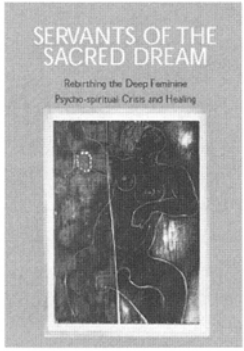
Servants of the Sacred Dream

Rebirthing the Deep Feminine: Psycho-spiritual Crisis and Healing

Linda Hartley

Elmdon Books, 2001 £12.95



I was delighted when I was asked to review this book, apparently exploring the deep feminine, as it is a subject I have been busy with for many years, personally and professionally. Reading that Melanie Reinhart – a woman I hold in high regard as an insightful and inspiring astrologer – considers this book *'a masterpiece in the genre of spiritual autobiography,'* I trusted I was in for a treat, but was curious about the genre she placed the book in. With a long, lazy holiday to look forward to, the task promised only to add to my pleasure.

The book is presented in two parts. Part one, 'Body, Soul, and Spirit in Crisis' starts with the author describing how her own process led her on the timeless quest of the dark night of the soul. Seeking containment for her experience, she turns first to Buddhism and then to Psychosynthesis. Hartley claims that her subsequent experiences as a psychosynthesis client and trainee were 'seriously misguided', resulting in what could be considered a psychotic breakdown. Her journey through and back from her breakdown provides the backdrop for the book which, unfortunately, didn't turn out to be the pleasure I had hoped for.

Hartley relates her subject matter to the larger arena of culture and history. She underlines the role of patriarchy in alienating women and men alike from our deepest sources of wisdom and knowledge, thereby dropping the world into the despair we witness all around us. Our individual and global challenge - and opportunity - is to embrace this decay with feminine wisdom, learning to trust the Life-Death-Life cycle.

Having thus established her personal motivation and the larger context in which this drama unfolds, she explores the root of the problem. She reminds us of key points in child development, the need for bonding, holding and mirroring, what may go wrong, why, and with what consequences. She retells the story of how, through the centuries, patriarchy infiltrated the very ground of our existence by eroding mothers' ability to protect, nurture and educate their children in a truly empowering and life-confirming manner.

Hartley's message, in the final chapter of this first part, is that the body doesn't lie,

and that we ignore its communications at our peril. With the prevailing patriarchal attitudes supporting us in ignoring our bodies' messages, we foster far-reaching consequences. These influence how we approach physical and mental dis-ease; how we relate to our own and our children's physical impulses and desires. We breed shame and distrust in our own sense of rightness and, ultimately, this insidious disrespect for our own physical reality is responsible for our tendency to misuse and abuse our planet. Hartley bridges the two parts of her book by suggesting that all symptoms can be seen as messages from the Soul – which she equates with the exiled feminine principle. If we don't listen to and honour her voice and wisdom, the denied feminine will show up in her archetypal manifestation as the Dark Goddess, and as a last resort take her revenge on our physical reality, individually and globally.

Part Two, 'Myth, Meaning and the Quest of the Feminine', focuses on how we can learn to take heed of the voice of the Goddess in both her light and dark aspects and what it demands from us to do so. Calling on the timeless myths depicting the heroine's journey, we see how the mother-daughter relationship has suffered from the lop-sided domination of patriarchal reign, to the extent that most women are alienated from what I call their own *Female Ground*. From this platform, Hartley relates the psycho-spiritual crisis to the initiation of the Shaman, and expresses concern that our culture has no formal context for initiations. Hence, nowadays if one suffers from symptoms associated with spiritual awakening, the most likely place to seek help is in the world of psychotherapy. But as therapists, she asks, are we equipped to provide the appropriate spiritual guidance?

I have no argument with Hartley's overall thesis and context, but there's nothing new here, and I would never have finished reading this book without the task of writing this review. It reads more like a student's dissertation than a book, as if the author had a need to bring closure to something. And indeed, in the epilogue she comes back to what seems to be the underlying theme of the book, bereavement. And, at long last, there is closure.

It is surprising that, in her book, supposedly exploring the deep feminine through an autobiographical lens, Hartley makes hardly any reference to her own mother. Even though what she calls 'therapeutic work that finally broke me' leads her to the Archetypal Mother, she seems unaware of how she skips the crucial personal level. Her real mother makes her only brief appearance in one of the chapter-heading poems, all of which were written by the author, and in my opinion do not add to the book.

