

Learning to be Female - From the Inside Out

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My year-long journey into the OPUS Archives and Research Center in search of a new mythos of female power began in January 2010 and included the opportunity in February 2011 to interview two of the scholars housed there – Christine Downing and Katherine Sanford.

Over a three-day period in Del Mar, California, I met with both elders in their homes, located just a few miles from each other, perched in the hills overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I had spent hours in the archives poring over their words and Sanford's paintings, but the conversations with these two women, aged 79 and 93, brought ideas to life and added clarity to my search for a new mythos. The conversations provided a clear vision of the rich fabric that is a female life, each spun from similar threads, and yet emerging in a unique style, pattern and form. One size does not fit all, despite longstanding cultural efforts to shoehorn females into uniform models of being. The strands, however, illuminate similar truths.

In fact, the similarities in the lives of these two women served as silk threads that lead toward a new mythos of *Learning to be Female*. They include:

- ❖ Lives lived in service to the burning creativity within;
- ❖ Resistance to the cultural and familial norms that reigned fiercely in the late 1950's (the 21st century versions of which continue today) when Sanford and Downing, on opposite ends of the country and in very different manners, could no longer ignore their unique voice and vision;
- ❖ A blossoming sexuality that led away from conformity, toward a truer, soul-deep self;
- ❖ Passion, curiosity and creativity that endures.

Importantly, the work and process of Marija Gimbutas as an archeo-mythologist also mirrored what is essential for females today and is at the heart of this new mythos: the need to breathe passion and sacred stories into the stone figures that too many girls and women have become.

Elements of the New Mythos: We are *not*, as females, a single, homogenous tribe but are instead unique mixes of brain, brawn, body, creativity, sexuality, heart and soul. Depending on our particular family constellations (which themselves are a rich stew of economics, ethnicity, love and rage) these elements intertwine within us to create the millions of iterations that are the lived lives of women today.

However, what burned most brightly from my archival dive, which shall be expanded upon in this paper, are the common threads that did emerge from the Archival collections. These include:

1. Listening to, trusting and *expressing* the voices of truth that lie deep within requires courage and commitment;
2. When heeded, these voices can lead females out of the clamp of conformity that culture uses to channel and contain female energy, intuition and sexuality;
3. The “language of our souls” is one whose vowels and consonants comprise metaphor, dream image and intuition – a language that *must* be learned, trusted and lived;
4. The serpent that must be befriended, and can guide us, on this journey is our own sexuality and passion – the life force of female bodies that has been seized by religion, commercialized by popular culture and shrunk over time to genital-focused, non-Eros sex with a neon glare that bleaches males and females of life and creativity.

Swimming Upstream: Our world has strived to bottle and channel female behavior and sexuality from the moment that Eve reportedly snagged that apple from the tree. The version of that force in the late 1950’s, when Downing and Sanford began their swim upstream, featured vice-like female definitions that included motherhood, monogamy, minks and Mr. Clean.

Downing: On January 5, 1959, 28-year-old Christine Downing sat down at her typewriter in her New Jersey home to write in what is labeled in the archives *Notes to Self*. She mused about the

last section of a book she was working on in which she sought to capture “the fusion of poem, prayer and drama.”

That same day, she wrote of a literal fusion that was taking place in her own body:

I almost forgot to put down my latest sign – as mysterious and ambiguous as any – the very fleshly one of getting my period while still nursing which has never happened before – I know there is sometimes a tribal sign for the lifting of the taboo which surrounds woman after childbirth.

This line stopped me in my tracks. We live in a world where American companies spend more than \$200 billion each year “hacking women’s bodies into bits and pieces” (Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion*, p.33). But in 1959, in a suburban New Jersey home, Downing was bleeding and fertile, breast-feeding her new daughter, mothering five children, married to George, and collaborating professionally with Ira Progoff, with whom she was also having an affair. This flesh and blood woman was mother/maiden/crone/hetaera/Hestia/Hera/Athena/Aphrodite fully alive, at the same moment, in a single female body.

Just one month earlier, Downing had shared in their family Christmas letter that she had “been invited by Ira Progoff (author of *Death and Rebirth of Psychology* and the new rendering of *The Cloud of Unknowing*) to join a group on ‘creativity and depth experience.’” She added in the same letter, written in the third person, “So George has taken on the care of the family Monday evenings this fall while she has gone into New York.”

