

THE RAPTURE OF BEING ALIVE

REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY TO ELEUSIS

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People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

The Power of Myth
Joseph Campbell

Several years ago as part of a graduate program in cultural anthropology, I participated in a three-week journey through Greece, including a reenactment of the nine-day Eleusinean Mysteries. The best way to describe my experiences there resonates with Joseph Campbell's statement above—I felt "the rapture of being alive."

Shortly before that journey I had begun to create a personal deck of cards, like tarot cards. I didn't choose a particular number or type of cards to create; I let meaningful experiences in my life guide what I created. Today I have around sixty cards in my deck and expect to create still more. During the journey to Eleusis and around Greece, I created nine cards; the related experiences are described below.

A New Day

Our group participated in a ceremony held in the Telesterion of the temple at Eleusis. This ritual profoundly affected me. On the way there, we were asked to observe silence, which always creates a heightened awareness for me. Silence helps me to see how much unnecessary social chatter

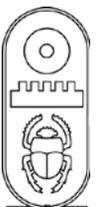
and sometimes thoughtless conversation I participate in. Silence provides a stopgap that illuminates the habitual.

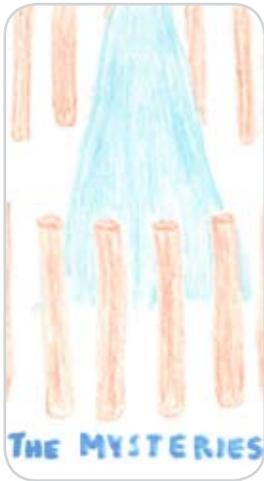
We stopped at Aphrodite's shrine on the way to Eleusis, with the all too visible reminders of how disregarded the goddess had become. I wrote in my journal, "Standing behind the rusted chain link fence crowned with barbed wire, the highway roars behind us and there is Aphrodite's shrine, carved into the rocks with niches for offerings from devout pilgrims of long ago. Overgrown with little plants, white butterflies flutter about as we make our offerings—beautiful pink flowers and an earnest wish for remembrance. "Remember! Remember!"

I was very earnest on this journey in the role of the initiate on the path. I felt the rapture of being fully present in the moment.

The Mysteries

After walking the Bridge of Jest, where the candidates of old were jeered, assuring that each of them arrived equally humbled, we arrived at Eleusis. I had no idea what to expect nor was I aware of the profound effect that the upcoming ritual would have on me. Standing in the former Telesterion—the great Temple of Eleusis—we were asked to





think of the cultural implications of the rape of Persephone, to think of the personal implications of the loss of the mother/daughter relationship.

I was somewhat aware on an intellectual level of what had happened to the peaceful matriarchal cultures when the patriarchal invaders conquered them. But, for the first time, thinking of the cultural implications of the rape of Persephone, I felt this on the physical level. It hurt my soul and my heart. I felt profoundly sad for all of us for our loss. I also thought of the strained relationship between myself and my mother and the hurt that my distance may be causing her. Finally, I felt the loss of my relationship with Mother Earth. I felt not only like an orphan, but like an orphan wandering blind in the desert or tossed about in a small boat in the middle of the sea, all alone and lost. Carl Jung wrote, "This is the great tragedy, the loss of the mother to the daughter and the daughter to the mother." How deeply this loss is felt, I believe, by our entire species, reflected in the way that we treat Earth.

The most poignant moment at Eleusis for me was when we were asked to be aware of what it meant for us to be there, at that moment, bringing new awareness of our connection with Earth and the renewal of the mother/daughter relationship. Persephone returns!

What it meant for me was a return to the reverence for the feminine and for relationship. I felt this reverence and I believe many others in our group did too, and I am hopeful that this ritual, with this small group, might be one of many sparks that reignites this reverence on our planet again.

One of our group leaders said that like the grooves worn in the stone floor by the doors of the Telesterion by rituals that were performed there over and over again, the rituals had worn grooves in the universe. Perhaps we were just tapping into, and reactivating, the initiations that had occurred there thousands of times.

Gaia

At the end of our day at Eleusis our professor pointed out the nearby mountain over which the sun sets on the autumnal equinox and told of her experience of seeing the sun set between the two peaks that resemble breasts. This created a vivid picture in my mind of earth in a woman's form—that of Gaia, the goddess of Earth. This day at Eleusis I felt the rapture of relationship; with other people, with wisdom older than our time, and with the feminine.



Learning

For part of our instruction, we met in an old house on the small island of Madouri, near Lefkada. I had just stepped out of the water at the small beach when I saw a group of dolphins swim by. There were two pods of three; one group went right by and the other stayed in the area for about half an hour. I was completely mesmerized by them. Each time I spotted them I declared with excitement, "There they are!" I felt like crying, feeling so connected with these



beings, part of the awe-inspiring abundance of life and relationship. I experience the same feeling when I see a deer in a forest or a hawk flying above, or a baby. I am in awe and feel so alive, so present in the moment and so privileged to be alive.

