**Persephone at mid-life: revisiting feminist archetypal theory in a personal journey through menopause**

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**Abstract**

This paper suggests that feminist archetypal theory provides a helpful and empowering framework through which to understand embodied change as experienced in contemporary times. A mainstream approach associated with second wave feminism, it has fallen victim to post-structuralist critiques and is rarely used, despite a renewed popularity of goddess archetypes in broader lay culture. I argue that this framework deserves revisiting as, in generating positive images and plots, it can serve as a source of empowerment and strength for women and especially so where hegemonic contemporary discourses are overwhelmingly negative and medicalized, as in the case of menopause. Using auto-ethnographic methods, I illustrate this with reference to my own lived experience of menopausal transition. Finally, and just as importantly, I show how this approach configures a different and more holistic kind of knowledge that recognizes connection, relationality and communion of self, others and world, rather than separation and domination.

**Key words:** archetypal feminist theory, menopause, quest, moon, goddess

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**Background and introduction: the unfortunate disappearance of feminist archetypal theory**

Second wave feminist theory, although responsible for many of the huge leaps women made towards equality in social and economic terms in the latter part of the twentieth century, as well as providing brilliant conceptual tools for analysing women’s situation, has not fared well in the subsequent four decades. In brief, and possibly overly brief, summary, post-structuralism, which emerged and remained dominant in social sciences, has problematised both the category of woman and the notion of experience. One of the unfortunate consequences of this approach has been that much brilliant second wave feminist theory has been discarded amongst which includes feminist archetypal theory. At one point prominent in the arts and humanities but now lying far outside the mainstream, as an approach to both identifying and conveying patterns of embodied female experience it is extremely insightful and empowering for women. For these reasons, I believe that it deserves to be resurrected. In making this argument in the paper I will draw on my personal experience of discovering or (re) discovering it for myself.

I came to this understanding via a crooked path. Indeed, I am a sociologist who has for much of my career considered myself a fairly hard social constructionist and I particularly enjoyed the playful and ingenious ways in which post-structuralism could be applied. However, with the advent of menopause, discourse as my focus and deconstruction as my tool failed me in my attempt to make sense of my embodied experience. We were not and never would be Post-Biology (Morgan, 2019, p. 15). Reading widely and eccentrically, I found the themes and structure of this experience, although powerfully unique to me, to be ones shared by women of very different eras and contexts. After I discovered feminist archetypal theory, it has proved extremely insightful in making sense of my experience and in helping these experiences transform from a kind of overwhelming confusion to something richly meaningful and indeed empowering. I will start, however, with a discussion of feminist archetypal theory, considering its aims and origins and some of the best and most useful ways of applying it to mid-life women’s embodied experience.

**A brief overview of feminist archetypal theory**

Any discussion of feminist archetype theory must start with Jung. His view of the unconscious is very different to Freud’s, in that it has a future as well as past orientation: as Lauter and Rupprecht describe, ‘no mere depository of the past but full of germs of future psychic situations and ideas’ (1985, p.3). Lauter and Rupprecht compare archetypes to Chomsky’s view of language – a structuring tendency of the mind but manifested in different ways according to context and culture, which means ‘the concept could serve to clarify distinctively female concerns that have persisted throughout human history’ (1985, p.14). Juxtaposing this with Durkheim’s nature of the collective consciousness, which is about the circulation of shared norms within societies, we can view the collective unconscious as repository of values and norms that have been repressed by mainstream society. Patriarchal forces, according to Lauter and Rupprecht, have found women’s empowerment deeply threatening and one effect they noticed in the 1970s and 1980s was ‘the truncating of women’s hope that female experience even exists’ (1985, p. 221). This effect is clearly with us still. Thus, ‘unconsciousness-raising’ (Pratt, 1985, p. 95), as a task that complements the second wave feminist emphasis on consciousness raising, would seem to play an important role in countering this form of patriarchal oppression.

The history of feminist archetypal theory begins with M. Esther Harding, with Christine Downing in particular building on Harding’s work to assert the importance of goddess archetypes in suggesting empowering images for women. Harding (1935) explores ancient texts, myths, folklore and dreams from around the world to suggest images of the feminine that women might draw on to achieve a complex and powerful self-understanding. One of the themes emerging from Harding’s work suggests that women have a mythical tie to the moon. Knowledge of this can be helpful, she notes, although contemporary women have dissociated themselves from it. She observes: ‘the conscious life of a woman, with its daily routine and its more significant events, is lived, as it were, over an underlying pattern of rhythmic change determined by her moon-like quality’ (p. 246). The different phases of the moon, moreover, can point to different models or templates for femininity. In particular the waning crescent phase symbolises in such mythologies what Harding calls an 'in-oneselfness’, a powerful, not literal, ‘Virginity’ (whether one is mother, widow or wife), during which period the moon goddess ‘does what she does not because of any desire to please, not to be liked, or to be approved, even by herself (1935, p. 267). Christine Downing draws similar inspiration from Greek goddess archetypes and among other things she notes the value that such a perspective can bring. In *The Goddess* she notes: ‘I have learned that recognition of the archetypal and universal dimensions of one’s experiences can help free one from a purely personal relation to them’ (2020a, p. 2). This emphasis on women’s experience is also connected to the numinous dimension, specifically to a religious non-patriarchal consciousness. Naomi Goldenberg, for example, identifies ‘contemporary fiction as a resource for reflection on new gods, images and metaphors for our psycho-religious consciousness’ that puts women at its centre (Goldenberg, 1979, p. 116).