What Downing did not share in the Christmas letter but did in *Notes to Self* on December 19, 1958: her sexual relationship with Progoff. She questioned “whether or not this experience is to have any fulfillment on the outward level, it is obviously working toward something within...I do not remember ever before, even when pregnant, feeling so FEMALE, so passively receptive, so much a containing vessel.”

It was at this moment in time, with so many dimensions of female expression alive in her body, that the idea of a “poetics,” a concept that would inform her later work, emerged. On December 19, 1958, she wrote in *Notes to Self*,

I want a symbol for 'another world' that is just as rich – the religious is too explicit and probably too easily misconstrued– I think the poetic would suit my handling best.

Sanford: In 1959, in Del Mar, California, 42-year-old Katherine Sanford signed up for an adult education art class and began creating a series of 62 canvasses that would continue to spill from her over a 30-year period. She had no formal training as an artist or poet, but Sanford used the medium to give shape to the images that haunted her unconsciousness. She created a visual narrative of her journey to reconcile all parts of herself, to let all parts of her, ferocious and feral, live their way into the landscape of her life.

Sanford was married to Sandy with whom she had raised three children. Her roiling internal strife, which she herself characterized as nothing less than her soul taking on a conforming ego, was also guided by a questing, curious sexuality. As Max Zeller, the analyst she was seeing at the time told her, “You are so split, if you don’t do this work you will become either a religious fanatic or a whore.”

As a cultural context, 1959 was the year that Barbie dolls, panty hose, and the weight loss supplement Metracal were introduced. Jenny Craig got her first job in the fitness industry, ABC began airing the Jack LaLane show and the U.S. Postal Service banned *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. Total advertising dollars spent that year in the United States was just over \$11 billion, with 31.7% percent of that total spent on newspapers and only 13.7% on television.

Today, that total has risen to nearly \$300 billion, spawning the 12 billion display ads, three million radio commercials and 200,000 TV commercials that flood the nation each day. Most of us see or hear about 5000 a day (Yankelovich Report, 2007).

In short, while the cultural mandates to be wife, mother, nurse or teacher have clearly loosened, this has been accompanied by an onslaught of media images and messages that instruct us on how our external bodies should look.

The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls, authored by Cornell Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg, documents the many ways in which culture compels external obsession with the female body, an American-grown phenomenon that has snaked its way throughout the global community. Media today begat a tsunami of pictures and sound bites created by shallow imaginations that draw their inspiration from economics. Girls and women are conjured largely as two-dimensional clothes hangers whose breasts, hips, thighs and other body parts are used as both bait and dangling carrot. Specifically, female images invite people to buy that new Lexus or six-pack of beer while also promising that if females purchase the perfect purse, shoes, face cream or hairstyle, they will reach the nirvana of perfection. These images instruct females, incessantly, to think not what magic and mystery lies within, but to obsess instead over what their appearance and shape can do for others.

Archival Wisdom:

In my four visits to the archives during 2010, the new mythos began to take form drawn from both male and female offerings. As I searched for a uniquely female way of exploration and thought, I found an observation by Joseph Campbell written in *Myths and Mysteries of the Great Goddess*,

Where women preponderate in a religious cult, usually the experiential side is accented. And you get dance in your art; whereas the male tends to accent the theological or rational aspect of the thing. (p. 21)

This observation held true throughout my search of the OPUS Archives.

Of the five authors I focused on – Joseph Campbell, Marion Woodman, Marija Gimbutas, Katherine Sanford and Christine Downing – each one reflected, obviously, strong intellect and rationality. However, while Campbell’s prodigious output came primarily through words and the compilation of 100,000 images in the *Historical Atlas*, the four women combined research with their own experiential output, which added new dimensions for consideration:

- ❖ Gimbutas worked tirelessly to imbue more than 100,000 stone vulvas and other artifacts with the stories and lore that inspired humans more than 30,000 years ago to create these symbols in honor of their deep spiritual beliefs.
- ❖ Woodman believed that “a body workshop was as necessary as dream analysis...releasing the body into spontaneous movement or play constellates the unconscious in precisely the same way as does a dream” (*Pregnant Virgin*, p. 78).
- ❖ Downing used her body and sexuality as a canvass, exploring first-hand how the container that is the female body can be, all at the same moment, mother-lover-wife-intellect-scholar.
- ❖ Sanford augmented her written work with the paintings and poetry that seemed to jump full-blown from her soul, an Athena emerging from the forehead of a Del Mar wife, mother and mystic.

