

Maureen Murdock Interview by Mary Davis

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Women are standing, lining the walls, spilling over into the hallway – all of us hungering to learn about ourselves, about the meaning of our life journeys as we gather to listen to Maureen Murdock's lecture, "The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness," at last year's Mythic Journeys' Conference in Atlanta. We are not disappointed; we hear an inspiring discussion of the ways our journeys as women, as heroines, are both important and different from men's journeys. Maureen Murdock is first of all, a very wise woman who articulates the issues facing us as individuals and as a culture. She is also a family therapist who was licensed in 1982, and she is an educational consultant. Murdock was Core Faculty and past Chair of the M.A. Counseling Psychology Program at Pacifica Graduate Institute, and she currently teaches in the Depth Psychology Program at Sonoma State University. In addition, Murdock is a photographer whose photographic art has been exhibited widely.

Murdock's published works include: *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*; *Fathers' Daughters: Breaking the Ties That Bind*; *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*; and *Spinning Inward: Using Guided Imagery with Children*. She also is the editor of *Monday Morning Memoirs: Women in the Second Half of Life*. In our recent discussion, Murdock mentions that she is currently writing a book about mental illness in the family. Its tentative title is *Hooked on Hope*, and it is about, as she notes, "the one frontier we haven't explored."

We begin by discussing her Mythic Journeys' lecture. When I arrived at her lecture, there were approximately 200 women in a basement room with a 100 person capacity. What I learn from Maureen is that the initial lecture room (from which they had just moved) had a 40 person capacity, and it was also in the basement. So, what does the basement have to do with the heroine's journey?

One of my questions to her is, “What are the differences in the heroine’s journey and the hero’s journey?” Murdock uses the Mythic Journeys experience to demonstrate. She says that the masculine journey is different from the feminine journey, and the heroine’s journey metaphorically does take place in the basement. “The feminine journey is about going down deep into soul, healing and reclaiming, while the masculine journey is up and out, to spirit.” She points out, however, that at Mythic Journeys the feminine journey was being discussed in the basement in a room too small, while the masculine journey was discussed upstairs in the hotel’s Grand Ballroom! Those of us who are a part of Mythic Journeys’ planning must pay attention so that we are not unconsciously relegating the feminine to the basement. As Murdock notes, “We’ve moved from the back of the bus!”

On page two of *The Heroine’s Journey*, Murdock discusses talking with Joseph Campbell in 1983 about how the woman’s journey relates to the journey of the hero. I question her about the impact of his response.

She answers, “I had worked with Joseph Campbell on and off for about three years when he came to California to lecture at the Human Relations Institute. They were wonderful workshops. I had worked with Jean Houston for years and she had integrated Joseph Campbell’s monomyth of the journey of the hero into her work on sacred journeys and sacred psychology, using the basic stages of: the separation from home, the trials, the return.

“I had also worked with that map in the 1980’s in nine month sessions with men and women. And the hero’s journey model did not address the deep wounding of the feminine for both men and women. Most women are ‘fathers’ daughters’ if not personally, then culturally. I saw in my therapy practice that women worked hard to make it in a man’s world

and then were often experiencing enormous spiritual aridity and deep wounding of their feminine nature.

“I met with Joe (Campbell) and showed him my map of the feminine journey. He said, ‘Women don’t need to make the journey, they are the place that everyone is trying to get to.’ His response shocked me. It is true that in the mythological tradition, the feminine is the place people may be aspiring to integrate, but what I was aware of was that most of the women I knew and worked with were disconnected from our feminine nature. Our task was to reclaim the feminine for ourselves.

“The impact on me of his response was definitely to pursue the writing of my book. My writing was informed by therapy with women and by my work with women’s groups. When *The Heroine’s Journey* was published in 1990, it deeply impacted both women and men. It has been published in seven languages.”