Although there is no suggestion here that either human nature or archetypes are fixed or unchanging, these archetypes connect us to times outside the current gender hierarchy, whether in pre-history, myth or moments of social upheaval/crisis, when women were considered more powerful and agentic. By so doing, they suggest the possibility of richer and more complex future archetypes and ways of female being. In contemporary times, archetypal theory emphasises helping women to develop strong self-understanding outside the patriarchal models that have defined them. Moreover, despite changing cultural contexts, these archetypes suggest a continuity in terms of women’s experience of living in a body shaped by menstruation, pregnancy or the need for its avoidance, and menopause and marked above all by changeability both in terms of monthly cycles and more generally over the life course. Such embodied experience affects the psyche for example in terms of a weaker sense of boundaries or greater permeability or a different sense of time resulting from monthly cycles, or a sense of bodily suffering with pain and blood as ontological.

In the 1970s and 1980s the work of feminist theologians also stressed the link between archetypes and the ‘sacred’ by which they meant, in Carol P. Christ’s words: ‘the powers that provide orientation’ in a life; ‘the boundaries against which life is played out, the forces against which a person must contend, or the currents in whose rhythms she must learn to swim’ (1995, pp. 2-3). They traced archetypal patterns and plots in women’s literature including in and through the quest narrative. Annis Pratt (1982) explores the theme of rebirth in literature related to younger women and to older women respectively. Pratt identifies two stages in a woman’s life in particular when some women reject social norms with the aim of self-development: adolescence and mid/later life. At both stages, women make use of feminine archetypes, however fragmentary and intuitively, and Pratt notes: ‘For the woman past her “prime”, as for the young heroine not yet approaching hers, visions of authenticity come more easily than to women in the midst of their social experience’ (1982, p. 11). Indeed, Pratt traces the experience of ‘rebirth’ from a space configured by the patriarchy into one outside it, a transformation in which lost and repressed elements and values of the psyche are restored and a sense of balance achieved. Such journeys require women to sink into the unconscious via what Pratt has termed the ‘subconscious’ or personal store of memories where people from the past may wield power long after they have lost such power in the ‘real’ world.

Drawing on philosophers of religion, including William James and Michael Novak, Christ (1995) discusses women’s quest in terms of an ‘awakening’ followed by a more powerful re-emergence into society. This has both a social and spiritual dimension, that is focused on worldly roles or else one’s relationship to the cosmic domain where such existential questions as ‘What is the meaning of my life?’ are located. Through exploration of women’s novels, she identifies a structure of experience involving (i) an experience of nothingness, loss and confusion; (ii) an awakening experience with ‘mystical identification’ with the natural world during which a fine line must be walked between the patriarchal association of women with nature, and women’s own experience of liberation through nature (Pratt, 1982); (iii) a new relationship between self and world involving an experience of wholeness, ‘a movement toward overcoming of dualisms of self and world, body and soul, nature and spirit’ (1995, p. 13). However, for Christ, being in the midst of social experience is no barrier to diving into the cosmic or spiritual realm.

Women’s experience of mid-life today is shaped by cultural discourses that paint ageing in entirely negative terms. Women’s value in the sexual economy is almost entirely predicated on retaining youthfulness and ageing is never considered in a positive way. This is particularly significant as ‘girlhood’ is central to neoliberal discourses of success, seen as key both to the economic success of the west and in optimising its mentality (Paule, 2017). Despite many women being at their peak of power and influence in personal and public domains, there are very few examples of women revelling in their age at mid-life. Whilst self-development with maturity takes place for women against a cultural emphasis on decline, however, there is also a biological sense of loss which is undeniable. As Polly Young-Eisendrath notes, about the experience of loss in mid-life, that self-development and loss are intimately connected and adds: ‘If we are tempted to think of ourselves as immortal, we have abandoned the project of our own development’ (1994, p. 207). This remarks suggests that what is sorely missing in contemporary times, then, is any real emphasis on the aspect of growth and self-development which, as Eisendrath suggests, is equally important to the mid-life experience. This paper argues, accordingly, that the identification of archetypal patterns and plots in contemporary women’s experience will provide a powerful resource on which mid-life and older women can draw in order to understand and harness growth and self-development in the face of continuing images of decline. It will also permit a different kind of knowledge in the sense of a holistic understanding of self’s relationship to world.