The words, images and experiences of these five scholars blended for me into a single voice that provided a blueprint of how we all must learn, *from the inside out*, what it means to be female.

The blended voice enfolded me also. I found an important aspect of my Archival work was my own inner process, a year-long journey that has involved breathing in what is housed there, recording my dreams and exploring my own responses as I worked to live a more embodied female life. This approach enabled me to hear these voices whisper their wisdom in a way that I took in as deeply as possible, letting their guidance move my own life in better directions.

One year after my first visit to the archives, I witnessed the shooting through the left lobe of her brain of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, a woman I had worked for and care about deeply. I missed being shot by mere seconds. Three days before the shooting, I had a vivid dream. I was at the University of Arizona in a classroom and there was suddenly an enormous explosion a few buildings over. The building I was in shook to its foundations, and within the dreamscape I thought to myself, *“It has happened; everything has changed.”*

As Woodman noted in the taped speech held in the archives, “Symbol as Connector Between Mind and Body:”

To be a conscious crone, man or woman, it takes a lot of heartbreak...You do not understand the crone until you have met Kali. We pretend we do not have Kali – she comes in storms – if you have watched a person die of cancer you have seen Kali. You question and it makes no sense – there is a mystery and you are allowed in.

The eyes of Kali, which were fully opened in me on the day of the shooting, must remain open in all of us or out-of-control and unbalanced patriarchal forces (which harm males and females) will continue the deadly rampages. The eyes of Kali are the unblinking truth burning at the center of the new mythos – if they remain open, everything can change.

The Shift Toward Elder Respect:

To birth into our world a deeply respected body of female wisdom, hard work is required. It is incumbent on individual women to live their daily lives listening, respecting and bringing to life wisdom and power that is multi-faceted, unique to each female and utterly intertwined and informed by, the female body, sexuality and desire.

As I worked in the Archives, I imagined a serpentine force leading *my* way: “Pluck this apple,” it whispered. “Open this file,” it urged. “Take a bite.” “Taste this.” And I listened. Importantly, the apples of wisdom, insight and courage found in the Archives neither rendered me sinful nor put me to sleep. Instead, they offered up life examples and wisdom that, if integrated into daily lives, can wash away sin, and awaken females of all ages.

As a collective body of wisdom, the Archives are unanimous in the opinion that the task for women is *not* to go forth and slay dragons, but instead, to dive in, trust. The holiest of vessels is the female body and the way for every woman to take full custody of her own body is to:

- **Listen, Awaken** – Despite a tsunami of cultural images and words that can numb females into obeisance, our dreams and intuition offer up healing images that can inspire us forward.

- **Befriend** the body and pay attention to where sexuality and desire lead you – they remember what a whole and embodied female is and can lead the way back.
- **Learn** the “language of the soul,” the dreams, metaphor and images that are sent and received through the body;
- **Claim** lust and brilliance fully and equally – the female form contains ample room for multiple dimensions, and desire, in its many faces and forms, remains a driving force through life.
- **Reconnect** “sacred” and “sexuality.” 100,000 stone vulvas promise that there was a time when the female body was deeply revered, where sex embodied procreation, intimacy, love, mystery and not just genitalia; where god was immanent and not transcendent.

Following is an elaboration of each of these points, with specific quotes from the works of the five scholars that guided this evolving narrative:

1) **Listen:** There is significant wisdom to be unearthed, present throughout the history of time, and available to all of us, that can help us buck conforming pressures.

- Campbell, “Letter to Professor Vernon Gras, Professor of English at George Mason University, Feb. 11, 1980: “I have lived too long in the woods and by the sea to know that nature is not only ‘out there (trees, birds, etc) like the Judeo-Christian ‘god’ but equally in here (inside our bodies).”
- Campbell, *Myths and Mysteries of the Great Goddess*, p.4: “She is the incarnation of the power of nature to pour future forward from past. Between past and future is goddess. Between seed and new life is the goddess.”
- Campbell, “Goddess Lecture,” p. 109: “The important thing about the Goddess is not whether women sat on thrones and ruled in a matriarchal social structure; it

is whether the quality of woman, the being of woman, the sense of woman was understood, known and respected.”