As a therapist, I find myself wishing that she could have brought her rage at being abandoned back to her sessions and made better use of the failings of her imperfect, human therapist. Together they might have worked through the underlying transference issues, allowing her to genuinely separate from her over-idealised father. As it stands, the therapeutic episode that hurled Hartley into her own descent, and subsequently to write this book, lends a peculiar taste to her work - like a familiar dish, well prepared and made with good ingredients, but burnt.

The book did, however, lead me to reconsider the cutting-edge work on the subject by excellent writers in the 70's and 80's; most of Hartley's extensive quotations are indeed taken from these rich sources. Dipping into some of the ground-breaking feminist literature of that era I reread Audre Lorde's 1978 paper 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power'. I was struck by the fact that in seven pages she takes us to the heart of what it means to be a woman rooted in the erotic reality of herself. I'm not sure that Hartley got there in 280.

Nevertheless, I cannot completely dismiss this book. I obviously don't agree with Melanie

Reinhart's comment (For a true masterpiece in that genre, see Irina Tweedie's *The Chasm of Fire*). But I do think this book has some value for students undertaking a transpersonal psychotherapy training, such as Psychosynthesis. Her caution against the shadow side of this type of discipline needs to be heeded. For anyone new to the concept of the 'deep feminine', it could be a good starting point. The many threads woven into Hartley's tapestry give the reader a realistic sense of the scope and magnitude of the subject matter, and her references and bibliography provide an excellent source for further exploration.

Further Reading

Lorde, A, (1984) *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* in *Sister Outsider, Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde,* The Crossing Press, Freedom CA.

Tweedie, I, (1978) *The Chasm of Fire,* Element Books, Shaftesbury.

Helena Lovendal-Sørensen is a psychotherapist, supervisor and Sexual Grounding therapist. In 1996 she co-founded the Centre for Gender Psychology and co-authored *Sex, Love and The Dangers of Intimacy* (Thorsons, 2002).

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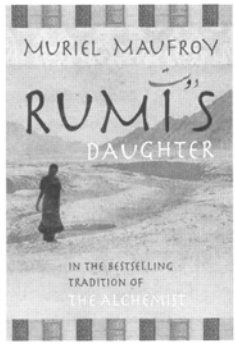
Rumi's Daughter

Muriel Maufroy

Rider 2004 **Price £9:99**



Rumi's Daughter tells the deceptively simple, inspiring story of a young woman's spiritual awakening in 13th Century Anatolia (now Turkey); a rich and fascinating record of Sufi psychological and spiritual transformation orientated on the heart. It is a fictional story with a basis in historical fact. Rumi was a Sufi spiritual teacher best known now in the West for his mystical poetry. He was inspired by another teacher, Shams and he did adopt a daughter.

The book breathes some space into their lives. How it might be when they walked and talked. In different hues and colours, ordinary family loves and tribulations are described: the kindness, the infectious inspiring, the fear of separation and the jealous demanding. There is also something else: the epiphany of presence. The magic of this book is that it brings us imperceptibly into the presence of a mystery; how love endures and transforms. In life that is easy to miss, hard to trust. This book opens the heart. It encourages bigness and beauty. It reminded me of Dr Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech,

'It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.'

The reader is invited to consider as real, a world of experience whose power and authority continually breaks through the peripheral perception, the sheaths of the ego. Kimya, Rumi's daughter, is forever being captured by,

and is available to, the stunning raw potential of being that is alive and vibrant within her. She lives in an absence of time and in an immediacy of experience which is both timeless and precisely present. These extraordinary moments are wonderfully described. In her family, her inability to stay 'with it' resulted in her being seen as a fond, but sometimes irritating, 'space case'. Her world is that of the mystic, a world of inner spiritual dimension that co-exists with the ordinary and is a world of uncompromising monotheism. This, and her relationship with the teacher, will be difficult for some readers. In a straightforward, disarming style, the passion and numinous power of the spiritual teacher in antiquity is revealed. Here are teachers, who embody a radiant transforming presence, who lived in a devotional passion that was the antithesis of priest and ritualized form, who were wild cards and who were embedded in a devotional practice. The devotional relationship to the teacher is here in all it tenderness and terror. The relationship with the teacher, the relationship with the divine, is clear. They are the vehicles for transforming the heart.

The book does not discuss the Sufi methods to transcend the ego. It holds the scent, the fragrance that is available. The hard, hard work of relationship, the continual putting of oneself aside, the cultivation of love in all circumstances is only alluded to. Dr Alan Godlas of the University of Georgia explains,

'...the Sufi surrenders to God, in love, over and over: which involves embracing with love at each moment the content of one's consciousness (one's perceptions thoughts and feelings, as well as one's sense of self) as gifts of God or more precisely, as manifestations of god.'