As this literature stresses, however, theory itself is something to employ carefully, with clear recognition of its limitations. Indeed, feminist archetypal theorists clearly discern the dangers of reifying ideas, removing them from the things themselves which endanger life itself. However, as Downing explains, archetypes bypass theory in that regard: ‘The point of attending to the archetypal is to bring us to appreciate and nurture the natural, spontaneous human capacity to respond to the world symbolically, not only conceptually, which ‘helps get us beyond the tyranny of the verbal and rational modes’ (Downing, 2020b, p. 52). James Hillman, father of archetypal psychology, warns: ’We sin against the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, requiring that images be translated into concepts’ (Hillman, 1975, p. 39). Instead, we need to ‘read’ images in the way we read poetry or listen to music, allowing them to evoke resonances and stir up memories and insights.

As I have noted, a focus on archetypes, including in their goddess forms, has disappeared from mainstream academic feminism. However, the focus on goddesses as a source of empowerment and strength has been experiencing a revival in popular culture in western society during the twenty-first century (Nicolae, 2003; Ruether, 2006). Particularly salient in self-help literature and on social media, there is a cultural diversification both of the women drawn to this movement and to the goddesses called upon, including West African Yoruba, African American witchcraft and the Afro-Coban santería (Nicolae, 2023). Nicolae writes: ‘By reclaiming and reconceptualising religion in their image, discriminated groups are challenging the oppressive social systems which supported the development of exclusive religious paradigms’ (2023, p. 133) and in so doing finding sources of strength and healing. This is surely evidence of a vital and exciting ‘changing of the gods’ in Goldenberg’s terms.

In what follows I draw on my own experience as a focus through which to illustrate some key themes which literatures suggests is also shared by many other mid-life women. Although my account depicts a change in my subject position – from youthful to mature, as well as from something located within the male gaze to something outside it – this is grounded throughout in embodied change. In the style of my writing these sections, I am deliberately trying to depart from a traditional academic manner and communicate through metaphor and imagery.

**Entering the new space: embodied knowledge and menopause**

Before going on to describe my experience of broader mid-life change, I will start with a brief description of menopause as an embodied event that was both central to it and, for me, a real catalyst of deeper change. After a couple of years of watching and waiting as my earlier fifties ticked by, wondering if *this* would be my last period, or *this* one, I bleed for six weeks straight, then – nothing. It is as if a tap has been turned off. And so I begin a new relationship with my body. For the past forty years, my woman’s body and I had reached an accommodation of sorts; I knew how to anticipate its changing moods, to manage period pain that was sometimes dragging, sometimes aching, sometimes burning, located in my lower back, my kidneys or sinking down into my legs, somehow keeping all this mostly to a background hum. But no more: now my body steps forward into the foreground, blazing with a will of its own. At this time, I am from occasionally seized by a panicky feeling of loss fed by the stories I have read, the medical tales of horror. Images of dryness fill my mind – fountains choked with dead leaves, river beds turned to dirt - and I tell myself dramatically: ‘the waters of life have dried up!’ But despite this ‘doom’, there is a sense of thrilling excitement too. The hot flashes that come several times an hour, sometimes every few minutes, are like being struck by lightning, over and again. I imagine being on fire, the past and all its mistakes burning away on a bonfire, cleansing and renewing. I enjoy too the fact that the cold December air is no longer something to dread, nor the damp streets.

I give HRT a few minutes consideration but as the weeks and months pass, I make no attempt to go to the GP. It seems I have decided to go wherever my changing body takes me. I toss away the celebrity memoirs that are stacked on my bedside table and find my way to other more thoughtful tales of mid-life change and growth. By chance I come across a memoir by Christine Dowling on menopause. A reprint of a text that had been out of print for many years, most importantly it introduces me to feminist archetypal theory, especially the archetypes of the Greek goddesses. I had loved these as a child, poring over tales of Athena, Ariadne and Hera, before puberty struck. From now on, I live my menopause transition against the backdrop of a tapestry of rich imagery, each deepening my understanding of the other in the process of ‘unventing’ as Pratt (1982) describes the experience drawing ‘latent knowledge out of oneself in contrast to “invention” from scratch ‘ (p. 178).

In what follows, I organise my material into several themes focused on key images and plots that recurred in my lived experience. These are: wild swimming in cold lakes; the moon; the myth of Demeter and Persephone; rebirth; and the orca as a symbol of the post-menopausal Goddess. I hope to show that women’s ageing, rather than something that happens to a passive self, is a kind of embodied knowledge that unfolds across every aspect of one’s being: the physical, the cognitive and the psychic.

