
THE MASCULINE DARK

We all need to look into the dark side of our nature, that is where the energy is, the passion. People are afraid of that because it holds the pieces of us that we're busy denying.

La Gitana Eva

Tell me, sister, are you scared of the dark?

For generations women have been taught to be afraid of the dark. We have been raised to follow the rules, to stay in well-lit areas, for fear of what may befall us in the dark. *Stay in the light*, we are warned, *stay safe, stay home*. In the masculine dark, men are heroes. . . and women are prey.

We know the story of the dark. Or at least the masculine dark.

In the masculine paradigm, the dark is the home of Death, a lone male figure, hooded darkness personified and armed with a blade, menacing and arbitrary in his culling. We spend our lives fleeing from Death, avoiding its path, making deals with it, inviting it prematurely, calling its bluff.

In the Abrahamic religions darkness is equated with the absence of God.

In the beginning all was darkness, so the story goes. *Then God made the light and the darkness was banished*. So begins the founding tale that many of us grew up with within the religions of our fathers. And ever since then they have been saying, *let there be light*.

And so began the battle between good and evil, dark and light,

masculine and feminine, the battle between two superpowers which has engrossed humanity ever since.

In the patriarchal system, black and white have been portrayed as diametric opposites, not including anything of the other. Our fear of the dark has been deeply ingrained. Dark — both literal and metaphorical — is bad, we are told. Stay away from it or suffer the consequences. Fight or reject every part of the darkness within you. Turn towards the light.

Despite the fact that science has shown that dark matter makes up most of the universe, our materialist culture has taught us to believe that darkness is the absence of everything. Where there is no light, there is nothing.

In the past century science has shown us that all particles come in pairs, positive and negative, and yet we humans have put a negative spin on the negative and tried to do away with its existence altogether. But energy naturally oscillates between these two poles, power moves in cycles, particles always have their twin.

Except in patriarchal culture. The man-made world is a strange, unnatural place where quasi-spiritual prejudice and ego-based fear trump reality it seems, in spite of the rhetorical claims of a love of rationality.

The light tends to be associated with *logos* — rationalism, logic, and order, and contrasted with the disorder and demonic qualities of the dark. The En-light-enment era (1620–1780) was a key development in Western civilisation as we know it today — a flowering of (white, masculine, Christian, Eurocentric) rationalist science, philosophy and politics. It was the blueprint for a masculine vision of the world, alongside a wholesale rejection of the Feminine and its associates: the irrational, the body, wild nature, the mad... All these were segregated as “Other”. All needed to be controlled. The masculine approach to the dark, to anything that it perceives as threatening, has been to conquer and subjugate it, to force

it into lightness, or lock it away. The end game of masculine power is the triumph of the ego over wildness, the chaos of the unconscious and shining the light of rational knowledge on all things. We see this in our ever-lit cities, in the domination of nature and darker skinned peoples by whites for hundreds of years. When darkness emerges through madness or rebellion, it has been brutally slain, medicated or confined.

For millennia this has been done in the name of the Father God of light. The Christian faith has instilled a spiritual fleeing from “the darkness” associated with the Devil and hell, to the dreamland of heaven, with Jesus, light of the world. But the Christians aren’t alone in this. The Nazis, and more recently ISIS are playing out their own interpretations of masculine power and control.

Even the New Age movement has taken up this mission it seems — same message, different words. The new gurus have taught us to embrace our light bodies, shunning the darkness, and focusing purely on love and light, constant happiness and extreme optimism. But, as Karin L. Burke astutely points out: “In our efforts to feel better, many of us start shutting it off, in favor of pop psychology or easy spirituality. It’s called spiritual bypass. It’s an attempt to avoid painful feelings, unresolved issues, or developmental needs.”

That is the basis of our culture as we know it — dismissing all that cannot be known with the rational mind. *Move towards the light, ignore the dark*, we are taught, again and again.

THE DARK ARTS OF THE PATRIARCHY

Despite claiming distaste and disbelief in witchcraft, our masculine culture has a powerful understanding of the dark arts. It’s how they’ve kept their stranglehold on power for all this time. It is not that they are cleverer, stronger, divinely

endowed or even in the majority, despite their claims to the contrary. It's that they use forms of mind and spiritual control, more subtle, but not that much less powerful, than the overt violence we stood witness to in the last section. The dark arts are psychological reminders of the real violence that can be played out without warning on our bodies and minds. But because they are invisible, and take place in the shadows, they are a more insidious form of control and when confronted can easily be denied, laughed off or turned back on the recipient as crazy imaginings.

Some of the most common of the dark arts of coercion that are commonly used in our culture include:

- › Fear
- › Shame, humiliation, embarrassment, discrediting difference as "madness"
- › Controlling bodies—through strict dress codes, veiling, starvation. . .
- › Banishment or threat of banishment
- › Rewards. . . and threats
- › Repression and dissociation
- › Imposing hierarchy and clear authority
- › Keeping people small, powerless, impoverished and infantilised
- › Exhaustion and lack of adequate rest or recovery time
- › Unattainable standards
- › A focus on the external
- › Closely policed spiritual and sexual experience

As a trained teacher, I recognise that we were taught many of these in our arsenal of control. As a parent I know that all mainstream parenting advice centres round them too. These

are the tools of coercion, the rules of play in the patriarchy. Naturally they are the back bone of most patriarchal religions.

First they are used against us by authority figures when we are younger, when they are physically more powerful than us, and can enforce them. Then we learn to internalise them, creating a super-ego, or internal authority figure which continues the job on their behalf.

Each of these weapons in the arsenal of dark arts is a complex energy trap, taking our natural power and turning it against ourselves in a deadly game of self-policing in order to survive.

Whilst the dark arts remain nameless and invisible they keep control of us: sticking to us like spiders' webs in the dark, confining our movements, filling us with unconscious fears of what might happen next.

Each of these dark arts works to activate fear within us. The fear of being found out, the fear of being shamed, the fear of rejection, the fear of pain, the fear of loss of freedom or finances, the fear of abandonment and the ultimate fear—the fear of death.

FEAR

When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision—then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

Audre Lorde

Every so often, when you've come into fear, you've walked away. What if today you held that tremble, and stepped into the centre of it? What if today, you allow yourself more courage than you've ever felt? What if you did it anyway?

