



## Climbing the Alchemical Mountain

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# Climbing the Alchemical Mountain

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*Betsy Perluss*

Using Thomas Vaughan's allegory of the mountain as a backdrop and drawing insights from the myth of Demeter and Persephone, this article elaborates on the challenging and paradoxical path toward individuation, which, in this case, is metaphorically expressed as climbing a mountain. Although, at first, it is often assumed that individuation is a straightforward process of moving forward and upward, this article demonstrates that this is not the case. Rather, individuation is a complex endeavor that initially takes one *down* instead of *up*. In other words, to climb the mountain is to encounter the *prima materia*, to come face to face with one's shadow, and to take the many unforeseen detours away from the ego's fixed goals. In the end, what is discovered is that one never attains the mystery (or reaches the top) by strength and will alone, but rather by divine grace, which the alchemical literature describes as the *aqua permanens*, the "stream of living water from the summit of the mountain."

There is a mountain situated in the midst of the earth or center of the world, which is both small and great. It is soft, also above measure hard and stony. It is far off and near at hand, but by the providence of God invisible. In it are hidden the most ample treasures, which the world is not able to value.

—Thomas Vaughan, "Allegory of the Mountain" (1651, online)

Thomas Vaughan, the 17th-century mystic, uses the allegory of the mountain to describe the alchemical process of transformation. Vaughan never explicitly states what the mountain represents; rather, he leaves it up to the reader to discern its meaning. Such secreted but guiding principles are not uncommon to the mystic traditions. The "treasure that is hard to attain" can be found only by making one's way through the labyrinth of paradoxical and puzzling messages—"both small and great, soft and hard, far off and near at hand." Alchemy is hardly a flatlander's proposition, horizontal and



Bianca Daalder, *Becoming*, 2000. Oil on linen, 8" × 14".

predictable. It is more like a narrow path that winds up the mountain, circumambulatory, full of unexpected twists and turns. It is only by the guiding presence of desire, a pure heart, and complete grace that one may discover this path.

On the other hand, it is no mystery why Vaughan chose the mountain for his allegory. Simply by their verticality, height, and inaccessibility, mountains evoke fear and awe. There are no shortages of extremes here, no lack of blizzards, thunderstorms, and avalanches. Mountains are radically high and low, hot and cold, beautiful and terrifying, and entering into this landscape can fill a person with both anticipation and a great deal of anxiety.

And yet, despite fear, many of us have dreamt about the treasure hidden within the mountain. To even speculate about gold—"the treasure that is hard to attain"—is a tenuous endeavor. How does one find that which cannot be seen? How does one seek that which is unknown? To seek the treasure in the mountain is like a fish seeking the sea, a bird seeking air, the ego in search of the Self. "We do not know it, we can never know it, because it is the bigger circle that includes the smaller circle" writes Jung (1976, p. 296). And rightly so, as the alchemist writes, it is "invisible."

So, we look for traces . . . a little gold dust gathered around a fissure . . . a dream, a fantasy, a symptom, a sparkle of beauty in an inhospitable world.

For me, such traces are often discovered within the natural world—which, in this case, is the Sierra Nevada, California's gold country. And, although I use no pick, shovel, or pan, discovering the beauty and intensity of this mountain range has, indeed, sparked my interest—a small claim on psyche, so to speak. To see the crystalline peaks reflecting brilliantly in the sun only confirms my intuition that, yes, there is gold in these hills. The perpetual snowfields, hardened into milky blue glaciers, speak of eternity, a time when the world was preserved in ice. Up here time is nonexistent. But only a few feet below I can hear the trickle of running water. The melting of eternity sustains life.

As a manifestation of the Holy Other, mountains emanate a power that awakens a sense of the sacred. No human-made temples can match mountain splendor. No cathedrals can lift one's heart and mind with the same reverence. Mountains *are* nature's temples, constantly turning our gaze upward, toward sky, stars, sun, and moon. I have seen how the fiery presence of the alpine glow reflected in the immeasurably deep glacier lakes—rubies and emeralds swirling inside/outside of each other—inspires the remarkable artistry of stained glass. And how the soft glow of the moon upon the sharp, serrated peaks hangs like a candelabrum over the trees that stand reverently like parishioners in an ancient gesture of observance. And the flowers—leopard lilies, crimson columbines, Indian milkweeds, snow plants, bleeding hearts, shooting stars, pride of the mountains, wild irises, and California fuchsias—

alter pieces and offerings. If there is such a thing as sacred space, mountains are the birthing spot.

## THE APPROACH

To this Mountain you shall go in a certain night—when it comes—most long and most dark, and see that you prepare yourselves by prayer. Insist upon the way that leads to the Mountain, but ask not of any man where the way lies. Only follow your Guide, who will offer himself to you and will meet you in the way.