Within Sufi spiritual training there is a journey to the 'heart of hearts'. We are shown that here. How the intense longing for the beloved is made actual in precious states of union and in the painful agony of separation. As love transcends obstacles so the capacity of the heart to love grows. The function makes the organ. It is said that the heart grows wings. It is a process that demands the confidence and the inner stamina of a spiritual athlete. Seeing things as they really are, in their intensity or in the intensity in which they are resisted is the work of the therapeutic exchange and, traditionally, of the spiritual teacher. Lives pivot around how such moments are met. The transcendent capacity to be transformed by and beyond our grief is known. It is not easy but happens. We witness it.

This book is a profound record of psychological and spiritual transformation and, as such has been compared with Paolo Coelho's The Alchemist and Tracy Chevalier's Girl with a Pearl Earring. Too soon over, it is an inspiring read; simple, evocative and heart stopping. The charm of this book is that it is devoid of analysis. It inhabits exquisite tenderness. It does not tell us how to do it or how it is done. In the feminine space it creates, it shows how it happens. The developing mystery is contained in the ordinary tale of a young girl becoming a young woman within a family of friends who care for her.

Can you tell a book by its cover? With this book you can. Rumi's Daughter is a book which has a particular striking, evocative cover. In a red and golden landscape of barren terrain a female figure is silhouetted, her back is towards us. It is not clear if she is stopped or walking away. Is she striding out or still and silent in a muse? As we look at her, we look with her, desert hills and mountains stretch out before her and us, suggesting journey, solitude and, paradoxically, connection. As we look, we share a resonance, the heart wakes a little.

Geoff Johnson is a Core Process Psychotherapist, staff member of the Karuna Institute and a Sufi.

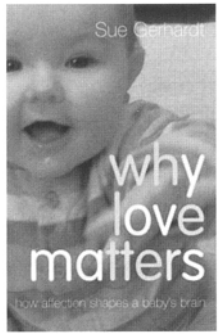
Further reading

Dr Alan Godlas www.arches.uga.edu/~goflas/Sufism.html

Why love matters: How affection affects a baby's brain

Sue Gerhardt

Brunner-Routledge 2004 Price: £9.99



In a way this is a brilliant book, and in a way it is a disappointment. It certainly brings a great deal of research in neuroscience to bear on the early development of a child, and explains it clearly and in detail. The author is admirably careful in her treatment of genetics as an explanation of psychological difficulties.

I don't quite know who it is aimed at. Sometimes it seems to be for mothers, but the amount of academic detail given would be too much for most mothers. Sometimes it seems to be for psychologists, but there is much more human detail than would be needed for academic purposes. Sometimes it seems to be aimed at therapists, but for them it seems more intimidating than helpful.

It is also not quite consistent in its point of view. Sometimes it seems to be stating rather simplistic cause-and-effect stories about how later problems come from early experiences, via brain patterns. At other times it seems much more sophisticated, using dialectical language and the deeper insights of people like Candice Pert to say that whatever may or may not happen in early experience, later experience can overcome it. But there is no awareness of the way in which consciousness studies, in the hands of people like Francisco Varela, has moved in the direction of paying more attention to Buddhism and meditation in their understanding of different states of consciousness, and new possibilities for change.

One unfortunate lapse, common to most books dealing with recent neuroscience, is that it ignores the work of people like Stanislav Grof and David Chamberlain on the importance of the birth experience. Why this should be is hard to say, because both of these people (and others too) are respectable researchers who have produced vast bodies of relevant data.

A dominant feature of this book is a heavy reliance on attachment theory. The author is quite attached to the Bowlby tradition, and mentions it often. My own view is that attachment theory is quite trivial, and leads people into rather simplistic cause-and-effect thinking. It is suspiciously similar to the 'OK Corral' ideas of Transactional Analysis, which are too neat by half.

The author is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in private practice, and she does come out at the end to say the familiar psychoanalytic message, that 'some degree of real healing can be achieved'. She also comes out with the familiar message that if people knew more about the effects of what they do to babies and children (particularly as affecting their brain patterns) they could better guide their efforts in child raising. But she has no conception of real transformation, and no appreciation (it seems to me) of the radical changes that can come about through the more humanistic forms of therapy.

So if you want to know about the more recent findings in neuroscience and how they relate to child raising, this is the book to have. It is a thorough and reliable book which will not lead you astray. But if you want to know more about the heights and depths of the experiences people can have in therapy, this is not the book. You will need to go to people like Alvin Mahrer for that kind of thing.

John Rowan