Sukhvinder Sircar

He's after me. I want to take my children to the top of the tall

tower, but the old male guard at the bottom stands inscrutable and impotent in his uniform with his machine gun by his side. I run past him and up the stairs, it is the only way through to the other side, my daughters run behind me. But as I turn a corner of the spiral staircase a young man with dark curls, aims his gun and shoots, the bullet whistles past the side of my face, I can feel the cold air and hot metal, I run up the stairs in twos, he's after me, and then I'm trapped, at the top. I can see where I'm headed, the landscape opens up before me. But there is no way down from here.

He has me cornered, I cannot move, I try to scream but nothing comes out. My heart pounds, the air is being squeezed from my lungs, I have to get away. I scream again, he is getting closer. My eyes jam open as I feel a hand.

"It's OK, Lucy, you're safe," my husband murmurs, half awake, familiar with this routine when fear wakes me in the night, its dark tentacles winding round my neck, my belly, paralyzing me in my bed. The shadows in the room take on a life of their own and begin to move towards me like the dark pursuer from my dreams. I lie awake in the darkness trying to will myself to think of other things.

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This is how women have lived for as long as they can remember. One eye always over our shoulders on the shadows in the dark—in our waking lives as well as our dreams. This is the ever-present shadow of fear.

We run and hide from the rapist, the murderer, the evil king, the robber, the terrorist, the sadist, the stalker, the vampire, the troll, he who wishes to do us harm, he who we fear. Again and again we run and hide from him, we are killed and raped, we are saved or sacrificed.

We may have met the dark man in real life—in the form of a rapist, abuser, cruel physician or burglar—he who intrudes, who penetrates without permission. He who deems us

powerless, who abuses his greater physical strength and shames us into silence. Fear scrambles our signals—disconnecting us from ourselves, others and the life force, awakening trauma, shutting down our bodies, our feelings, or making us disregard our own safety, and open ourselves to anyone. Fear is the death force in energy form.

As Burning Women we learn again and again to face fear, and to see it for what it is. Not a shut cage door or a jail cell. . . but a portal of transformation. As Burning Women we learn again and again to stand in the face of fear, and feel it, rather than run or hide or capitulate. In feeling it fully we find our way through to the other side.

The dark arts work in the man-made world, simply because we believe their truth which we have been taught since birth: that the world is man-made and the power lies outside of us, in the grips of an omnipotent masculine force.

But it is not. It does not.

The way of Burning Woman is an unveiling of another truth, a deeper truth: our own truth. But to find it we have to have the courage to walk through the other side of fear.

In the psychic realm, the dark man represents our subconscious fears of masculine power that we have yet to make our peace with. Our dreams are often the first place we can practice witnessing and confronting our subconscious fears and transforming the power dynamic we have with the masculine. We can learn to develop healthy boundaries with him, learn to stand our ground, to roar in his face, to say *no*. We can also learn to partner him, play with him, take calculated risks, help him to transform. Our dreams are a physically safe training ground for the maturing Feminine psyche coming into her power.

In our dream life we can recognise that our attacker, our predator, is actually a part of ourselves, one that longs to share in our power, or express aspects of ourselves that we have cut off. However, as the immature masculine he does not know

how to be in partnership, and so he grabs and threatens. Soon we learn that he is magnetised to us by our fear: the more we fear him, the bigger and stronger he grows. Whereas when we learn to stand our ground, rather than run in terror, to look him in the eye and to name him, then he loses his power over us.

We can then take this dream learning out into the waking world with us to confront our fears of stepping into our power. So that when as we do our work in the world, we have the tools to begin to disentangle fear's fingers from our guts. We know that fear is merely a shadow, that we, not it, hold the power.

But, as we get closer to our goals in the real world, we start to hear our fears in stereo: reading criticisms of our work, being attacked or threatened by rivals, facing rejection from those we love and respect. And we know that if we step back, if we walk away it will stop. But we will lose. And so we find ourselves, once again, caught between our inner burning and the outer burning.

To stand our ground in the face of such terror feels more than we can bear. I am there right now. If you read this book, it is because I have dared to walk through a fire so large I knew it would consume me.

This fear is strong. But so are we. And it knows something that we do not: when we dare to face it, we can free ourselves. But to do that we have to pass through the fire *whilst feeling fully*—we must consciously walk through the burning wall of oblivion, knowing that it may destroy everything we love.

Fire burns our worldly attachments, and shows us our most primal selves—our love and our fear—and asks us which we choose.

SHAME

No longer believe the shame, it is a lie you whisper to yourself to keep yourself small and you are so far from small, you are a magnificent human being. We may need to endure the terror of exposing our own magnificence. It is true that to begin with it might feel deeply uncomfortable to be seen, but it is time, tender one, hiding in the shadows, to offer love to your own un-livedness, to become the safe place to land your heart in the world, with its vast medicine bundle of beauty.

Lucy Pierce, *Belonging*

Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.

Brené Brown,

I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame

Shame.

Slaps round the face.

Cuts like a knife.

Burns in your throat and makes your skin crawl.

Raw agony of flayed flesh

The braying mob look on and jeer.

And then silence so visceral you could bury yourself in it.

The patriarchal system is built on honour and reputation—saving face.

What is *face*? It is the persona or mask we have acquired as defence structure against a world we perceive—or have been told—is dangerous. It is how we cover our vulnerabilities.

When the patriarchal system refers to defending honour, it really means defending the persona—the projected, public self and reputation—without which we cannot function effectively within the System. Shame shatters the persona and destroys honour, it does this by homing in on a fundamental truth of ours, which we perceive as dangerous and unacceptable to others, and yet is fundamental to our existence. It reveals that which we have purposely tried to conceal: shame is the slipping of the mask to reveal a vulnerable, fallible human underneath. Shame makes us bad and wrong for who we are and what we love.

Shame is a pilot light that warns us when we are approaching the boundary for acceptability: it is a cultural tracking device to keep us within the fold. Which is good, if the community supports our health and growth. But if that culture is stunting us, or wishing us harm, then shame is a faulty warning light, trying to make us conform to values we no longer hold, and an authority we no longer respect.

Shame is the key tool in the arsenal of the repression of Feminine power. It is the enemy of pleasure. The drier up of juices—creative and sexual. The putter-on of clothes. Shame says: *Who do you think you are? What will people think? You dirty little whore, you untalented piece of shit, you pretentious arse, you stupid woman.* Shame says: *Sit still, shut up and do not embarrass yourself. You are bad, and you will be exposed. Shame on you, shame on you, shame on you.*

It is a spell of disempowerment and disconnection that is cast upon us early—magic words which make us believe: if I am not perfect, if I am vulnerable, if I am complex, then I am wrong and deserve to be alone, to die. I am not acceptable. I am different. I do not belong. I have no rights. No authority.