Thomas Vaughan, “Allegory of the Mountain”

Traveling along the Eastern edge of the California Sierra Nevada, it is impossible not to notice the mountains that rise above the valley. There is no mistaking

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Mount Whitney, for instance, at 14,494 feet, saw-toothed and shadowing the small town below. And across the valley, at 14,246 feet, stands White Mountain Peak, weathered and bald like an old saturnine god. The word *mountain* is rooted in the Latin word, *eminere*, which means to stand out, to project, and to be eminent. Whether it is Whitney, White Mountain,

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or Everest, one obvious truth stands out . . . mountains don't hide.

But according to the allegory, the mountain that contains the “most ample treasures . . . by the providence of God is invisible.” Furthermore, finding this mountain is a quest that can only be undertaken during the “most long and most dark” night. At first, such statements are perplexing. How can we see that which is invisible? And why must we travel through the dark? Everything that seems to be true about mountains—high, clear, and sunny—stands in opposition to that which is invisible, hidden, and dark. Obviously, two different mountains are being discussed here: one that is external and concrete, and the other that is imaginal and symbolic of an archetype. But, philosophically speaking, at what point do we differentiate between the concrete and the archetypal? Everything that I *sense* about mountains—high, vertical, beautiful—echoes with archetypal imagery. Conversely, when I consider the mountain archetype, my mind's eye spontaneously envisions a snow-capped peak piercing through a crown of clouds. Such an image fills me with reverence and fear. My very *real* self is affected by the image.

Such speculations would have been pointless in premodern society. The ancients made no distinctions between the external and internal realms. Nor did they maintain abstract notions of an individual, psychological state of mind, as we understand it today. Rather, that which we today commonly refer to as the inner realm of the unconscious was known as the underworld in antiquity. Only after years of philosophical and scientific development did the *underworld* evolve into the *innerworld*. But, perhaps, we are not so far removed from our premodern ancestors as we initially think, for the unconscious is still referred to as that which is below—dark, mysterious, an often terrifying abyss.

Furthermore, the ghosts and spirits of the underworld continue to haunt us in the form of symptoms and complexes. They enter our dreams. They act on us in mystifying ways. When the allegory informs us that we can seek the mountain only during the “most long and most dark” night, without doubt, we are being summoned to the underworld unconscious.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that right as I began writing this piece about the mountain, the following dream came to me . . .

*I am in my apartment when I suddenly hear a loud siren. Looking out of my window, I see a large passenger jet heading toward me. In fear, I watch the jet crash on my roof, at which point, it transforms into a large serpent! The fuselage of the jet becomes the serpent's head, and the cockpit becomes the tail. I have a jet-sized, urobouric serpent sitting on my roof, slithering and devouring!*

In the days that followed this dream, my endeavors to write turned into frustration. Clear thoughts sank into confusion, and I sat at my desk paralyzed by anxiety and fear for countless hours. It was as if the sun had descended, and the mountain, which I was so eager to explore, had faded into the dark. All paths disappeared.

Jung points out that when one tries to go the way of consciousness, instinct will attack. Thus, it is not so surprising that the slithery serpent of the underworld would appear just as I was ready to approach the mountain. Attempting to climb, made conscious by writing about the mountain, the serpent in me was stirred from her slumber. Detecting my desire to ascend, feeling the earth vibrate beneath my steps, she crept up from beneath the mountain, grabbed me, and pulled me under. Such an attack melted me; all my

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mental capabilities became a dark mush. Clarity turned obscure. Light became dark. Everything that I imagined these serrated peaks to resemble—sharp and differentiating—only served to cut deeper into the unknown underworld of the unconscious. Vaughn explains:

When you have discovered the Mountain the first miracle that will appear is this: A most vehement and very great wind that will shake the Mountain and shatter the rocks to pieces. You will be encountered also by lions and dragons and other terrible beasts; but fear not any of these things. Be resolute and take heed that you turn not back, for your Guide—who brought you thither—will not suffer any evil to befall you. As for the treasure, it is not yet found, but is very near.

The battle between consciousness and instinct is as real as it is ancient and archetypal. This battle is often retold in stories of young initiates who, upon climbing a mountain, are deterred by threatening serpents or dragons that guard the treasure. If the initiate successfully subdues or conquers the instinctual dragon, he is then free to climb the mountain toward the treasure of greater consciousness. This is never an easy task, and not one to be taken lightly. Indeed, “Taoists stress the dualities, the dangers even, of climbing a mountain without training oneself through spiritual exercises. Mountains are sometimes inhabited by fearful beings who bar all approaches to the summit” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1969/1996, p. 680).