- Woodman, “Symbol as Connector Between Body and Mind,” 2001, Journey Into Wholeness Conference (cassette tape): “As you gestate longer and longer you hear and see with spiritual ears and eyes. What you see is so exquisite that you weep with the sheer beauty of a child’s smile. All your senses that are instinctual in the beginning are developing into a different way of perceiving that is very different from just physical sense. That is what a soul journey is all about.”
- Sanford, “Integration of the Feminine Lecture,” pg. 4: “Our collective consciousness has become so one-sidedly factual that in our culture the magic of the soul has lost status and recognition.”
- Sanford, “Interview,” 2-13-11, Del Mar, CA: “The last time they (her son and his wife) were here, my daughter-in-law asked, “Katie, what secrets do you have like Bill and I have?” I said, “Secrets, what do you mean by secrets?” I said if I look back over my life, every experience I have had has in some way added a value to my understanding of myself. If I think of that as a secret, am I keeping it from myself? If I think of it as a secret, it is shameful. But I think of it as a responsibility, of having to carry conflict between individual growth and the collective. There is no shame, it is our individual responsibility.”
- Sanford, “Interview,” 2-13-11: “Where I would say the real challenge for my generation and yours and less for Allison’s (Sanford’s granddaughter) could be epitomized by Emma Jung’s observation from Zurich in the 1930s and 40 when she said, ‘ I am well aware of the power of the collective so I am very careful not to offend it. So it will leave me alone, and I will do what I have to do for myself.’”
- Downing, “Notes to Self,” December 20, 1958: “I seem to have an almost damnably high estimate of my gifts though a hesitancy to really put them to the test and of course all these portents suggest that is precisely that which needs to be done.”

2) **Befriend Your Body:** We must live our lives with the deepest respect and reverence for our own bodies and sexuality, and to do this we must awaken from the stupor of *The Body Project*. When we clear away the fog, the body serves as the canvass for dreams and metaphor.

- Campbell, "Letter to Vernon Gras," Feb. 11, 1980: "In my view, myths are more like dreams and visions, constituted, rather out of images, grounded not in the culture but in the psyche, which in term is of the human nervous system and the body."
- Woodman, "Symbol as Connector Between Body and Mind,"(cassette tape): "If your container is not strong, the wild instinct is not disciplined. It is not disciplined and the instinct does not find a natural way to express itself... The Latin word for matter is mother. If you are sitting at a big table in the conference room and all are efficient and all are talking and you say, can we all just stop and listen to what your belly is saying about this. Listen to your belly – society thinks that is weird or listen to your heart. The body screams out, Listen!"
- Woodman: "Symbol as Connector Between Body and Mind,"(cassette tape): "Make time to go into the body, listen, draw the images that come out acknowledge the dreams – the dreams are made in our body. The sensation comes in on your skin, the brain computes the experience into an image. Dreams are your particular gift."
- Downing: "Interview," 2-14-11, Del Mar, CA: "Most women out there are succeeding professionally but they become aware that there is a sense that is persona – but they think it is not the real me – so the idea that I want to be seen becomes literalized – I want my body to be seen – my femaleness needs to be validated."

3) Language of the Soul:

- Woodman, “Embodied Lecture,” 1987, (cassette tape): “The language of the soul is metaphor...dream is pure metaphor...metaphor appeals to the mind, the imagination and emotion. It takes in the entire human being and that is why it heals...if you work with a symbol long enough, not just for meaning but in your body, work with its energy, you begin to see why it is so exact for you – ah, that is what it feels, it resonates in your belly...the soul requires metaphor for food..in art, music, writing, dance and architecture.”
- Woodman, *Dying Into Life*, p. 132: “Kill the imagination and you kill the soul. Kill the soul and you’re left with a listless, apathetic creature who can become hopeless or brutal or both. Kill the metaphor and you will kill desire; the image magnetizes the movement of the energy.”
- Downing, “Demeter and Persephone Notes”: “Myths don’t tell us how, they help us to question, imagine, go deeper.”
- Campbell, *Myths and Mysteries of the Great Goddess*, p 17: “One of the wrong ways to reach mythological symbols is to think they refer finally to historical facts or personalities. They refer through the fact and all personality to a power, a power that informs all things, not only the universe out there but also, you, in here.”
- Campbell, “Letter to Vernon Gras: “The gap between nature and culture (the Other) can be bridged, and the bridge is by way of myth and dream.”
- Sanford, “Background Notes to Paintings,” written at the request of ARAS, no date: “Symbolic language was, to me, like a long lost native tongue.”