As women we have internalised its messages, which we have received so many times, in so many ways. *We are inherently not okay.* Shame confirms this loud and clear.

I understand the power of shame. I have believed these voices

so many times. I have seen others be pulled into their web in a thousand different vicious ways. Over the past couple of years, I have begun to see more clearly every time that shame engages me: shame about what my body looks like; what others think of my work; asking for what I want sexually; shame for not being a good enough mother; shame about not having enough money, about having too much; shame for being sick all the time; for having a dirty house and for having a cleaner; for painting unacceptable art; for not being patient enough; for being a bad daughter. . . the list is endless. And it is truly disabling.

Burning Woman learns to overcome the crippling effects of shame and fear by realizing that they are universal patriarchal control patterns: **they are not personal**, even though they are always couched in personal terms. They say everything about the one who speaks them, not the one being shamed. When she learns this, she cracks the code and breaks the spell of the patriarchal power matrix. She learns to release herself from the shadow power of the father's stories, and reconnect directly with the full power of the Feminine source energy.

If the empowered Feminine could be described in one word it would be: shameless. The Feminine is she whose ways cannot be proscribed or controlled, she who follows her own flow, she who knows that her vulnerability is the birthplace of real power.

As good quasi-men of the patriarchy, we have been told that vulnerability is weakness. Vulnerability allows soft spots for others to exploit and attack. Vulnerability=death. But in the Feminine model of power, vulnerability is a key strength. It allows meaningful connection, empathy and authentic expression—which all human beings naturally seek.

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*

The deeper in shame we are the more we are disconnected from ourselves, our community and the world beyond us. Shame occurs in and cultivates isolation and disconnection. So to be defused, it needs to be shared. We need to be witnessed in our naked truth to expose our shame.

So here is the magic: if you do not define yourself by the System's rules, if you surround yourself with others who do not buy into their values, then you are free. Completely. To be yourself. Your full self, not just the self that you feel safe projecting into the world, but your shadow side too, the parts of you that you have always had to hide in order to be honourable.

The first, most important step into power is through the portal of fear and shame: uncasting their spells and having the courage to stand face to face with your own power. When you do this, you step from pouring all your energy into appeasing a monolithic structure that will never accept you, however hard you try, one that will always change the boundaries and demand more, to one which sees and loves you as you are.

You have reached the threshold of the portal of Feminine power.

Dare you cross over?

THE THRESHOLD

A woman's initiation includes many moments of crossing a threshold. This threshold is the bridge to our feminine soul, and crossing over is the beginning of becoming.

Sue Monk Kidd

Where do we go, when we don't know where to go?

How do we get to where we do not know?

Welcome. I see you there, standing on the threshold. Step further into the darkness, into your own darkness. Follow the sound of my voice. You cannot see me. You have no need for your outer eyes and ears here.

Here you are. Alone. But not alone.

I am here for you, holding space, waiting with you.

This is the space between dreaming and becoming. The liminal space. The held breath.

For perhaps the first time in your life you are standing in a space which is not defined in any way by the masculine. This is No Man's Land. The threshold where time and space coalesce in a different way and we re-emerge in a new identity. Here we come to reclaim our words, our images, our spirits, our souls. Here is where we meet our Feminine power.

Rest here. Allow the shadow space to embrace you in your wholeness. Here you lie in the womb of infinite possibilities. Here you can let go of your projections, your personas, your

stories. Lay them down and allow yourself to rest. Know yourself without limits. Get intimate with your essence.

This is the place of creativity. The passing place of life and death. Where existence flits in and out between pure consciousness and the material realm.

Settle in, make yourself at home.

Time does not apply here. Only truth. You cannot hurry this place. It is the resting space of eternity. This is the space you must inhabit to hear the call, the whisper of your soul, the shouts of She. This is the space which always holds the sacred invitation to healing, becoming. This is where your invitation to dance in the flames can always be found.

This is the place you will return to time and again.

Are you willing to wait in the space between stories? To sink into the warm depths of yourself and listen without agenda?

Behind the fear, the planning, the cleverness and noise. Behind it all. The invitation is waiting for you; the call is sounding.

Can you hear it? Are you listening?

Can you feel it? Are you here?

THE FEMININE DARK

We need to dream the dark as process, and dream the dark as change, to create the dark in a new image. Because the dark creates us.

Lauren, in Starhawk's *Dreaming the Dark*

There is an underlying longing for darkness. It's as important as sleep. It feels natural for us, as humans born from wombs, to search for a home or understanding that is based on feeling and connection rather than sight.

Eila Kundrie Carrico, *The Other Side of the River*

Darkness is the ancient womb. Night-time is womb-time. Our souls come out to play. The darkness absolves everything; the struggle for identity and impression falls away.

John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*

*Soft and warm,
A mother's nest, feathered with softest down,
A dark cocoon in the palm of the goddess,
I am held, so gently,
My skin is night, and the stars my necklace.
I am safe, I am home, I am loved, I can rest.*

Can you try to picture a softer dark than the masculine dark you have been brought up with? A darkness which is benevolent and mysterious? Feel yourself cradled in it. Fully held. Can you imagine that rather than a void of nothingness, darkness holds complete intelligence and possibility—waiting to take form.

I invite you to step into that darkness with me, and adjust your gaze, heightening your vision, learning to see through sound, hear through feeling. In the dark you need all your senses. As you wait in the dark, your inner eyes and inner ears are heightened and aware, your instincts are strong. Your ears are primed, the hairs on your skin stand up. You are fully alive. Fully alert. In the darkness you are here.

This is not the darkness of fear, but of love. Deep, complete, unconditional acceptance. The loving darkness of our mother's womb. Soft and dark and round and safe, the darkness that held us as we grew. Our earthly bodies did not come from a masculine God but a real human female's belly. For the first part of our life, we were at home within her. We belonged, intimately, within the Feminine. And part of us longs to return to that safety, ease and feeling of deep belonging.

But for many women even their womb time was not a time of safety. For those of us with mother wound issues, attachment issues, who have been adopted, have lost, or never had the experience of a deep, safe, loving connection to the Feminine during their lifetime, the Feminine dark presents deeper challenges. Estranged from the flesh and blood mother, systemically disconnected from the patriarchal system, having stepped away from the Father God we can find ourselves adrift and alone. We become all the more aware of the strict prohibitions on the divine feminine, our lack of connection to real flesh and blood women, and find we have nowhere safe to belong. Nowhere to rest and be held.