In medieval Europe, upcoming kings were expected to venture into the mountains, brave a dragon, and make their way back safely to the foot of the mountain. So seriously did medieval Europeans take the threat of dragons that some scholars devoted themselves to dracology, the scientific study of dragons. According to Schama (1995):

As a sign of their diabolical contamination, mountain ranges like the Alps were thought to be densely infested with dragons. As late as 1702 Johann Jacob Scheuchzer, a professor of physics and mathematics at Zurich University and a correspondent of Isaac Newton, collected evidence of dragon sightings, canton by canton, into a comprehensive dracology. (p. 412)

And, certainly, serpents and dragons have not escaped modern consciousness, although they now appear in new guises such as weapons of mass destruction or other war machines. Just as in the days of old, we continue to search for these elusive creatures in the mountains and caves of foreign lands, not realizing that they exist right here at home, within ourselves. Hopefully, our dragons of instinct will not become dragons of extinction.

In Western religious history, the serpent/dragon is almost always associated with the feminine, symbolized by the figure of Eve. As narrated in the Book of Genesis, Eve did not conquer the serpent but, rather, was seduced by

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it. And, in doing so, she jeopardized the spiritual status of all humanity. Symbolically, Eve finalized our mortality. She gave flesh to spirit. “The spiritual man was seduced into putting on the body” writes Jung (1954/1967, p. 94). According to the Gnostic tradition, it is through Eve, the feminine principle, that we—our souls—are seduced away from the heavens and birthed into this temporal realm of life on Earth. For this reason, Neumann (1994) points out, “The emergence of the Earth archetype of the Great Mother brings with it the emergence of her companion, the Great Serpent” (p. 197).

On the other hand, it’s no surprise that, at least in the Christianized West, Eve and the serpent are regarded as evil. Who wants to be human? Who wants to suffer an earthly fate? Who wants to face the onset of age, the frustration of physical limitations, and the powerlessness of death? Who wants to undergo the conflict between instinctual urges and spiritual longings? Every attempt to escape humanity is an expression of contempt for Eve. Every effort to cast off mortality is a blow to the serpent. Despite my own ambivalence about life and death, the serpent of my dream has thrust me back into the garden and set me face to face with this feminine principle. For, if to climb is to meet God, the first God we encounter is the dark one—*Magna Mater*—she who is coiled in the great chasm of creation, dressed in dark earth, upon whose very back we attempt to climb. Alas! The mountain!

In alchemy, the serpent is often regarded as a symbolic manifestation of the *prima materia*, that shadowy and slippery aspect of the unconscious that includes all that we deem evil and repulsive in ourselves. Consider the serpent—cold blooded, hairless, legless, belly on ground. To encounter a snake, whether in nature or in dreams, almost always triggers a gut-level reaction. After all, the bowels are their territory. Such instinctual energy not only fuels our impulse toward consciousness—the energy needed for the climb—but also our most reactive, habitual, and self-destructive human natures, which most of us would rather leave hidden, buried deep

beneath the ground. Such a landfill is that upon which our glorious mountain stands.

Jung (1958/1968) writes, “The *prima materia* comes from the mountain. This is where everything is upside down: ‘And the top of this rock is confused with its base, and its nearest part reaches to its farthest, and its head is in the place of its back and vice versa’” (p. 433). Truth be known, the only way up the mountain is *through* the mountain. The path to consciousness leads through the *prima materia*. Such a detour is hardly welcomed by those who desire a quick route to consciousness. Here, all is dark and disorienting. There are no distinctions. There are no clear-cut signs, no roads to differentiate one side from the other, no demarcations between the concrete mountain and its image reflected in the shimmering lake below. That which appears solid and unchangeable in the light of day becomes ephemeral at night. The sun submerges into the lake. A breeze slips beneath the evaporation of day. A chill drops in. Everything changes. Ashen mountains turn red to purple to blue, and finally to black.

There are many myths that speak about the “long dark night of the soul”—the encounter with the *prima materia*—but, at this juncture, I bend my ear toward the cries of Persephone. Perhaps, on the outset, it appears that the Demeter–Persephone myth has little to do with mountain landscape, and yet, it is so intricately tied to mountain consciousness. “Demeter and Kore, mother and daughter, extend the feminine consciousness upwards and downwards . . . and widen out the narrowly conscious mind bound in space and time” writes Jung (1951/1969, p. 188). As told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the innocent maiden, Persephone, is in a field where she finds a splendid flower that impresses even the gods. Dazed by the beauty of the flower, she reaches down to pick it or to gaze at it in wonder. Suddenly, the earth opens up and Hades emerges on a chariot and abducts Persephone into the realm of the dead, where he rapes her and makes her his wife. By the efforts of her mother, Demeter, Persephone is eventually brought back

to the realm of the living. Her death and rebirth are simultaneously a descent and an ascent.<sup>1</sup>

Elaborating on the rape of Persephone, Helen Luke (1990) writes: “The moment of breakthrough [of consciousness] for a woman is always symbolically a rape—a necessity—something which