**Into the lake**

*I stand on the edge of the lake, my feet in their rock sandals pale as fish in the freezing air of early morning. The lake stretches out before me, smooth as glass, and after taking a couple of deep breaths, I shrug off my coat and wade out into the water, taking cautious steps as the rocky bed shelves deeper. I continue on until I am immersed up to my shoulders then I stop. First, I experience a splintering pain in my feet and shins, a deep bone ache but after taking more deep, slow breaths the pain melts away, dissolving into a tingling feeling of tiny bubbles bursting up and down my legs. I remain where I am, counting my inhalations and exhalations, for another fifteen minutes or more, centred in a bull’s eye of stillness. Everything suspended, motionless, a vegetal stillness in my body, time itself slowed right down. Later, when I have scrambled out and am standing on the bank, wrapped in my towel, I feel wider awake than I can remember, as if the lights are on full and every cell of my body is awake, a feeling I remember now from my childhood. At the same time the deep calm is still within me, and I find I can reconnect with it during stressful times during the rest of the day until it finally fades away.*

I first venture out into the wild water a few months after my menopause symptoms begin. I have a notion that it may help with cooling the fiery heat of my hot flashes but there is more: something about the feeling of entering the water is connected to my feeling of embarking on an adventure to an unknown destination. I have always had a powerful connection with water. I was six months old when I learnt to swim in the Mediterranean sea off the Spanish coast, during the brief golden time in my family history when we still lived in Spain and when the only trace of dad’s illness that was to blight his life and our life as a family was a faint limp. Mum always described me as a ‘water baby’. Later after we moved to the council estate in Wales, I joined a swimming team and was a fearless diver. All this changed when puberty hit me earlier than the other girls in my class. I remember the ugly stares directed at my body in its newly-tight swimming costume and, stiff and constrained for the first time, I swallowed lungfuls of water and felt like I would drown. I didn’t go near a pool after that for many years. So, my immersion in the water in my fifties is a significant departure for me but at the same time a reconnection to an earlier, stronger version of myself.

A little further down the Welsh coast, I see a group of older women who gather at the shore each morning, discarding their dry robes in a pile on the sand and striding out into the waves. With their round red cheeks, plump red-and-white thighs and swim caps, they look like a colony of seals bobbing together on the surging swells. I notice, admiringly, how their limbs are strong, not beautiful, the fleshiness perfect insulation against the freezing water. There is no place for shame, no ugly stares, and I reflect on how all that has melted away for me too. I discover through my reading many reasons why women choose to swim in rivers and seas and enter fast-flowing currents and tumbling waves. Oliva Laing talks about ‘the pleasure of abandoning myself to something vastly beyond my control’ (2017, p. 4). For Tamsin Calidas, who initially contemplated suicide in the freezing Hebridean sea, but later came to find daily swims life-affirming, she writes: ‘As I return to shore, feet gripping shingle, I feel braver than I did before… After my cold-water swim, anything else that happens in my life feels, if not easy, then at last possible’ (Calidas, 2020, p. 216?). Although I sometimes swim, I find I prefer to stand, relishing the stillness which after a while is indistinguishable from the cold itself. I feel the desire to become like that calm deep water. Throughout my life, I have drawn on others for strength, or to soothe me from my habitual state of anxiety and agitation. Now I seek that strength and equanimity within.

**A mid-life Persephone[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*August 2018:* I have been married to H for ten years but we live on opposite sides of the Atlantic, he in an A-frame timber-house situated on the eastern seaboard of the USA and me in a dark brick apartment block in North West England. Each year, I fly to spend a month over the long University vacation with him. However, I have felt increasingly torn about leaving my life in England behind, especially following dad’s death when mum moves up and settles in a little flat in the same block as mine. On the eve of my flight, I take mum to our favourite tapas bar, situated on the corner of what is now *our* street. Since my adolescence, I have nursed a vision of us as two women sipping wine at the bar together, discussing our lives at the end of a busy, exciting day and although this has taken some fifty years to realise, and is inevitably crumpled and creased and half-erased, with time, still it is the closest to that dream we have ever come. Thinking this, I am sorely tempted to cancel my trip and stay here with her, Persephone refusing to go to Hades as she can do in mid-life. I grip the stem of my wineglass hard and remind myself that there will be a gentle man – not the dramatic lovers of my youth but someone calm(ing) and kind - who will meet me at the airport tomorrow, delighted to see me. He will offer freedom from the intense, claustrophobic, daughterly tie and in his garden, and for a brief time, I will spread my wings beneath a different sky, where I am not a daughter first. I say, ‘I should get back, I still have my packing to do.’

“You don’t have to go, you know”, mum says, as she always does, anticipating my needs and trying to help. Although in her late 80s, she has become more carefree and youthful since she is no longer a full-time carer for dad. She wears jeans and floaty bohemian tunics, her nails painted in the candy blue that I often see on my students. But what is most evident is her deep contentment, as if she is complete in herself, and I can see she has cast off motherhood like an old shapeless garment that no longer fits. Although I still relate to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, as if it were the story of *my* life, the fact is that my Persephone is a mid-life woman and her Demeter is old; for her it will not be winter that I leave behind me when I board my flight the next morning, but summer in its full ripeness. I shake my head, tell her that I have to go, as I always do. But still, the feeling of leaving everything behind to embark on my second life remains right up to the moment I land in D.C. and later, as I wait for my return flight home, the dislocation makes itself felt again, like the changing of stiff gears that only yield after painful effort.