We have died to our old selves, but do not know who we will be. How can we find ourselves at home in the Feminine when

we have felt homeless, rootless, disintegrated all our lives? How can we know Her when we do not know Her?

Start by having the courage to simply be here in the dark, without filling it with stories. Learn to know it intimately, personally.

Allow yourself to be held within the matrix, the womb space of the divine.

The Creation Mother is always the Death Mother and vice versa. Because of this dual nature, or double-tasking, the great work before us is to learn to understand what around and about us and what within us must live, and what must die. Our work is to apprehend the timing of both; to allow what must die to die, and what must live to live.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*

Within the course of our lives we pass through a thousand deaths, losses big and small — of identities and loved ones, places and people. Our death and rebirth to the Feminine is one of the biggest.

Through this experience we learn the truth that death never is The End, but always leads to rebirth, and new existence in a different form. We discover that what we had feared as final annihilation is actually an integral part of the creative process. This helps us to release our fear and resistance, and begin to lean into the divine paradox, embracing the reality that in death lies life, in creativity lies destruction.

When we do, what emerges is the freedom to fully and creatively engage with the miracle that is life, bringing the full power which lies within us into the world, during our brief journey from the womb of our mother to the womb of the Earth.

To come into our wisdom, we have to step into the Feminine dark once more. To face the shadows we have run from and integrate them. We need the balance of the dark —

the unknown, the mystery, the veiled, the uncontrolled and unnameable, madness and chaos, stillness and silence, winter and night. This place of renewal, death, and birth is our soul's home.

Any time we recapture this primal womb darkness, we get to experience ourselves as safe, precious, held and cared for, free from striving or asserting ourselves. We simply get to be. We rest in our essence, connected to ourselves and everything beyond us. We experience firsthand the pulsing of life within us: our raw Feminine power.

And the longer we dare to spend in the dark, we begin to see that it is never truly dark — there are stars, and there is the moon. We learn to be guided by these subtler lights. As well as our own inner senses. We learn to trust the wisdom of other ways of knowing when the light is dim.

The dark is the crucible of transformation. It is a vital part of us, and we of it. When we wake up to the dark and face what frightens us then we can begin to make magic.

INITIATIONS INTO DARKNESS

Initiation into the mysteries of life entails walking the great labyrinth. The first part of the journey is finding your way in, past the meanders and distractions that could lead you astray, until you find the centre, the heart, where lie all the answers about yourself. But that is only the beginning. Once you have absorbed the sacred knowledge, then starts the second leg of the journey, which is finding your way back out, carrying the insights that you gained as you were staring into the intense light of your soul.

Nicole Schwab, *The Heart of the Labyrinth*

The darkness is

An invitation to intimacy

With that we have never seen or heard,

But which we know as truth.

An invitation beyond the doors of perception

To the deepest layers of our soul

Unstained by the dust of the world.

In many traditions a key part of a woman's initiation is to be left alone in nature, often immersed in total darkness — whether sleeping out by herself under the stars, finding her way through a wood or descending into the depths of a cave. This gives her a lived experience of confronting of her learned and instinctive fears, teaching her how to dig deep into her own resources and discover both her vulnerability and deep strength. In the darkness we can confront our own shadows and the fears that we project, and learn to listen to the instincts that protect us from real dangers.

Our early experiences of the dark can deeply influence our sense of safety, or lack of safety, throughout our adult lives. In the dark our senses are wide open, we are more vulnerable, hyper-aroused, and so whatever happens to us there will stay with us. Initiations in the dark are initiations of the soul.

Growing up in a culture without such rites of passage, my initiations to the dark have been unguided. Some beautiful, some terrifying, all totally unexpected. I hold them dear as some of the most profound and powerfully memorable experiences of my life.

When I was five years old I had two very different initiations into the darkness. One of love, and one of fear. The first, I was taken by my mother to a Midsummer ceremony on a village green. The event has taken on a magical place in my memory:

shadowy figures and flickering flaming torches reflected in the mirror-still lake. Which was real and which merely a reflection? I could hardly tell. It seemed as though two worlds had, for a moment in time, found their way back to each other. Under cover of darkness the veil had lifted. The darkness was bigger and wider and richer than all the people and the music that adorned it. It was alive. Fully alive. It was in me and I was in it, and it was so beautiful.

The initiation of fear happened that same year. It was the most turbulent part of my childhood, filled with trauma and deep instability. An ex-boyfriend of my mother's broke into our house one night and hid in the cupboard in the hallway. I remember her coming into my room, waking me up and pulling me downstairs, down through the internal staircase, through the front door of the house below and up the street, barefoot in the dark until we found sanctuary in a neighbour's house. It was as scary as it sounds. And burned vividly into my memory.

These were my early initiations into the two possibilities of darkness, the masculine and the Feminine. The dark in which I as a girl was prey and the one in which magic could happen. For years the fear won, but the seed of the beautiful dark had been planted.

Soft velvet black

You cradle me

Until I am dissolved into a billion

Pin points of light.

On the eve of my thirty-fifth birthday, Midsummer's Eve, I was on my way back from our women's book club. Though it was well after eleven, there was still a streak of sunset on the horizon. The evening was balmy, so unusual for the south coast of Ireland, and so I went to lie on the grass and watch the last

vestiges of light recede and wait for the darkness. At first there were just two stars visible, plus the bright orbs of Venus and Jupiter, but slowly, slowly, as darkness spread, the full display of stars emerged. Three-dimensional pinpoints of light, millions of years old, beaming in from across the galaxy. The silence was as deep as the darkness, I grabbed a blanket, wrapped myself in it, cocooned like a caterpillar, and watched the stars till I fell asleep.

Never in my thirty-five years had I slept alone on the grass under the stars. I had been too busy, too scared, too worried about cold or discomfort. But in writing this book I realised I needed to readjust my relationship with the dark. It was thrilling, for the first couple of hours, to sleep in the open air. But then I woke with a jolt. A crack of twigs. Something moving close by. My heart pounded and my mind envisaged rapists and murderers. I froze and tried to wait out my terror, but eventually headed inside. The masculine dark had won once more. But the magic of the dark, the need to heal the trauma of my past became more insistent than ever.

And so began my more frequent freely chosen visits with the dark, my self-initiations — walking home in the dark, moonlit walks on the beach and dark bedroom retreats.

As Burning Women, I realised, we need to find regular ways of both accessing, and moving through, dark liminal spaces, to experience them not as places of powerlessness, but instead of infinite potential, as training grounds for the soul. Looking back, I realised I had been subconsciously seeking out the dark Feminine for most of my adult life.