We continue to discuss the differences women and men experience in this journey. Murdock says that for all of us there is the separation from home, the initiation, enduring one’s own trials (of the mysteries of love and death), finding the boon, and the return trip home. “The hero’s journey is focused on the adventures: slaying the dragon, finding the boon, meeting the goddess. For the heroine, the first part of the journey is the separation from the feminine, because of the focus in our culture on the idealization of the masculine. The individual in a patriarchal culture is driven to seek control and power over themselves and others; still slaying the dragons, internally and externally, and finding the boon, more external focus. But for women, this doesn’t feed our nature. We ask, ‘What happened to my desire to write, to paint, to dance?’ And then, we experience the descent. So, there’s a split when we focus more on making it in the world, rather than on listening to our deep self.”

I share with Murdock that chapters 5 and 6, “Strong Women Can Say No” and “The Initiation and Descent to the Goddess” are especially powerful and moving for me. In Chapter 5, Murdock writes about outward success not being enough for women, the betrayals we feel within and by our patriarchal systems, and the feeling of being un-mothered. She tells again the story of Iphigenia’s betrayal by her father Agamemnon for the sake of his brother Menelaus and their pride and politics, as he ignores her mother, Clytemnestra when she pleads for Iphigenia’s life. She also speaks of the betrayal of women by the “the father religions.”

On page 83, she writes, “When the heroine says ‘no’ to the next heroic task, there is extreme discomfort.. When a woman stops doing, she must learn how to simply be. Being is not a luxury, it is a discipline. The heroine must listen carefully to her true inner voice. That means silencing the other voices anxious to tell her what to do. She must be willing to hold the tension until the new form emerges...”

Then in Chapter 6, Murdock retells the story of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate as well as the Sumerian story of Inanna and Ereshkigal, the ancient stories which describe, among other things, women’s descent into the underworld.

So, I ask her about the role of this descent to the underworld, of grief, loss and suffering in our lives, and about the transformation we can experience if we can give the process time and hold the tension. I ask her how we deal with the practical aspects of life (like walking the dog or earning a living) during that time of descent, and if she has helpful hints for us.

Murdock says, “The key is to view the descent as a sacred journey, instead of a depression to be medicated. The descent is a natural process of life. We don’t give time for grieving and loss, whether it is internal or external loss. An internal loss would be the realization that

I am not really living my own life, but someone else's, such as my father's. Then, there is a very deep grieving, with the questions, 'What have I lost? Who am I?'

"We have to give people emotional support during that time. However, it is important to note that there are some circumstances in which people do need medication to help them sustain their journey. The main thing about the descent is to give yourself permission to be there, to listen to the dreams, and then to follow the images. The experience of the descent is that it is timeless; you feel as if you are in a different culture, in a different landscape.

"Draw the images that come to you, write poetry, dance the images! One of my students built an extraordinary garden, creating a labyrinth. She honored the process in her own way. Others created amazing, or sometimes not amazing, art or music. It's about being in a state of ritual, in a sense, a sacred space. Listen to your inner knowings. For many women and men the descent is a period of voluntary isolation."

She continues, "When a person is going through a descent, it's not an easy time for friends and family. Regarding the practical, some women take less demanding jobs during this time. Then, at the next stage, women remember what they were like as little girls. What did they like to do as little girls? To play with clay? To dance? To take walks in nature?

"I am a member of the Women's Leadership Collaborative, and we meet three times a year. As we sit in a circle, I notice that out of 23 women present, 18 are knitting. There's a desire to reclaim the feminine arts like knitting, sewing, beading, making scrapbooks."

Murdock writes about her own dream about the "kitchen man" who guides her down to the bottom of the ocean where the Great Mother (with her multitudinous breasts like those of Diana of Ephesus) is present, impersonal, but very present and very available. I ask her how we may reclaim the Great Mother and use her presence to help us in our current world situation. Murdock notes that there is currently an intense interest in divine images of the

feminine. A recent San Francisco Chronicle article cited that more female figurines have been found in Turkey. There's a strong interest in the Black Madonna and a strong interest in pilgrimages to see these ancient images of the divine.