This is the culmination of a long story, the final chapter in a tale that is about how a mother and daughter were as close as it were possible to be, brought together in a tight circle by bad luck in the family (dad’s illness and the poverty and stigma that arose from his being unable to work). We were not just mother and daughter but also each other’s solace and support. The fact that we shared the experience of having a woman’s body also accounted for the sense of intimate collusion between us. I knew what a period was and sometimes when mum was in the bath I would gaze fascinated at the blue string I would see during certain days of the month floating from between her legs in the foamy water and think about my future. When I got my period for the first time mum brought me hot water bottles and vegetable soup where I lay in bed, administering to me with the kind of hushed reverence as if I had now joined a tragic religious cult. This was the understanding, as Perera puts it, that suffering is not necessarily pathological for women but rather, ‘wounding for a woman.. is part of the cycle of menses and birth and daily blood life’ (1985, p. 159).

It was she who took me to the family doctor for a prescription of the contraceptive pill at 17; she who accompanied me to have an abortion when I was 35. ‘I want you to be an Independent Woman’, she would say, and we were both deeply invested in this idea, where I would escape from the estate, education my ticket to a world where a woman would have a career and live a thrilling life. My inspiration for this was Simone de Beauvoir, who I admired because she was brilliant, independent and courageous and with her blazing blue eyes and pill box helmet evoked resonances of Pallas Athene. This became a joint project and mum’s belief in me against the odds made me believe too in my limitless possibilities, despite being a child on free school meals whose teachers directed her to the local technical college to learn hairdressing or home economics. A vivid image captures what I think of as her magical properties in this regard. When the council fitted the back garden with a long ramp with railings so dad could trundle in and out of the house in his new electric wheelchair, they concreted over the small lawn. But one tiny patch of grass was left outside the kitchen window and though it was north facing and shady, on it grew something of extravagant beauty. This was a lush green bush with ivory-coloured lilies, the swan necked stems swaying gracefully in the rain and wind, sometimes tapping the pane where mum stood at the sink. It was she, I knew, who had caused that plant to grow, against all odds, just as she helped me blossom out of the destiny given to me into a life of my choice. As I moved through my turbulent teen years, she presided over my life, eagle-eyed, ensuring I did not get caught in the traps and snares that were just as likely to be coiled up inside as outside. For example, when I declined her offer of driving lessons (which she had saved for over two years, taking on an extra part-time job), she was fiery. To her, the Independent Woman needed to be able to drive herself around. ‘But D- can drive me,’ I insisted, of my first boyfriend. She flared, like a wrathful goddess, until I did what she said and I was of course glad I had when six months later the boyfriend and I broke up.

But there was a price to pay for this sustaining mother-bond and it was the fact that I, as a daughter, have never quite felt that my life is my own. Phyllis Chesler captures this dynamic when she writes: ‘Neither husband nor child – *no stranger* would ever claim her as his own. Persephone belonged to her mother. That was Demeter’s gift to herself’ (1972, p. xiv). Indeed, long after I had left home, when I had become the Independent Woman of my dreams, I felt my life was a project shared by two people. During my twenties and early thirties, despite financial independence resulting from my professional job, I remained hugely emotional dependent. I had not yet learnt to trust myself to interpret my own thoughts and feelings but ‘needed’ mum to do this for me – calling her many times daily - as if she alone truly knew my mind. Although millimetre by millimetre over the years I managed to strengthen my sense of self, nevertheless, until I am well into my forties I struggled to incorporate attachment (to her and others) healthily into my life: too close was suffocating, too distant felt like abandonment, an aching homesickness.

The trip I take in the summer of 2018 turns out to be the last one I make to the east coast to stay with my husband. A few months later, H decides it is time to take early retirement, to close up his little timber A-frame and move to England, to be with me. As he makes his preparations, I am overcome with doubt: it feels as if I have spent all my adult life swimming against the current, which is to say away from mum. I feel so tired, too weary for this change. I ask myself whether I should just stop struggling and allow myself to drift blissfully downstream again, back to her? Should I tell him not to come? But, as if reading my mind, mum turns to me and says, ‘It will be fine. He is good for you.’ And I know that what she says, as always, is true.