4) Lust and Brilliance:

- Downing, “Notes to Self,” January 16, 1959: “I feel so freed in this relationship – not only by it but in regard to it...this sounds abstract but I have a sense of glorious stretching – out of all my limbs, with the marriage-girdle off...I feel the sleeping princess faintly stirred – no, deeply stirred – and the fear is of another kind, the ‘proper’ fear of God.”
- Downing, “Notes to Self,” January 16, 1959: “What a wonderful revelation and parable and expression the sex act is.”
- Downing, “Interview 2-14-11”: “I met George and he awakened my sexuality and more than that I thought this was someone I wanted to have a family with. My plan had been to get the Nobel prize and have lots of love affairs, but it was like being on the edge of orgasm, I was so ready to have children.”
- Sanford, “Background Notes to Paintings,” no date: “Since sexuality is so compelling, and basically bound up with the magic of life, it is almost unbelievable that any other creative dynamism might become accessible to man...being too conventionally good starves one to death.”
- Sanford, “Interview, 2-13-11”: “What are you guilty about – guilty about not being conventional? We would like to think guilt comes from the outside but it is much more inside of our heads. It is probably the conditioned voice that we know.”-

5) **Reconnecting Sexuality and Sacredness:**

- Gimbutas, “Audiotape made at celebration of the publication of *The Language of the Goddess*,” 1991: “We must reexamine history and start putting back some parts that we have left out, namely the Earth, the body, the feminine and the unconscious.”

- Gimbutas: "Audiotape made at celebration of the publication of *The Language of the Goddess*," 1991: "Another result of cultural training is that the female as a spiritual force is usually confined to earth fertility and labeled as Mother Earth. Certainly fertility was a major concern of our ancient ancestors, but the wide variety of figurines and particularly the archeological contexts of the Neolithic suggest that the feminine force in religion played a wider role...In earlier times, the concept of obscenity surrounding either the male or female body did not exist and the purpose of portraying the female body was to express her other functions: the nourishing aspect and its procreative aspects...her role extended far beyond simple eroticism."
- Sanford, "Comments on January 1961 Painting in Notes for ARAS," p. 19: "The dance continues with just the movement of our upper bodies. This is a most ecstatic experience, and at the peak of intensity, I find myself alone in a green meadow where I stand wonderfully content with what I have experienced...I also sense that the woman of importance is the primitive figure. She goes as a sacrifice, not to death but to renewal."
- Sanford, "Comments on January 1961 Painting in Notes for ARAS," p. 46: "The spirit of Eros seems to have fallen into disrepute and man walks in isolation and discomfort with his fellow men. The relations to the warmth and vitality of Mother Earth tends to be severed, and we become educated cultural robots, held as prisoners in the archetypal shadow of our nature."
- Sanford, "Interview," 2-13-11: "I was very impressed with a nun I worked with who went into the order at 16 or 17. She was Mexican, in her 40's and the order was paying for her analysis. I learned a lot from that woman – she told me she was going on a retreat with other nuns and priests – a retreat for sexuality and intimacy. "What do you do at a retreat like that," I thought, "You are celibate." A Sister had opened the workshop and emphasized the broad dimensions of

sexuality that were not identified with genitalia but linked with eros, relationship and the irrational working of the realities of the unconscious.”

- Sanford, “Interview,” 2-13-11: “My deep work gave me choice in how I expressed a relationship – I didn’t have to go to the bed with the guy – I could appreciate – I had choice.”

Conclusion:

Among the strengths of the OPUS Archives and Research Center is the way in which the works of the scholars housed there weave a Body of wisdom and guidance for men and women. It is wisdom that needs to be learned, experienced and activated in daily lives if we are to birth a more expansive and embodied archetypal vision of female authority.

As I quoted in my original grant application, “The cover story of the *New York Times Magazine* on August 23, 2009, noted, ‘In many parts of the world, women are routinely beaten, raped or sold into prostitution. They are denied access to medical care, education and economic and political power. Changing that could change everything.’”

If we embrace this new mythos of embodied female power, in its wide range of forms and manifestations, with the serpentine force of sacred sexuality at its center, where every child and adult speaks easily the language of dream, metaphor and myth, we could change everything.