My first memory of this was in Japan in my early twenties when I was living and working there with my fiancé. Kyoto is a veritable tourist mecca and not the sort of place you would expect to have an intimate initiation into the dark. But the dark has funny ways of surprising us.

The nation's capital for over a thousand years, Kyoto is a

vibrant modern city built on ancient foundations, a metropolis of twenty-four-hour karaoke bars and pinball parlours, with their dazzling flashing lights and hypnotic noise, dense traffic and towering neon signs. But it is also a city of thousand-year-old temples, palaces and gardens of simple zen beauty. Kiyomizu is perhaps the best known of all the Kyoto temples, a three-storey pagoda overlooking a mountainside of cherry blossom. But there, before you go in to the main attraction, is a smaller shrine, where the Japanese clap their hands to ward off evil spirits in front of an altar overhung with strings of prayers. There, if you know where to look, is a small doorway into an ancient practice.

A monk in robes greets you with a deep bow. You press your coins into his hand, and follow the passage which takes you down a gentle slope, your hand on a rope, the simple stone walls gradually receding as the path spirals ever-deeper below the temple, into what feels like the womb of the Earth. Enveloped in darkness, the only sensory orientation you have is the muffled sound of slow shuffling steps of the visitors ahead and behind. And the pounding of your own heart. And the rope in your hand. And nothingness. Thick, dark, black, nothingness.

Though it only lasts less than a minute before you touch the centre stone and spiral back out, time seems to have no place in the darkness. It is eternal and all-consuming. It is thrilling, terrifying and deeply soothing all at once. You experience the ecstasy of the dark: stepping beyond your worldly limitations, and into a fuller sense of self.

Emerging blinking into the light I longed to hand over more coins and re-enter the darkness. To step in each time more consciously and courageously, to face my fear time and again until I knew it intimately.

Another more recent encounter with the darkness was in the south of France, on holiday with my family, soul sister and her

boy. We stayed in the foothills of the Pyrénées where Neolithic people had painted cave walls tens of thousands of years before. Our first stop on our impromptu pilgrimage into the Earth was a long cave, the Mas D'Azil, where a river—and now the road—disappear abruptly into the side of the hill, and suddenly, there you are, a tiny human cell in the great womb of Gaia, the rushing waters filling your ears, like embryonic fluid: so deeply soothing and comforting.

Onwards we travelled to more caves, this time a complex network over a hundred metres under the ground, with a dark river running through the subterranean chasm. I remember my legs shaking as we were led down the steep, slippery steps carved into the cave wall, clinging on for dear life to the rickety iron handrail. *If I slip here I could die*, my mind played on loop. Death walked just one step ahead of me. I tried to keep my eyes on the steps, and from the vertiginous bone-shattering drop below. We arrived at the bottom and embarked on the wobbly boats. Our guide began to pull us along, warning us when to duck down, as we levelled ourselves with the sides of the boat to get through the tightest gaps.

Stalactites and stalagmites were artfully picked out with coloured lights. . . until we reached a section that was unlit, and we glided in silence in the darkness, through the narrow stone chasm, the birth canal of the Goddess. Once again that feeling emerged, which you can only know in complete darkness: the thrill, the terror, the absolute peace. The total absence of being which is eternity.

JOURNEYS TO THE UNDERWORLD

The demons who attempt to block the gateways to the deep spaces of the [inner] realm often take ghostly/ghastly forms, comparable to noxious gases not noticeable by ordinary sense perception. Each time we move into deeper space, these numbing ghostly gases work to paralyze us, to trap us so that we will be unable to move further. Each time we succeed in overcoming their numbing effect, more dormant senses come alive.

Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*

Two days later I had another sort of initiation to darkness when the dark mind unleashed. It was as though a pin had burst my bubble. Everything was darkness and despair. I felt detached, alone, despised. Everyone hated me. I hated me even more. Dark thoughts ran unceasingly through my head. I looked out the window at the breath-taking mountain view, snow-capped in the dazzling July sunshine. At the faces of my children laughing in the sun. Nothing. I felt nothing. It was as though a gauze curtain had been drawn between me and the world. Its beauty could not touch me. It was just me and the darkness in my head. Nothing else could find its way in. I slapped myself around the face to try and shake myself out of it, then collapsed in a puddle of tears on the bathroom floor longing for death.

*

Initiations to the darkness can be exhilarating, or terrifying, depending on when and how they happen, how prepared we are and how supported we are during the process. Often the initiations do not happen in a tourist cave or festival, but in the recesses of our own minds, with terrors and chasms of emptiness far more real than anything we have seen on Earth. They remind us that transformation can be dangerous and requires enormous courage.

When we don't consciously initiate the body and mind into

the dark, it can force itself on us chaotically and destructively instead. We can see this in our culture as a prevalence of mental illness and dissociative disorders.

Our bodies can initiate us into the darkness when we lose control for a moment through illness, stress or exhaustion, and become unable to function in the masculine sphere. But rather than follow this path into the darkness we put our focus on trying to do 'normal', patching up the cracks, medicating ourselves, rather than by supporting the break-through process which is occurring. And so the process becomes more severe, and we are taken kicking and screaming down into the underworld which can be terrifying. . . and deadly. In the underworld we come face to face with the flip side of our creative power: the death urge, and the shadow side of our vision: our fear.

We fear the descent of madness or depression, because in the masculine view of the dark, they lead us away from the light, through complete disintegration (lack of control) and towards the ultimate darkness: death and hell. Whereas the dark mind when seen through the lens of Feminine darkness offers a different perspective: the underworld as a place between the worlds, where healing and transformation can happen. Disintegration is a necessary step to greater integration.

Often we long for "spiritual" experiences to "raise our consciousness" or "empower" us, but when they come they are very different to what we expect. We have been led to expect that spiritual experiences are when we are touched by the light and transformed. When actually far more spiritual experience takes place in the dark. A cursory flick through the stories of spiritual transformation in any of the major sacred texts will quickly show you that the road to spiritual power is littered with trials, exile, infertility, loss, disability, wrestling angels and wandering in the desert.

Each breaking open, each initiation into the underworld through grief, illness, depression, anxiety or loss—is a potential

initiation, a portal of possibility where we get the chance to see and feel the very root of our own fire in the deepest dark. In this place we get to see our inner spark more clearly, as we are detached from our daily busyness and sense of belonging. We get to move further inwards, to let go of the shells of ourselves, and break open our self-concept to include our fuller selves.