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takes hold with overmastering power and brooks no resistance” (p. 56). Here, it is helpful to keep in mind that, as with all myths, each character and theme in the story is a manifestation of a preexisting archetype. Persephone’s rape is an expression of the archetype of initiation, which always involves an encounter with the overmastering power of instinct. Furthermore, that which at first feels like an attack from the outside is later discovered within oneself. In other words, Persephone is taken by her own instinct. Essentially, she rapes herself. She tears apart her own innocence because deep down she knows that the sacrifice of innocence—that unconscious state of passivity—is a fundamental aspect of being a complete woman.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone also sets the stage for the Eleusian initiation rites, which were practiced for thousands of years in ancient Greece. The ritual involved a reenactment of the Demeter–Persephone story: Persephone’s abduction, rape, and marriage to Hades, Demeter’s grief and her search for Persephone, and finally, the reunification of Demeter and Persephone. The ritual came to a peak when, in the dark temple of Eleusis—a symbol of the underworld—the hierophant revealed a mown ear of corn to the initiate as a symbol of divine wisdom and immortality.

It is beyond the scope of this article to even touch upon the multiple dimensions of the Eleusian mysteries, but it is important to understand that the rites involved honoring and sustaining the feminine mystery of death and regeneration as an ongoing cycle of nature. Demeter and Persephone are so inseparable within the collective unconscious that they can be considered to be one in the same, or rather, two opposites of the same pole – life and death. Demeter, as goddess of the upperworld, is the mother of life, whereas Persephone, as goddess of the underworld, is the queen of death. Actually, there are three feminine principles at work here: Persephone, Demeter, and Hecate. As the myth illustrates, Hecate is the goddess of the moon, the mercurial goddess who acts as a mediator between Demeter and Persephone.<sup>?</sup> According to Kerényi (1969):

A daughter with the name of “Mistress” or “She who is not to be named” was born of this rape. The goddess becomes a mother, rages and grieves over the Kore who was ravished *in her own being*, the Kore whom she immediately recovers, and in whom she gives birth to *herself* again. The idea of the original Mother–Daughter goddess, at root a single entity, is at the same time the idea of *rebirth*. (p. 123)

Persephone’s descent into the underworld is a return into the chthonic womb of the Great Mother—the *vagina dentata*. Having been severed from Demeter, Persephone enters the greater mother and the womb of her second birth. And thus, from here on, Persephone is my guide into the cavernous

mountain, whereas her mother, Demeter, *is* the mountain into which I return. Having followed the footsteps of Persephone, I enter the womb of the second birth.

#### THE ASCENT

After this wind will come an earthquake that will overthrow those things which the wind has left, and will make all flat. But be sure that you do not fall off. The earthquake being past, there will follow a fire that will consume the earthly rubbish and disclose the treasure. But as yet you cannot see it.

—Thomas Vaughan, “Allegory of the Mountain”

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Looking at the California Sierra Nevada from the east, it is easy to observe how this huge segment of the earth's crust has been broken loose and pushed up, giving the mountain range a westward tilt. The eastern slopes are dramatically steep and rugged, and peaks such

as Mount Whitney, Williamson, Pinchot, Birch, and Kearsarge rise up like great waves, inducing a delightful terror. “Climb, climb, climb,” they cry out, “but only at your own risk.” No guarantees of safety. No promises of comfort. No assurances of ease. Despite all the warnings, these mountains beg to be climbed. It is never a question of why; it's always a question of how.

And for months I have been asking myself, “How?” How do I get *out* of the mountain so that I can begin to *climb* the mountain? How *do* I deliver myself from the womb of dark Demeter? Alchemically speaking, how do I free my spirit from the bedrock of matter? I have been groping for practical advice . . . give me some instructions, a “how to” manual for climbing. In desperation, I have cried out for answers. I have scoured through my books seeking a solution. I have consulted friends, therapists, and mentors . . . all to no avail. For the first time in my life, I realize that there is nobody *out there* who can help. Like the Eleusinian mysteries, the alchemical work of inner transformation is shrouded in secrecy. It cannot be spoken, only experienced. Casting aside books and counsel, I've had to experience that which I initially set out to write: an experience that is beyond rational explanation.

In addition, the mystery, like pregnancy, unfolds at its own pace; impatience does nothing to further the process. At first, we may assume that if we

just work hard enough, or fast enough, or engage in enough therapy, or whatever self-help discipline we choose, we could put an end to this dark business and get on with climbing. The alchemists, however, stressed the dangers associated with haste: “He who is in a hurry will complete his work neither in a month, nor yet in a year; and in this Art it will always be true that the man who is in a hurry will never be without matter of complaint” (cited in Edinger, 1985, p. 5). Helen Luke (1989) points out that haste is an act of insubordination, “the original sin from which the disobedience sprang was haste, and that the knowledge of evil was not in itself forbidden. ‘I must have what I want *now*.’