In the Womb

My friend was floating on her back in the sea and said to me, “Float on your back and pretend that you are in the womb of

Gaia.” As I lay there, supported by the sea, I felt completely relaxed and loved. The salty water, reminiscent of my days in the womb, muffled all sound. I shut my eyes. Eventually all thoughts drifted away and I floated weightlessly, lost in time and space. At times I was unsure whether or not I should

breathe, not certain if my face was under water or not. My mouth curled up at the ends in a blissful smile. I felt rapture in the miraculous privilege of being alive.

(By the way, I was wearing a swimming suit at the time. Nevertheless, this image more clearly reflects how I felt.)

The Circle Dance

We were in Greece on the summer solstice. During our solstice ritual, a circle dance in the woods, again I felt deeply moved, to the point of tears, feeling so connected with others, connected with nature, connected with the universe. When I described my feelings to a friend, she said, “You need to face it, you’re a pagan.” Since then I have come to realize that I am not a religious person at

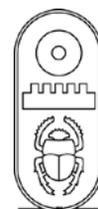
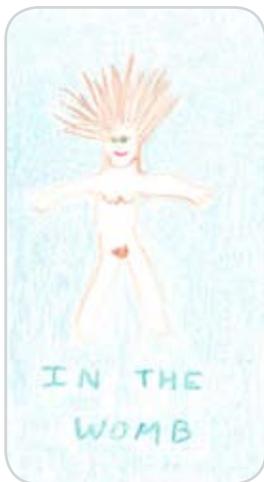
all—neither a Christian, nor a pagan, nor otherwise. What I felt was the rapture of being connected with more than myself.

Completion

Following the group journey, some of us stayed in Mochlos, Crete, for a while, exploring the amazing archeological sites in this area. One evening my friend and I watched for the full moon following a beautiful sunset. We were sure that it would be coming up soon after the sunset, as it had the night before (only later did we learn that it rises fifty-five minutes later each night after the full moon).

We walked around Mochlos hoping to find the moon peeking out from behind some two-story building or hill, but it was not there. Then we saw a glow behind the mountain in the east. It looked like the lights that brighten large parking lots. We watched incredulously. The glow turned into a spotlight; it was the very tip of the moon poking out from behind the mountain. And then, right before our eyes the moon revealed itself so quickly that we could watch it move. Its brightness

illuminated everything in its path. For ten minutes we stood knee-deep in the sea, in the reflection of the moon, which moved with us wherever we stood, like some scientists’ description of the expansion of the universe. We can’t get out of the universe and look at the center. Every point in the universe is at the center of the expansion (like raisins in raisin bread). Every place is the birthplace of the universe.

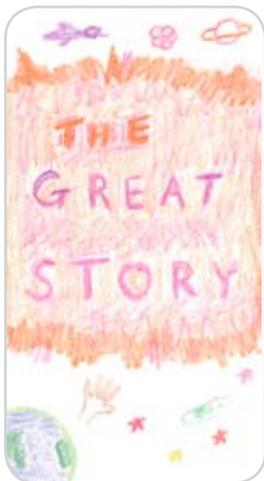


We watched the moon climb higher in the sky as it bathed us in light. The cells of my body seemed to vibrate more strongly. I stood there in amazement at how powerful the moon felt and how connected I felt to this piece of earth that had separated itself, yet remained close, for so many years. Long ago, the Moon was much closer to Earth; I felt like it was closer that night.

My friend and I walked back to the hotel, and by the time we got there, just a few blocks away, my head was spinning. My mind and my speech were slow, like I was slightly intoxicated, but I hadn't been drinking. When I lay down, I felt like I was spinning. This lasted until after I fell asleep over a half hour later. I felt rapture in the power of the moon, in the power of being a woman, and in the power of the old ways.

The Great Story

Two well-known cosmologists journeyed with us on this trip and presented fascinating information on modern and ancient astronomy, physics, and how the ancients viewed the universe. Part of our experience on this journey included determining how we could pass on what we had learned so that it benefited more than just us. We agreed that society would benefit from embracing a new myth or sacred story to help transform human consciousness.



Many of our oldest, life supporting stories were replaced a long time ago by the beliefs that we are sinners, that we are separate from the Divine, nature, and our fellow beings, and

that Earth is a gravel pit and garbage dump to be used for human whims and desires. We can all set the direction for the future with a

new story—our “Great Story”—which is one of connection with nature, with other beings, and with the universe as a whole, which can be told through science, relationship, and more than just intellectual ways of knowing.

I experience the rapture of being alive when I realize that I am participating in the evolution of humanity and of the universe.

Gratitude

In my rapturous moments, I felt connected and more deeply aware. As Joseph Campbell suggested, my life experiences on the physical plane resonated with my innermost being and reality. I wasn't looking for the meaning of life. I felt the rapture of being alive when my life resonated with my meaning of life; when my experiences reflected what I already believed and valued. For me, that is relationship, mindfulness, and being in touch with wisdom beyond my usual knowing.



And these rapturous moments make me profoundly grateful for the opportunity to be alive.