But most of us see the darkness approach and freeze, we feel true terror in the face of what feels like the dead zone, and we do everything we can to resist it, to run the other way, to medicate it, numb ourselves, distract ourselves. . . Walking into inner space requires an ability to be with the darkness, to discern, to listen deeply and to move beyond our fear, into a trust of the process of disintegration, into a deep surrender to it. Learning to be in the dark requires that we learn to hold space for ourselves. And find others who can hold space for us as we journey.

In the dark we are not defined by our exterior — we are not defined by our beauty or bodily appearance, our money or worldly power which our culture tells us are important. We become formless and fluid as our masks fall to the floor.

Entering the dark, we peel away the layers of false selves and identities so that our authentic, inner Feminine power can shine.

GOING DARK

*You, darkness, that I come from
I love you more than all the fires
that fence in the world,
for the fire makes a circle of light for everyone
and then no one outside learns of you.*

*But the darkness pulls in everything —
shapes and fires, animals and myself,
how easily it gathers them! —
powers and people —*

and it is possible a great presence is moving near me.

I have faith in nights.

Rainer Maria Rilke

I invite you to step with trust and courage into the Feminine darkness. Let go of your persona, your worldly identities, and experience yourself intimately as an integral part of the endless darkness, the sea of infinite creative potential. The more you know yourself in this way, the more rooted in your source power you will be. And the less power the world — its threats, judgements and controls — will exert on you.

Total darkness is rare in this era of electric lighting inside and out, car headlights, glowing smart phones and computer screens constantly vying for our attention. Bright light activates the neo-cortex (the newest part of the brain, responsible for complex thought, the home of *logos*), it also stimulates adrenalin production. Whereas in safe, dark places the body produces oxytocin, melatonin and other hormones which allow us access to the more primal parts of the brain, and promote feelings of deep relaxation and ease.

Going dark is an important regular practice for Burning Women. It serves to disconnect us from the outer world, from the racing, chattering mind and incessant doing, and reconnect with self/Source. We fully recharge and revitalise when we allow ourselves to go dark. We allow space for our embers to glow more brightly, so that we can truly sense what we burn for and focus on how we can become further inflamed with it. In the

dark we come out of our comfort zones, out of our minds and into our primal bodies — sounds, thoughts, feelings take on different dimensions. As creatives our job is to uncover what lies in the shadows, and give it new identity, new life. As healers our job is to identify what lurks in the shadows and heal or integrate it.

A number of Burning Women I know choose to 'go dark' regularly. Stepping away from technology and distractions, they immerse themselves in nature and their own creative impulses undistracted. Be it by living off-grid for a day each week, or even months or years. By returning to writing by hand, and living by firelight and candlelight for the winter season or just winter solstice. By retreating every time their menstrual blood emerges, or on their personal Sabbath, or simply when they choose to create.

But be warned, sister: in the dark the mind usually goes through its bag of tricks. In the darkness the mind is not our friend. The power that it believes it has in the man-made world of *logos* does not work — and once it sees that, it can freak out, trying to order and control. And when it can't, it panics. It projects its own shadows, terrors and imaginings. It churns around chattering on and making you believe its stories.

The first way to find ease in the dark is to quiet the mind, perhaps through breathing techniques or mindfulness practice. In the daylight we believe we are our thoughts and that they are reality. In the dark we learn that we have the choice to listen to and believe our thoughts. We learn that they are a river running over the top of a deep dark chasm of being. We are not the river. We do not control the river. It takes consistent practice and unlearning.

We are not taught how to deal with the process of inner transformation, or recognise what is happening in the dark. But our souls are pushing us to go dark. . . so that they can emerge more fully.

Transformation cannot and will not ever happen by mental force or in the realm of the mind. But this is our comfort zone, and so this is where we try to, believe we can, make it happen. Transformation happens in the dark zone. It requires that we walk into the dark, away from everything that makes us feel safe and defines us.

Entering the darkness requires that we acknowledge that we are not just our minds, nor can our minds help us. We need to learn to walk without the light of the mind, to stay calm without word knowledge. In the darkness we learn that surrender is our ally, feeling our guide and resistance our biggest enemy. We have to learn to trust another power — something deeper and more primal.

The dark speaks in a Feminine voice. And She calls us to listen.

WOMB SPACE—FEMININE HEART OF DARKNESS

We bleed. We burn. We are powerful.

Jackie Stewart

Ovarian energy is a woman's creative fire energy. It is the energetic source of life force energy utilised in making children, as well as making any creation a woman brings into the world.

Tami Lynn Kent, *Wild Feminine*

The voice of the dark, the voice of the womb, is a voice long forgotten, but once contacted it becomes a staunch ally and your inner guide. This is more than the voice of your intuition; this is the voice of your Feminine essence, where you birth and create from, where you learn again and again to surrender. It is the centre of your unique power as a woman.

The womb is the Feminine heart of darkness. A dark space of seemingly infinite creativity. It lies at the very core of our physical being and yet most of us will never see it. It is a place we can only penetrate through feeling and intuition, with our inner eyes.

The womb is considered by many healing systems to be the central node of the female energy system. In yogic traditions, it lies at the heart of the second chakra. It is often referred to as a woman's second heart. Many believe it to be central to all her creative functions — not just her fertility, but also her visioning and artistic abilities. It is said to be a crucible for her powers, and where a woman's sexual energy is coiled.

However, in Western medicine this uniquely female organ has traditionally been perceived as capricious and far more trouble than it's worth. The cause of "women's problems", Western science and medicine have never really felt at ease with the womb throughout their history, and their focus has only been on its reproductive functions. Or rather dysfunctions.

In the past it was considered to wander aimlessly around the female body, causing symptoms of hysteria, a solely female complaint, diagnosed by male doctors, which affected vast swathes of the female population. In the US today the two most common surgeries are both female only, and on the womb: C-sections and hysterectomies. ^{xxxiii}

In the Western world pre-menstrual syndrome, the most common of women's womb sufferings, has reached epidemic proportions. According to the US Government's National Women's Health Information Center, three out of every four adult women experience symptoms during their childbearing years, with 30-40% suffering impairment of daily activity and 3-7% experiencing severe, disabling symptoms.

Our wombs have been screaming in their own language of pain and dis-ease that patriarchal culture is strangling them. They are suffering. We are suffering. This culture is not healthy

for us or our bodies. Our immense Feminine power is being stifled into cysts and tumours and cramps. It is trapped. Life is not flowing as it should. Our wombs are telling us of the abuse, if we would only listen. Our wombs are trying to bring our attention to our Feminine place of power.

At her first bleeding a woman meets her power.