Haste is born with the ego’s consciousness of time” (p. 181). In its original meaning, the word *haste* refers to violence, fury, struggle, and strife. It is in our haste that we resent the Great Mother for keeping us down. It is in our haste that we kick against

the womb. Like a child screaming, “Let me go!” we are constantly fighting to free ourselves as hastily as we can. But haste has no place in Hades. Nonetheless, the timeless quality of the underworld is not an easy thing to endure. As Jung (1976) writes:

The ego idea, for example, would be to say: “there is a good thing on top of that mountain. I will make a straight line for it.” But the archetypal way is not like that; it is a serpentine way that wiggles and spirals its way to the top. We often feel defeated by it and brought to a standstill. It makes most people terribly impatient and even desperate when nothing happens and they get nowhere. They feel hindered all the time; they don’t understand that this is just as it should be, that it is actually their only chance of getting to the top. (p. 295)

Once again, the alchemical mountain presents us with a paradox: Although haste results in struggle and strife, one cannot expect to reach the peaks without some element of haste. Even the alchemists exhibited a desire to hasten the earth’s natural but much slower process of turning ore into gold. Psychoanalysis is also an attempt to hasten the process of individuation, which occurs naturally in the psyche. Pressure, exertion, and attention are necessary to heat up and intensify the process. Like climbing, it entails going up and against gravity; we go against nature.

Psychologically speaking, the work involves going against *our* nature. That which we desire the most is often the very thing from which we suffer.

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further the process.

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To struggle against our desires is to go against our nature, while at the same time, the struggle reunites us with nature. In other words, when we suffer from unmet desire, the ego becomes active. It knows that it wants something, and this something is hidden within the core of the unconscious. It is only through unwavering desire that we become aware of the true nature of the unconscious. It is only through a desire to climb that we realize there is a mountain to climb in the first place.

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When we suffer from desire,  
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And nothing makes a person more real, more palpable, and more solid than unmet desire. When we suffer from desire, the Self is embodied through us, we *exist*, and etymologically, to *exist* means to stand still. To stand solid like a mountain. Persephone, in her suffering and

despair, is in the process of becoming *real* . . . as real as a mountain.

Mountains standing close together:  
The image of KEEPING STILL.  
Thus the superior man  
Does not permit his thoughts  
To go beyond his situation.

—The *I Ching* (cited in Wilhelm, 1988, p. 86)

## EUREKA VALLEY SAND DUNES

*Tonight I walk in the dark. There is a sliver of a moon illuminating the south side of the dunes, while the north slopes are left in the dark, creating a strange mix of blackness and translucent moon glow. It all feels a bit lunar and mysterious. Without thinking, I start trekking up the sand dunes. I feel an urge to climb as high as I can. The sand dunes are over 680 feet high, making them the tallest in the United States.*

*Reaching a small plateau, I look up and notice a gaping black hole in the sand above me. My heart sinks. It looks like death. Maybe if I climb into the hole, I will conquer my fear of death. Maybe if I climb into that hole, I will gain the "secret." I continue to climb the sandy terrain. Sweaty and thirsty, I imagine myself as Jesus walking through the desert of temptation, when the devil appears as a snake. "Sssssso,"*

*says the snake, "You want to be successful? You want to be great? You want to get to the top?" And, yes, I am tempted. I Want. I Desire. I AM. I am tempted to reach the heights. I am tempted to see God.*

*Now the dunes are very steep and I resort to hands and knees, plodding to the peak, sinking in the soft sand, groping in the dark. I think the top is near, but I can't make it out against the black sky.*

*Suddenly, I hear a deep vibration emanating from beneath the dune. At first, I think it is the sound of a jet echoing off the sand, but as I continue to climb, the vibrations become louder. Eventually, the entire dune begins to vibrate with a loud deep booming sound. Stricken with fear, I freeze! The vibration subsides, but as soon as I resume climbing, it returns. I imagine a great avalanche burying me deep in the sand, and in my panic, I run! As I leap down the dunes, the impact of my body makes the vibrations increase in volume. I freeze again. Very slowly, I make my way to the base of the dune, where I give way and begin to weep. Now, I know what it is like to see God. It is terrifying.*

Not until later did I learn that the booming dunes are a natural phenomenon, that occurs only in the highest and driest of sand dunes. According to ancient myth, a great sea monster is buried in the dunes. Longing for her mate, she rumbles and moans, she twists and turns. As for me, I got a terrifying taste of the Great Mother. Like Persephone, I felt the earth opening up, and I imagined myself buried alive in thousands of feet of sand. And so, I ran. And in my flight, I felt utter defeat.