"There is such a longing for a divine image of the feminine, who is compassionate and present. I was struck by the Black Madonna in France at Rocamadour. She's a no – nonsense gal, she says listen to your heart, you have the wisdom within you! Part of this desire is to reclaim the wisdom, compassion, and the discernment of the sacred feminine."

We discuss the dark goddess Kali, who has been an important image for me and who has helped me with the integration of my anger. Murdock says that Kali helps us with discernment. In fact, Murdock ends *The Heroine's Journey* with "The Invocation to Kali" by May Sarton, in which Sarton asks Kali to help us be hopeful, "gardeners of the spirit," knowing that darkness is as important as light for flowering and for birth, remembering the importance of roots.

"Reclaiming images of the divine feminine really does help us reclaim the personal feminine. If we have spent our childhood looking at images of the divine as masculine, and with a feeling of the inferiority of the feminine, the demon of that inferiority is embedded in our culture. Remember that people who are trying to be conscious still are putting the feminine in the basement!

"The hero's journey is up and out– with a big splash– to the light, while the heroine's journey is down and in–into the body, into the metaphorical cave, to the Black Madonna. And the journey to recover the feminine is also true for lots of men, too. Forty per cent or so of the attendees at my lectures are men."

Then we shift to another topic: women's repeated experiences of not being heard, such as when a woman presents an idea which is not heard by a group until it is repeated by a

man. I recently read an article in which Murdock suggested strategies for dealing with this. She tells me, “Name it, if it happens to you in a meeting, but name it without an edge. Say, ‘Perhaps you did not hear me the first time’ or find a male ally in the meeting to back you up.”

“It is really important to locate your own power, to state it, to speak your truth. And we do need to name it. When women do not name their truth, they often go underground or they get angry, or they leave. Sometimes it’s appropriate to leave if the situation is toxic. We often stay too long. Ask yourself if the situation, the culture, can change, and if it can’t, then say, ‘I did the best I could,’ and move on where you can make a contribution.”

“In *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*,” I ask, “You write about the ways we choose our memories to fit the identities we have constructed. You also weave myth into your writing. Will you discuss memory, memoir, and myth?”

Murdock answers, “Yes, the Saturday workshop in Atlanta will be about memoir. I have been teaching mythology for seven years. I have been looking at the different domains of myth: Who am I? What’s my tribe? What is my journey? What is my purpose? The more I’ve read and taught myth, the more I see an overlap between memoir and myth. Writing memoir is writing a slice of life. It is mining of your life for meaning. When I was writing *Unreliable Truth*, I was looking for the similarities between myth and memoir.

“The first section of *Unreliable Truth* is about memory and identity. I realized, as I watched my mother’s struggle with Alzheimer’s that we can’t separate memory and identity. We construct our identity through what we remember. I am not saying that we invent our identity.

“Memoir gives us the opportunity to revisit times in our lives and find new meaning. When we write it down, we have to ask, did it really happen that way? It is about finding one’s

emotional truth. And now, in the light of that emotional truth, how do I live my life? How do I make my choices? So, it is more complex than writing what happened. As a depth psychologist, I use memoir to ask people to reflect about their experiences.”

And then, as we approach the end of the hour we have allocated for our discussion, I ask for guidance for the future, as individuals and collectively, to break through the hardened, concretized ideas currently prevailing in our culture; for her guidance to help heal our world. Murdock answers, “The first thought that comes to my mind is that we need a new Creation myth, one that is more like the Haida myth of Raven walking on the beach and finding people struggling to get out of a shell and opening the shell to give them life. It feels like we are in a period of great change, of transformation where masculine and feminine have to work together as equals.”

We end our discussion, knowing that this vision of our need for a new Creation myth is the beginning of the next discussion.

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