During her bleeding years she practices it.

At menopause she becomes it.

Traditional Native American saying

Every month between our early teens and early fifties, we receive a powerful monthly womb initiation into the different faces of the Feminine: our creative and destructive powers. It is a gift that we are not taught to treasure in our culture, instead we tend to ignore, resent and resist it. We are taught to hide it away: *don't talk about it, don't let it show*. Our bleeding is seen not as our power, but as shameful weakness.

As Burning Women, our menstrual cycle is one of our key navigation tools and sources of power and health. It helps us to find and live within the regular rhythm which is seen throughout nature — that of moving endlessly between darkness and light, birth and death. Our bleeding is intimately connected to our burning.

During ovulation it is our energetic powerhouse and where the Masculine and Feminine merge together to form new life. Pre-menstrually we tap into our firepower — our ability to rage and destroy. At menstruation and gestation, the womb is where we learn to rest in the Feminine dark within ourselves and embody our understanding of holding space.

Our menstrual period naturally brings us to this place. A place that we are often scared to go. A place we cannot enter with our minds, but only through our bodies. The greatest gift of our moon time is in learning to clear space and enter the darkness, in order to be reborn as fertile, creative beings

once more. We learn that this letting go, this cocooning in the darkness, is integral to our health. Again and again we must learn to be comfortable in the formlessness of transformation, and rest in the mystery.

Month by month we are taught that our power is not based on possessions or external prestige, but something far deeper and stronger: our power is a natural force, intimately connected to the force of nature, and rooted in our bodies.

Our power is the power of life itself.

And it is innate to us.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

Becoming our fullest selves is a journey of the soul: mythical, magical, transformative. It requires of us to surface from the depths of our psyches what we may not want to see, know or feel, what we may want to reject. It is precisely our hidden grief, unspoken rage, fear, longing and unknown joy that wants to know of us our courage. Are we brave enough to own its existence within us and not exile it to places we refuse to go? You say that you want to be whole and free? First then, descend. Find the gold hidden in the dark caves of your heart and belly. This is your rite of passage home. When you truly know all of who you are, you will no longer live in avoidance and fear of your vast human nature.

ALisa Starkweather

In we go, deeper and deeper. Through the body and into consciousness itself.

The dark is a place of few words and many images. Where our worst fears and brightest dreams lie hidden, formless and nameless, waiting to be discovered. This is a realm we have been warned of in stories—the underworld, the dark wood, the black

night, the stormy ocean, the underground river, the locked box—the place of demons and witches. This is No Man's Land, the place our culture has taught us to fear and turn from. This is the realm of the unconscious where *logos* is not king. This is the domain of the Queen of Darkness, the Goddess.

The unconscious is a repository of immense wealth — of all the other possibilities of existence which are currently not part of our conscious functioning in the world. It is here, the personal and collective unconscious, that we descend to in our journeys in the dark.

We may access it intentionally through dreams, trance work, body work, poetry or painting. We may get here unwillingly through grief or depression. Through these portals to the underworld, strange visions beckon, images haunt us, whispers of words catch on the inner breeze, shadows of creatures we do not recognise. As things get stranger, we know we are getting closer to Source.

Often we have a tendency to skirt around the edges of these processes, to stay in safe, familiar territory, revisiting old ground, too scared of the consequences or what we might find if we go deeper and darker. We often try to make the images and ideas we find here acceptable, censoring or only partially expressing that which we have discovered, in order to make them identifiable with the persona we have dedicated ourselves to cultivating. On one level, this is wise—the unconscious contains many things that we fear hugely, that we have purposely repressed. It has the potential to awaken physical and emotional trauma, and to threaten our mental health and stability. Our discoveries have the capacity to destroy the control that we enjoy, and the calm, ordered world that we have created. If we are looking to sustain the status quo we need to keep the hell out of the unconscious.

However, playing safe and transformation do not work hand in hand. Transformation cannot be micromanaged. When we surrender to it, the rules of the ordinary world do not apply.

The experience can be guided, but never controlled. The whole point of exploring the unconscious, is that we do not know what we will find. This requires great courage.

It requires a leaving of the conscious mind: the home of the patriarchal system. It necessitates throwing down the rule book and entering with curiosity and daring. Each time we delve into our unconscious, each time we tap into sacred power, each time we move into our bodies, we are part of the revolution, we are locating new sources of power, identity, existence, passion, joy and possibility outside of the mind system. We are freeing ourselves from fear and shame and clothing ourselves in the flames of our own unique beings.

DREAMS AND VISIONS

*If all the women of the world
recorded their dreams for a single week
and laid them all end to end,
we would recover
the last million years
of women's hymns and chants
and dances,
all of women's art and stories,
and medicines,
all of women's lost histories.*

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Dreams are a direct gateway to the unconscious, and one which we potentially have access to in the darkness of every night. If we choose to pay attention and commit to learning their language, they offer us great riches.

Whilst many of our dreams are simply a way for our brains to process the thoughts, events, people and places of the day,

they can also carry direct communications from the divine, our primal instinctive selves and the personal and collective unconscious.

We all know the deeper sort of dreams that stay with us. Not just into the milky first light of morning, but with a technicolor vividness throughout our days and even our entire lives. These are the dreams I am talking about here. The dreams that make you call your mother to check she is okay. The dream in which you meet your unborn child. The dream that introduces you to your spirit animal. The dream that both my grandparents had on the same night, which led my grandfather to a bar in the local town, to meet the man who was to teach him about pottery, which has become a three-generation business. The dreams that share the whisperings of your soul and have the power to shape your life.

The night after I finished the first draft of this book, I had such a dream.

I leave my husband in his place of work, and walk past my son on my way home to my daughters, on the other side of the city. I am passed by flank after flank of blue dressed police, more police than I ever knew existed. "What's happening?" I ask.

"The Chinese have set an ultimatum, if we support the attacks on ISIS they will attack Wednesday morning," they tell me.

That is this morning. I look out to the bay and it is filled with warships of every size — from small dinghies to massive aircraft carriers with battered planes on the deck.

I enter a block of flats on my way, stopping in to visit an old wise man, much loved, but now impotently sat in his easy chair. I leave him, somewhat comforted, and join many others, out on the balcony: at least I will not be alone when death comes. We watch as our police shoot out into the hazy blue, and then in answer, an atomic explosion, ripping the clouds and seas, barrelling towards us. We fall to our knees, looking to see how safe the structure is

above us, knowing we are dead any way. I feel absolute desolation at being apart from my family, at the loss of my family, of all these people with me, of the beautiful Earth and the places we have built. Absolute desolation that it has come to this. What a waste, what a tragedy.