Soon after my encounter with the sand dunes, I began to imagine that the vibration was Demeter in the throes of labor, and that, this time, it was I who was being born. Helen Luke writes, "Without terror, without experience of the terrible face of God, there can be no divine birth" (1990, p. 67). This newborn woman is no longer an innocent Persephone, ghostly and anima-like. Rather, she carries within her the horrifying *and* awesome mystery of life and death, she *is*, in herself, the alchemical vessel, the womb of transformation. Such an experience taps into the great Eleusinian mystery: "By touching a reproduction of a womb, the initiate evidently gained certainty of being reborn from the womb of the Earth Mother and so becoming her very own child" (cited in Kerényi, 1967, p. 106). Here the innocent is swallowed alive by the unconscious, digested, and, having acquired the secrets of "matriarchal consciousness," is birthed anew. No longer just a daughter of Demeter, no longer just a wife of Hades, but a woman who is *both* Demeter/Persephone—human and divine, mortal and immortal. Darkly divine. To enter into, and emerge from, the mountain is to be born again.

## THE PEAK

After these things and near the daybreak there will be a great calm, and you will see the Day-star arise, the dawn will appear, and you will perceive a great treasure. The most important thing in it and the most perfect is a certain exalted Tincture, with which the world—if it served God and were worthy of such gifts—might be touched and turned into most pure gold.

—Thomas Vaughan, “The Allegory of the Mountain”

The Sierra Nevada mountain range is one of the most distinctive topographical features in the State of California. To see these mountains from above gives the impression that God, with an enormous hand, pinched the center of the state to form these raw, serrated edges. This divine study in clay and stone has evolved into the central nervous system of the state, for without it California would not have the water supply it needs to sustain its population. The white snowy peaks of the mountains indicate that the source of all life—water—has its beginning in a very mysterious and somewhat indifferent place. To step into this realm of ice-aged glaciers is to enter timelessness; only the movement of water serves as a reminder that in the midst of eternity, change is constant. Undeniably, we are profoundly dependent on the quiet melt of snow that slowly seeps beneath these highest rocks.

*I promised myself that I would return to the mountain before this week was over. I walk up the wash to the lovely mountain range on the northern end of the valley. I hope this re-visit will shed some light on my defeat. My fear of the sand dune continues to surge through my nerves, and I am beginning to think that I will never reach the top of the mountain. Now, standing at the base of the mountain, looking up, resigned, I ask, “So, what shall we do now?” In my imagination I hear the mountain respond, “Sit down and don’t climb. Sit down on the soft sand, feel the warmth of the sun, and simply look at me.” I feel relieved of the burden of climbing. I sit in the wash with my back against a warm rock, sheltered from the wind, resting at the foot of the mountain.*

*Waiting, musing, and sketching circles in the sand with the tip of my finger, a prayer spontaneously enters my thoughts, “Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with Thee. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus.” The phrase repeats itself over and over . . . “Hail Mary full of grace.” . . . “Hail Mary full of grace” . . . “Hail Mary full of grace.” How strange that these words should come to me. I wasn’t*

*raised Catholic; this prayer has meant nothing to me, but now it makes perfect sense. Grace is the water that flows from the mountain.*

Grace is divine intervention, bestowed at the crucial moment of defeat and despair. Grace is given freely and is not based on merit. It cannot be earned, and thus, it transcends the ego. Simply put, grace makes no rational sense. It just *is*.

Like a cool steam, grace flows from the mountain. Only grace can move that which is hard and permanent. Only grace can soften a rigid ego, erode stone, and bring forth new life. When the waters of grace break open, new life gushes forth. It is no coincidence that the Eleusinian rites ended with a ritual of pouring water, a symbol of the living water and eternal life. This eternal water is what the alchemists call divine wisdom or the *aqua permanens*. “‘Gideon’s dew’ is a sign of divine intervention, it is the moisture that heralds the return of the soul” (Jung, 1946/1966, p. 279). Or, as the Zen master Dogan writes, “There is walking, there is flowing, and there is a moment when a mountain gives birth to a mountain’s child” (cited in Tanahashi, 1985, p. 103).

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Only grace can soften a rigid ego, erode stone, and bring forth new life. . . . It is no coincidence that the Eleusinian rites ended with a ritual of pouring water, a symbol of the living water and eternal life.

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The alchemists recognized the necessity of grace for the completion of their work, and, most likely, found grace to be an integral aspect of the treasure. “Therefore, if any man desire to reach this great and unspeakable mystery, he must remember that it is obtained not only by the might of man, but by the grace of God, and that not our will or desire, but only the mercy of the Most High, can bestow it upon us” (cited in Edinger, 1985, p. 5). From a depth psychological perspective, I imagine grace as being what Jung termed the *transcendent function*. Jung noticed that when the tension of the opposites is held long enough, when one feels as if they are at the moment of psychological death, a third, previously unimaginable, possibility emerges. A new image is spontaneously created by the psyche. Although this may sound abstract, the experience is highly numinous. It *is* like being cooled with living water. It is an act of grace.