And, indeed, things change. Having H to talk to on a daily basis finally allows me to find my place as a daughter, not too far from her, not too near. I take a step away, and then another, and it is fine, she stays exactly where she is, not disappearing, still within reach. As I settle finally into my own space, so she comes properly into view. Indeed, I can see her for the first time as a woman and person: as Isabel, not mum. As Isabel she has so much to teach me: how to grow old courageously, how to continue to cherish one’s body and appreciate its many gifts: the sensual pleasures of a long soapy shower, of the meals I prepare her every night. Now that this body no longer conforms to the feminine ideal, it seems it is more precious to her than it ever was, when she looked at it only for the purpose of finding faults. Furthermore, now she is settled in a flat I helped her buy and for which I pay the bills, starting at the age of 82 she has become, for the first time, herself the Independent Woman of her dreams. We share an intimacy around the body still but with reversed roles: it is I who take mum to the clinic to have her hearing aids fitted; now that I no longer have any need for sanitary wear, every week I place Tena Lady Discreet Sanitary Pads for mum in my shopping basket. I have discovered what happens to Persephone at midlife and I enjoy this part of the story as much as, if not more, than the earlier chapters.

**The Moon**

For as long as I can remember, I have known that women have a special connection to the moon. From menarche onwards, I linked my own menstrual cycles to the cycles of the moon, when I would become hugely emotional while my breasts and stomach swelled, reaching a tremulous peak at the full moon, thereafter subsiding into the calm flat waters of low tide, before beginning once again. Although related both to women’s menstrual cycles and to the phases of the moon, Harding (1935) asserts that the lunar cycle she is referring to is the more esoteric one associated with the cycle of the female psyche across the life course. Of these, the waning crescent phase moon is the most inspiring; it represents the mature female who is not defined by her relationship to men, nor in terms of motherhood, but determines her own path and makes her own choices, guided by her own values.

From this point I can look back and review the other phases of my moon cycle down the years. I see how I adopted a particular mythic version of sexuality when I was 17 and first read the poem ‘Women’ from Frances Horowitz’s collection *The High Tower*. Horowitz writes: ‘Women lie open as green meadows to the urgent flood [...] gazing at different wallpapers/compassionate/and lonely as the travelling moon’. I remember reading it as if seeing my new womanly self in the mirror, as if I was trying on a myth, stepping into a delicate dress handed down by previous generations of women - as I often tried on mum’s dresses - and pulling it down over my head. It was a deliciously seductive image in that it also drew me into an adult world I had, till then, been very reluctant to enter. I remember as a small child staying with my grandmother in her big cold rented house. Unlike the charged atmosphere at home, the times I came across mum crying, the harsh tones of dad raising his voice, nana, alone in her echoing rooms, seemed to me untouched by the battles with hopes and disappointments that characterised adult life. Indeed, I felt that she floated above it, serene as the moon, and I would add today: as the moon in her waning crescent phase.

I discovered, through this mythical poem, certain things about what it means to be a woman in her fertile phase. For one thing, this involved a state of openness. For another, and relatedly, it suggested a liberated, generous sexuality. By the time I discovered the painful, sacrificial element of this ‘lonely, travelling moon’, it was too late. I knew by now that heterosexual femininity involved suffering but this was different: my head swirled from all the paradoxes such as ‘Virgin or slut? Wife or girlfriend?’ or in my case the fear that I was too serious to be feminine, too studious to be attractive. I had arrived at the centre of the labyrinth but it was here that the patriarchy possessed its greatest power. So it was the time of the travelling moon, rising sadly over different wallpapers, but it was also the time of frequent heartbreak too, an emotional turmoil, merging followed by a violent splitting apart, so great that I sometimes felt my personhood on the verge of disintegration. And then I was the moon as depicted by Sylvia Plath in Lorelei where, beneath the crazed gaze of the full moon, the peace of drowning beckons: ‘O river, I see drifting/ Deep in your flux of silver/ Those great goddesses of peace/ Stone, stone, ferry me down there.’

Now, at this crescent phase of the moon, in my relationship with H I discover that this ‘in-oneselfness’ brings a kind of androgyny, the ‘third sex’ as Simone de Beauvoir calls it, meaning a femininity with personhood. In my self-containment, I have reached a new accommodation with men in general where true friendship is possible, where I can like a man for his personality and goodness, not his charm. With my husband, there is a greater intimacy than ever before, with friendship as its solid foundation. I feel like a diver heading down to the green depths with H my diving buddy keeping watch, giving me the confidence to go further, knowing that he has my back.