At first I thought the dream was simply about the escalating war between Western governments and Islamic State, a reflection of the terror in the air after the terrorist attacks in Paris. Discussions of reprisals had filled the nightly news and the French had declared the attacks an act of war.

This is one of my greatest fears, as a child who grew up in the shadow of the nuclear age, at the end of the Cold War. A child of peace-loving parents who were engaged in their own personal nuclear holocaust. I have grown up terrified of conflict, of the possibility of the ordinary skies being filled, without warning, with the drone of war planes. I recognise that this is both a literal and metaphorical fear, the terror of the little Good Girl who makes a pact that if she is good, please God let there not be war today.

But then further interpretations came to me as I reflected more.

Interestingly in the dream I was just going home to see my daughters, my husband and son were the other side of the city, I was aware of this sense of leaving behind the masculine and moving into the Feminine. In the dream, this was represented spatially by a movement from the right hand side to the left (traditionally right-handedness is the correct, masculine way of imposing oneself on the world. I am, of course, a left-hander!)

On the way home I popped in to visit the Father God of my childhood, he was still there, but benign, no longer all-powerful.

And then there was the explosion. I realised that for me it correlated with the power of the Feminine — both my fear of my mother exploding in fury if I confronted her about our

relationship dynamics, but also the immense wild, natural power of the divine Feminine. The ocean is a common symbol of the Feminine in dreamers' psyches, whereas architecture, especially tower blocks like the one I was in represent the phallus, or masculine — order and structure.

Despite my fear, the explosion was deeply beautiful. It came in response to the pathetic ejaculations of all the guards of the patriarchy firing in unison into the blue, like a shoal of fiery sperm. The response was silent but awesome: a bubble of pure power and energy coming straight towards me.

But whilst the architecture around me started to fall, I didn't die. The ending was left open. I just felt a wave of deep, deep grief for what had been lost. And a sense of having been somehow initiated further into the wild, uncontrollable power of the Feminine, which had blasted away the previous man-made structures of control.

I interpreted this dream as my psyche's way of communicating to me that vast blockages to the Feminine power — personal and collective — were in the process of being destroyed. It reflected exactly where I was in my life. I had struggled deeply with the first draft of this book, knowing that it was caught behind energetic blocks. Fears of speaking openly about the divine Feminine. Fears of speaking openly about the erotic. Fears of attack and reprisal for so blatantly critiquing the patriarchy. I was living what I was being asked to learn in deeper and deeper ways, but still it was not deep enough. Until I could clear these old blockages, the book could not flow. I needed to let the old structures crumble down, but I was not in it alone. The Feminine power coming through would help the process of clearing space. It was time to let go. It was time to surrender. I woke in terror for what had happened, in grief for what I had lost. . . and in awe-inspired beauty of the power of the Feminine erupting and the fact that I was here at this momentous time, to bear witness as it emerged into the world.

BURNING QUESTIONS & FIRESTARTERS

MASCULINE DARKNESS

What is your relationship to the darkness — now, as a younger woman, and as a child?

Do you believe you are alone in the dark? In danger? What are you afraid of? Can you allow yourself to picture it? Why does it threaten you so?

FEARS

Firestarter

Make a list of your fears.

Next to each note down what it is that created this fear in you, and when you learned it.

Can you go back in time and enter into dialogue with each of these fears, and reclaim your power from them?

SHAME

Firestarter

Make a list of your shames.

Next to each note down who it was that created this shame in you, when you learned it. Can you go back in time and enter into dialogue with each of these shames, and reclaim your power from them? Try to see them in their own shame and smallness and allow compassion for them to emerge.

Firestarter

Dress yourself in many, many layers of clothing, each representative of a key shame. Look at yourself in a full length

mirror, how do you look? Reflect on how you feel internally. Now remove each piece of clothing, naming the shame, and saying aloud, "I remove. . . ." until you are standing naked in front of the mirror. Reflect on how you feel in your body now and what you see.

DEATH

What experiences have you had of death? And how were you taught to navigate them?

Can you see the echoes of this in the smaller losses you experience on a more regular basis and how you deal with them?

Firestarter

How do you picture death? Can you draw a picture of it (does it have a gender for you?) or write a poem about it?

FEMININE DARKNESS AND INITIATION

What initiations have you had into the Feminine darkness? Can you write or tell a story about one or several of them?

How can you create a conscious initiation into the Feminine darkness for yourself?

Firestarters

Possible tools for entering the unconscious include:

- › Burning questions: most spiritual practices, and modern psychoanalysis, use unanswerable questions as cues to internal examination of that which we have not previously examined in order to move us from automatic functioning to conscious examination of our unconscious assumptions.
- › Dreams: these again play a key role in the stories of

all spiritual traditions and modern psychoanalysis as a way of receiving messages from the divine, seeing with greater clarity than in waking life, and understanding previously obscured feelings.

- › Automatic writing and intuitive painting are two core ways of facilitating an exploration of the unconscious.
- › Active imagination: free association of ideas and words; unplanned speaking in a held witnessed space; continuing the dream state in waking life; lucid dreaming, where the dreamer takes an active part in the dream; trance states, meditations or visualisations which lead us into the unconscious mind.
- › Sound, movement or body based work.
- › Many therapeutic techniques.
- › Hallucinogens.

Each way of encountering the unconscious requires that we move from fear and control to a playful yet serious-minded curiosity. It requires that we find a way of staying safe, whilst taking big adventures into the unknown.

THE WOMB

What is your relationship to your womb? Is it a place of safety or pain? What is coming up as needing healing in this area?

What does your monthly bleeding mean to you?

How is your bleeding connected to your power?

Firestarter

Can you paint or draw your womb as you experience it?

Try creating pieces of art during menstruation and ovulation and comparing them.

6 CLEARING SPACE

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began. . .*

Mary Oliver, *The Journey*

Bring out your dead

It is time, it is time.

Take your broom in one hand and scythe in the other.

Take your flaming sword and polishing cloth,

Your power hose and pen.

It is time to clear.

Clear your attic, tidy your room,

Sort through the bones, the clutter, the pain,

Sing over them all and watch them take flame.

Our bodies teach us every month that we must clear space before we can gestate life: clearing the old is an integral part of creation. Before we can create the new, before we can increase our power, we must make space.

Do you feel resistance rise up, when I invite you to clear? A little voice that says:

I don't have the time, or energy.

I am scared to lose what is precious to me.