were never reconciled.

For a long time I wondered why I had been born into this myth as a son of Llorona, even to nearly drowning twice as a child and once as a young adult. My dissertation research showed me a connection between appearances of the archetypal Weeping Woman and the conquests she protests: "archetypal" because she is found around the world, whether her name is Llorona, Crying Wind, Banshee, or Medea. Imagining her tears as those of the wounded landscapes she haunted, I realized that Llorona's story connected me intimately and profoundly to used up, worn out, ecologically devastated California. In fact I had been born on July 6, the day Europeans first spotted the West Coast down in Baja. The myth had shown me my place in depth.

My question was then: What did this myth-rich land want from me?

Llorona had followed the Cross and Sword, the mission-building conquistadors and padres, northward from San Diego (the city of my birth) to Sonoma. To understand my ties to coastal California, I spent five years traversing the Mission Trail in the footsteps of the Weeping Woman and Junipero Serra, head of the missionary project in Alta California. As I did this Llorona began to change in my dreams from wailing ghost dressed in black into white-clad mother cradling a child. When I fully understood her to be the imaginal "voice" of the traumatized landscape echoed down into folklore, symptom, art, and dream, my dreams shifted again as I felt myself moving out of the old myth and into a new one. I could feel my spiritual job description change as a result of what I had learned.

The new myth contained elements of the old one, including images of drowning and the core motif of the wandering, displaced son of an abandoned mother and an absent father. It also picked up where the other tale left off. What happens to Llorona's son if he opens his eyes and survives? Well, perhaps the exile is looked after by wise Athena, known to the Romans and the Great Seal of California as armed and armored Minerva. Maybe he spends time living with a hard-to-leave girlfriend in an apartment complex called Capri, the name of the home of the Sirens. Or he spends six years counseling groups of emotionally immature men incarcerated for committing violent crimes. Moving restlessly from Mission county to Mission county, he might even meet his maternal grandfather, described as an "ogre" by the rest of the family, a one-eyed grouch who greeted his long-lost grandson with the words, "By what name should I call you?"

Call me Nobody…

As Homer writes about Odysseus:

> Sing in me, O Muse, and through me tell the story of that many-sided man who wandered far and wide after sacking the hallowed heights of Troy. Many were the cities he saw and the minds he learned from; and many the sorrows he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,

fighting to save his life and to bring his men back home.

After living in a tool shed in the mountains, presenting dissertation findings to Pacificans standing in for the friendly Phaeacians, and building a bed for a patiently waiting Penelope, I looked up one morning to see an eagle soaring overhead, thought about Zeus, renounced the vengeful fantasy of organizing the manpower to kick out the industrial suitors of California by force—and felt the myth release me. A lifetime spent feeling like a wanderer in my own homeland was over. My research had shown me not only how deeply implicated my story was in that of California, but how to finally feel at home here. For I belonged to this place. With that knowing permeating me, the imaginal hole punched in my unfailed heart by the circumstances of relinquishment finally closed.

> We feel ourselves to be outsiders, uprooted, in exile here below. We are like Ulysses who had been carried away during his sleep by sailors and woke in a strange land, longing for Ithaca with a longing that rent his soul. Suddenly Athena opened his eyes and he saw that he was in Ithaca. In the same way every man who longs indefatigably for his country, who is distracted from his desire neither by Calypso nor by the Sirens, will one day suddenly find that he is there.
> — Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*

Eventually I realized that the mythic roles of Llorona's son and Ulysses are embraced by an even wider tale. This tale I believe to be lifelong, my mythic bedrock, the storied core of my transpersonal self. It echoes into my name, my ethnicity, and in other lifelong synchronicities. The other myths did not.

The true personal myth is there from the start and organizes all later events, encounters, metaphors, and meanings. It points forward, incorporates all later temporary stories, and recedes toward the horizon of the future. It is the axis around which a life turns. In some cases it is so obvious that a person recognizes it as soon as it's stumbled upon. In others—mine, for instance—it requires more labor to excavate.

What matters most is to work with whatever myth you find yourself in by discovering it, learning its pitfalls and potentialities, and finding out what it wants by way of elaborative retelling and recasting. Only then will it have the psychic space it needs to undergo deep self-transformation.

As the following chapter will show, seeing how this works itself out in a life can be easier to spot when that life is a public one.