**Rebirth**

*A few months ago*. As I stir the sauce, I reflect on how much things have changed for me since I began my menopause transition in late 2018. With Covid and lockdown, fortunate as I was to be able to work from home and conduct my work meetings via zoom, it was like retreating into a cave in which I could complete my meno-morphosis in private. Before that, I had thought the change I longed for could only be effected if I took myself out of the flow of life, withdrawing to the wildness of the countryside, cutting my ties, leaving my work – all impossible as the family’s only breadwinner. Instead, I find my refuge here and what Marina Benjamin in her book on menopause describes as a re-birth occurring in the midst of everyday life resonates with me. She describes her urge not to leave her whole identity behind but rather ‘to feel more at home where I was ... a coming together, or making whole of the disparate parts of my liminal self, a reformulation of old elements… an invisible revolution’ (2016, p. 146). My own invisible revolution has included reassessing my values, transforming my appearance and my relationships, and achieving a new sense of balance. In turn, this has enabled me to take on challenges at work, in the social and spiritual awakening Christ describes. As I pour the sauce into the dish, I reflect how one of the ways in which this new balance has been expressed is through my appetite. I spent all my youthful years dieting so that I would possess a concave stomach and skinny arms and legs. When I was in my early forties this urge revved into overdrive, as, sensing the gathering forces of ageing, I was desperate to resist them, imposing my will over my flesh. During lockdown I simply did not want to do this anymore. Beginning then, I have learnt to view my body with different eyes, to be happy with looking strong and healthy, not to view the fact that I am no longer a size 6 as tragedy or failure. I have bought a new wardrobe of clothes in colours and styles I would never have considered when I wore my youthful uniform of body-con clothes: tight jeans and tops, short skirts designed to display that I ‘measured up’ to standards of femininity through diet and exercise. All that seems so docile now; far better to use style to express aspects of one’s character and hint at wilder qualities of soul instead.

Dinner is ready. I slide the lasagne dish from the oven and set it on the table. When I remove the lid, deliciously fragrant steam escapes in a cloud. I heap a generous portion on mum and H’s plates, and one just slightly smaller on my own. H pours the wine and then I, like the others, take a forkful, chew and swallow, savouring each bite. Once, I would never have touched lasagne as it felt like the most dangerous dish of all, with the power to turn me fat and soft as melting butter overnight. Now, each bite I take shows me too how far I have come; I feel myself spreading out, extending into the world, sinews loosening, tissue expanding, muscles lengthening, an appetite for life I have never dared exercise before.

Lockdown also gave me the opportunity to grow out my grey hair, something I had hankered to do for some time but lacked the courage. At first, my stripey multi-coloured hair looks like a birds’ nest but I learn to angle the screen of my laptop during zoom calls to ensure that the crown of my head isn’t visible. As the grey inch turns into two then three inches, it turns out that I have a Mallen streak to the left side of my parting, with finer strands of grey glittering like threads of Lurex through the darker brown. Then, a few months into lockdown, the Head of Department decides to retire and within a couple of weeks is gone. I volunteer to take his place. It is an act of service on my part but, while such a huge task could easily turn into self-sacrifice, it does not: instead, it turns into leadership of a kind I never thought myself capable. In particular, I find I am good at creating a supportive culture, mentoring junior colleagues through the confusion of their early careers, encouraging those who have been silent for years to find their voice. The weeks and months pass and finally, when I emerge from this cave with the rest of the world, it is as a different person: a woman of a certain age who is not trying to hide it, her hair threaded proudly with grey and who has found the confidence to lead and guide, to nurture and to make difficult decisions where this is called for.

Whilst during my ‘fertile’ period, I was suspicious of my body, now I trust in its embodied knowledge. Most of all, I trust it to take me to the destination I always longed for, since the time when as a six year old I played in my grandmother’s garden, whilst she pruned her roses and trimmed her runner beans, wishing that I could go straight from childhood to old age, missing out that stormy sea in-between. I know now, even as I vaguely guessed then, that this could not be. That to arrive at this place, to look ahead of me with curiosity and serenity, to the deep old age that mum has reached, has required of me that I first pass through that turbulent middle phase, via the woman’s body. Mum’s tampon string was Ariadne’s[[2]](#footnote-2) thread for me and it promised me that, although I must enter into the labyrinth of womanhood, and stay there for a while, yet one day I would emerge out the other side, not just the Independent Woman of my youth but, far more importantly, a Free Woman.

**The Orca as post-menopausal virgin Goddess**

When I am first hit by the menopause, unbeknownst to me I tread a path that many other menopausal women follow in researching the natural kingdom to see what other animals experience menopause, and what happens to them. When I discover that female orcas are one of the few species, apart from humans, that go through menopause and that they become important leaders or matriarchs in their pod, guiding their family to sources of food, teaching them how to hunt and so on, I pounce on this information with relief and gratitude. At last a positive archetype! In a rush of enthusiasm, I ‘adopt’ from the Whale and Dolphin Conservation society an orca in her late 40s, Simoom, a Northern Resident orca of the Pacific North West. When my certificate arrives in the post, I tack her poster to the inside of my kitchen cupboard. Henceforth, every time I go to make myself a cup of tea, or when preparing my flask to take with me to sip after plunging in the cold lake, I open the cupboard to see her looming out of the brown darkness. Mysterious, majestic, monstrous, I feel a profound kinship, as I trace my finger reverently over the glowing white of her underbelly.