Perhaps it is difficult to imagine Persephone’s rape as an act of grace, but certainly her last-minute decision to eat the pomegranate seed *is*. At the moment when she is about to leave Hades, she eats the seed and therefore has

to repeat her underworld descent every winter. Did Persephone understand the consequences of eating? Did she know that underneath her conscious yearning to return to her mother, she really didn't want to return to her previous state as innocent daughter, to remain incomplete, separated from her own feminine nature? As Luke (1990) writes, "This is an image of how the saving thing can happen in the unconscious before the conscious mind can grasp at all what is going on" (p. 65). By sheer grace, Persephone swallowed the dark seed of Hades, which has taken root and sprouted a new personality. What was just a tiny seed has blossomed into a full-grown woman. What was simple beauty on the surface has become dark beauty below.

For a woman, becoming real—ontologically real—is what the Demeter-Persephone myth is about. It is not about conquering fears, overcoming obstacles, slaying the dragon, or reaching the top. It is about entering into the mountain of the Great Mother—the mountain of all mothers—and reclaiming the power of instinct that has sustained life, and accompanied death, throughout the ages. When a woman recognizes that she comes from Mother, is mother (even if not literally a birth-mother), and is the container of the great mystery, symbolized by the mountain on which she stands, she becomes complete: virginal and sexual; able to love freely rather than from a place of inner deficiency. She becomes, as Esther Harding (1971) writes, "one-in-herself": "She does what she does—not because of any desire to please, to be liked, or to be approved, even by herself; not because of any desire to gain power over another, to catch his interest or love, but because what she does is true" (p. 125).

To be "one-in-herself" is not an abstract theoretical idea. Practically speaking, it means that a woman is not dependent on another—whether externally, as in a human relationship, or internally, as in the animus—to dictate her self-worth. For me, this means that it is no longer necessary to reach the peaks in order to justify my existence. I no longer need to climb to prove my worth to society, to others, or even to myself. Rather, I climb the mountain because *I want to*. It is what is true for *me*. The *opus* is not the attainment of perfection but the acceptance of completeness. To reach the peak of the mountain is not a conquering. It is a gift.

And, for me, no landscape is as mysterious and stunning as the high country of California Sierra Nevada. This is the land of the great wise ones—grandmothers and grandfathers—manifest in granite batholiths, 65 million years old, which have risen to their zenith. Here we reach the limits of life where oxygen is thin, the sun is intense, freezes are long, and winds are strong. This landscape points to that which is eternal, to a "oneness of things beyond" (cited in Killion, 2002, p. 18). Old mother earth unveils her soiled robe and exposes her overwhelming brightness, no longer seen as condemned Eve, but as Sophia, the wise goddess of the mountain.

In the Gnostic tradition, there are two personifications of Sophia, upper and lower. The lower Sophia is the one who fell from heaven onto earth. Seduced by the serpent, she is the dark one who lives in the mountain, animating all of creation. She is the vibration that rumbles beneath our feet. For this reason, the alchemists perceived her, and her consort the serpent, as a somewhat complex and symbolic form of primordial spirit—*serpens Mercurii*, the earth spirit, or *anima mundi*.

In her higher state, Sophia is the wisdom of God. Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom, *is* the guide and the goal. Without the grace and wisdom of Sophia, God's creation is nothing but dead matter. God may have the power to create mountains, but Sophia has the power to give them life. It is difficult to understand the higher and lower aspects of Sophia in purely abstract terms. It is much easier to imagine her by way of metaphor, perhaps as a glacier, overwhelmingly bright in the sun but also as cool water that melts and descends from the mountain, providing life to all that is below. Jung (1954/1969) writes:

The wisdom is the *nous* that lies hidden and bound in matter, the "*serpen mercurialis*" or "*humidum radicale*" that manifests itself in the "*viventis aquae fluvius de montis apice*" (stream of living water from the summit of the mountain). That is the water of grace, the "permanent" and "divine" water which now bathes the whole world. (p. 236)

Such wisdom enters into our lives in strange and paradoxical ways. For instance, I know that wisdom is not knowledge attained by books. On the other hand, having an inquiring mind is essential to finding her. I know that wisdom cannot be achieved by human will alone, but wisdom doesn't come without continual effort. Although wisdom is a gift of grace, it is discovered through a great deal of painful struggle.

Perhaps wisdom is an indescribable knowing that comes by way of Persephone and her passage through desire, suffering, defeat, finally to grace. Desire is the fire that burns deeply within us, and in our incessant attempts to fulfill our desire, we suffer. And when we can no longer bear the burning of suffering, we experience defeat, which naturally ushers in the waters of

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grace. Perhaps knowing the mystery and paradox of the natural unfolding of individuation—desire, suffering, defeat, and grace—is wisdom.