Darcey Steinke, writing about her own menopause, and sharing my fascination and respect for matriarch post-menopausal Orcas, reflects: ‘Menopause is situated at the crossroads between the metaphysical and the biological. It is as much a spiritual challenge as it is a physical one.’ She continues: ‘At this crossroads I have felt haunted by my animalistic past’ (2019, p. 216). Pratt, in her analysis of novels of transformation, talks about a being, totem-like, who frequently appears to help the protagonist to cross the threshold into the realm where deep change occurs. Animal and goddess both, Simoom has felt like a guide to me during these past five years. When I first blu-tacked her picture to the door, I did not know what she was showing me exactly. I did not try to conceptualise what she meant to me. I simply gazed at her image, soaking it up, burying it in the deeper layers of my consciousness. If I had to translate it into words today I would talk about leadership, empowerment, self-determination, wisdom. About drawing up from the depths the courage, the knowledge that was in me and strengthening them through use, like a weak muscle. In her black-and-white, the symmetry of a yin-yang, she is the whole that every one of my experiences is part of and whilst she is in me I am also in her: together we swim in the cold infinite deeps, beneath the serene moon. When I first connected with her, I was worried about the Northern Resident orcas but she has survived and her pod has thrived and now, five years on, in her fifties she is leading a healthy growing multi-generational family. A feeling of love wells up in me, not confined and lonely like romantic love but as big as the universe, encompassing the whale, the clouds, the buildings I can see out my window, the pigeons scratching in the dirty streets. I want to fall down on my knees in front of the scruffy tree at the end of my street and worship it. Susan Griffin writes: ‘the part of the mind that is dark to us in this culture, that is sleeping in us, that we name “unconscious” is the knowledge that we are inseparable from all other beings in the universe (1981, p. 260). It is the body that can restore this knowledge, ‘transforming us… bringing us through our own feelings to a sense of union with all that is’ (p. 261). When I look at Simoon’s picture, she reminds me that change is part of life, not to be feared, and that ageing is another name for change. There will be no point at which I can say ‘I’m done with change now, I’ll just stay as I am, thank you.’ Trying to ‘cure’ menopause, or ageing, as Steinke says, is missing the point: ‘it’s like trying to cure a rainstorm, a tulip tendril, or nightfall’ (2019, p. 218).

**Discussion and concluding remarks**

Eleanor Morgan has suggested, in her memoir on menstrual cycles: ‘at some point in her life almost every woman will have some kind of epic drama around menstruation, fertility, infertility, both, menopause… something to do with this burden of being a human, female animal ‘(2019, p.75). Whilst women do bear a great weight of suffering, I suggest that our female bodies also give us access to profound knowledge: of the centrality of impermanence and change in life, of the connection of all, humans, non-human animals, the earth itself. This is what Griffin describes as ‘eros’ and it is a kind of knowledge that our scientific method, our capitalist mindset, our disregard for the other species that share the earth, have conspired to make us disregard.

The experience which I have shared in this paper is that by going deep into the embodied experience of femaleness (in this case menopause), and with the help of the insights brought to me by archetypal feminism, I have been able to access this knowledge and at the same time, through and with it, to emerge in my everyday life with greater strength and purpose to change the world in a small way around me. Through it, I have gained a different perspective on issues I grapple with both as a woman and a sociologist, including the relationship between equality and freedom, sex and gender, and the more esoteric meaning of relationality and connection. Phyllis Chesler writes: ‘Goddesses never die. They slip in and out of the world’s cities, in and out of our dreams, century after century, answering to different names, dressed differently, perhaps even disguised, perhaps idle and unemployed, their official altars abandoned, their temples feared or simply forgotten’ (1972, p. xvi). Old goddesses have indeed found their way back into my life, orcas taking the place of the post-menopausal Virgin goddess, tampon strings a version of Ariadne’s thread, Simone de Beauvoir a recent manifestation of Pallas Athene, Persephone and Demeter still weaving a story in later life.

Dominant menopause discourses circulating in society today are far from being empowering: they treat this life stage as an illness or deficiency to be medicalized. Whilst in no way denying the very difficult and challenging aspects of menopause, my aim has been to suggest alternative images, associations and plots. As Nicolae (2023) notes, the new resonance that the revival of goddess religions have for women, their diversification beyond the western pantheon and the affirmative role in particular that this may play for marginalized and traumatised women, suggest that the development of new metaphors and archetypes will be very beneficial for women at this and every stage of their embodied experience.

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1. The ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone revolves around a profound connection between mother and daughter severed when Hades abducts Persephone and takes her to the underworld to be his Queen. Distraught as she searches for her daughter, Demeter (who is goddess of the harvest) neglected her duties and the earth succumbed to famine and drought. Eventually Zeus intervened and henceforth it was agreed that Persephone would spend half the year with her mother, during which the earth bloomed in spring and summer, and half with Hades, reflected in the autumn and winter seasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the Greek myth, Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of thread which he unwound as he entered the Labyrinth to slay the minotaur but which thereafter ensured he find his way out. A feminist re-telling of this would perhaps follow Dorothy Dinnerstein in asserting the minotaur to be the patriarchy which a woman has to battle and overcome in order to be free. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)