Ultimately, wisdom is Demeter and Persephone, the higher and lower Sophia, reunited as “one-in-herself.” The transcendent realm of Persephone touches the material world of Demeter. Matter becomes meaningful. The woman, now goddess and human, becomes the queen of the secrets of domestic life—not in the traditional sense, but as the great woman—and the one who brings the power and wisdom of creativity into the material realm of ordinary life.

## THE RETURN

This Tincture being used as your Guide shall teach you and will make you young when you are old, and you will perceive no disease in any part of your bodies. By means of this Tincture also you will find pearls of an excellence which cannot be imagined. But do not you arrogate anything to yourselves because of your present power, but be contented with what your Guide shall communicate to you. Praise God perpetually for this His gift, and have a special care that you do not use it for worldly pride, but employ it in such works as are contrary to the world. Use it rightly and enjoy it as if you had it not. Live a temperate life and beware of all sin. Otherwise your Guide will forsake you and you will be deprived of this happiness.

—Thomas Vaughan, “Allegory of the Mountain”

So, what is the “tincture,” or the “treasure that is hard to attain”? It is impossible to define the Tincture, but we know from the allegory that its purpose is healing, both personally and collectively, however this healing may appear. Jung (1977) writes, “The *opus magnum* had two aims: the rescue of the human soul and the salvation of the cosmos” (p. 228). Individual healing is linked with universal healing—the microcosm and the macrocosm are interdependent. I am certain that the healing tincture is not a static and concrete *thing*, but rather like wisdom, it is mercurial, provisional, changing, and *alive*. Perhaps it is even ourselves—women and men—having descended into the mountain underworld and recovered the life-giving power of wisdom.

Without divine wisdom the world becomes a “nothing but” world. Nature is nothing but dead matter. Our lives are nothing but mundane. Our desires are nothing but infantile. Our creativity is nothing but whimsical. We are now witnessing a world that is suffering from a “nothing but” drought of wisdom. Certainly, we have seen progress and development in areas such as technology and science, which are comparable to the success of mountain climbing, but such achievements often lack the life-generating

creativity of feminine wisdom. We are standing on the mountains of our own making, and as a result, we are on the brink of ecological and cultural disaster.

Creativity is the antidote for a dying world. As Jung points out, “The creative activity of imagination frees man from his bondage of ‘nothing but . . .’ ” (Jung, 1931/1966, p. 46). To create is to make the imaginal *real*. With our own hands and hearts, we mold our dreams

and give them life. We sing, dance, cook, move, sculpt, paint, and play our lives into being. Such creativity is not always sweet and pretty. The serpent is still a serpent. Unfortunately, there have been many cultural misunderstandings regarding this creative instinct as having no relationship to wisdom. Thus, it is easy to misinterpret the serpent/dragon-slaying hero myths as the need to suppress instinct, as opposed to befriending it for the sake of creativity. As the earliest religions demonstrate, the instinctual serpent is not, in and of itself, evil, but rather the source of imagination and healing. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan (1995) writes:

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We are standing on the mountains of our own making, and as a result, we are on the brink of ecological and cultural disaster.

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Before the snake became the dark god of our underworld, burdened with human sin, it carried a different weight in our human bones; it was a being of holy inner earth. The smooth gold eye, the hundred ribs holding life, it coiled beautifully and mysteriously around the world of human imagination. In nearly all ancient cultures the snake was the symbol of healing and wholeness. (p. 140)

And, Esther Harding points out that in ancient mythology the snake represents creativity and renewal: “In the first place the serpent was credited with the power of self-renewal because of his ability to change or renew his skin. The power was felt to be akin to the power of the moon which renewed itself month by month, after its apparent death” (1971, p. 53). From this it appears that the tincture is closely related to the redemption and resurrection of the serpent—instinct infused with wisdom—which gives us the power to heal, create, and renew the world and ourselves. And in doing so, the world becomes more real, more alive, more amazing, and so do we.

## THE ANCIENT BRISTLECONE PINE, WHITE MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA

*I am now over 11,000 feet high. The air is thin, and a cold, dry wind sweeps across my face. The landscape is stark and rocky. Only the thinly scattered bristlecone trees and flowering shrubs give evidence of life. The bristlecone pines are an anomaly, considered the oldest living beings on the planet, reaching ages of over 4,500 years old. How interesting it is that the oldest trees are not the tallest. Nor are they green with abundant leaves. They are not showy and glamorous. They grow from the inside out, shrouding their new growth with dense, gnarled bark. They appear like old women, wrinkled by the burden of life, joyous in the magic of survival. If any words describe the bristlecone it is aged, weathered, and wise.*

*Without much thought, I walk to a particular tree and carefully cradle myself in its lap. I rest here for a long, long time. Golden droplets of sap rain on me.*

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### NOTE

1. For a full reading of the myth, see *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in Meyer, M. (1987), *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, published by HarperCollins.

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