

Structuring our World Through Stories

Part III : The Strong Feminine

Part B : Assertiveness, continued

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An Overview

My research started because of my concern for the worldwide disintegration of cohesive societies. I find many of the changes in today's world so disturbing that I wanted to discover their cause and try to discern if there were indications of an emergence of a new, life-enhancing world order. This topic lead me to research about masculine and feminine energy forces and how they operate. That in turn took me to the arena of the re-appearance of Feminine Consciousness, which is being witnesses today in many areas of our psyches, and therefore, hopefully, eventually in our social values and behavior as well.

After studying the background of Feminine Consciousness, I have turned my attention to how it has and is appearing in folk stories. Many old tales are being retold from a feminine perspective with values of cooperation instead of competition, for example. This is such a fascinating study that I see myself pursuing this topic for many years to come.

Key Concepts

1. The feminine and masculine aspects of the psyche, called *amima* and *animus* respectively.
2. Feminine values: compassion, patience, intuition
3. Masculine values (Western): discriminating consciousness, logical stance
4. Influence of the feminine dimension of consciousness to awaken the masculine psyche
4. Transformation within the psyche, both feminine and masculine
5. Self-respect and self-worth, inner strength and security
6. Relationship with other as well as a separate identity

B : Assertiveness, continued

Charcoal Maker Chojya

In the previous part of this series (Thomas 2000) we discussed the re-emergence of the feminine in two stories: *Lady Ragnall* and *Tatterhood*. In those tales, the female protagonists, despite society's standard to do otherwise, kept an inner strength that they were able to bring out into the world, thus redeeming both themselves and those around them, especially the one closest to them, their male partner.

This idea of a woman's taking charge of her life first, and then assisting her mate in his, thus enabling him to become master of his own life, can be found in stories all over the world. Let us look at two examples, both from Japan. One is a fairy tale called *The Charcoal Maker Chojya* from Kagoshima Prefecture, and the other is *Kitchen*, a modern novellette by Banana Yoshimoto. The first tale is taken from Hayao Kawai's book, *The Japanese Psyche* (Kawai 1996, 224-27).

There were two fishermen who were friends. Both of their wives were pregnant. One day they were on the beach and one of them, East Choya, fell asleep. His companion, West Choya, stayed awake, however, and saw a wonderful vision. The God of the Dragon Palace appeared and bestowed ranks upon the two unborn children. East Choya's child would be a girl and was ranked higher than West Choya's child, a boy.

Of course, West Choya was upset, so he cleverly arranged for the marriage of the two children when they became of age. So, when they both reached 18, they were married.

The girl had been well raised. She would make offerings of barley to her ancestors, and one day she offered some to her spouse. Her husband was not as refined as she and yelled at her for not giving him rice. He kicked over the table, food and all. His wife saw all this calmly and said, "I will not live under the same roof with you" and with that she picked up her small table and bowl and left.

This young woman had discerning ears and heard the storehouse deities speak of the charcoal maker Goro, who, they said, was hardworking, good hearted and handsome. Upon hearing that, the woman set off to find him. And find him she did. He lived in a very humble hut and at first refused to let her stay there because he felt it was not good enough for her. She insisted, however, saying she was very tired and it was night. So he let her in. Then he offered her prepared rice tea. She brought out her barley and shared it with him. Then she asked him to marry her! Goro was taken aback and refused, but she insisted. So he finally agreed.

The next day this young wife wanted to know about her husband's charcoal making, and asked him to show her one of his kilns. He complied and was amazed to find gold in each one of them. The couple soon became very rich.

At this point in the story, it is easy to see the confidence and strength the woman possessed. She was not arrogant, however. Every day she offered food to her family ancestors. That gesture showed her humility and her wisdom concerning the forces of the

cosmos. By honoring her ancestors and by acting in a dignified way, she recognized that she was part of a much larger process. The world did not begin nor end with her. She was merely a link in the chain of life. Her first husband, on the other hand, was arrogant and self-centered. He wanted the best for himself and was too selfish to recognize the care his wife had made in preparing special food for him. He kicked her efforts away.

The beauty in this story is that the woman had enough self-respect that she could stand-up to such a boorish husband. She did not have to follow social convention and stay with him, making herself be subservient to and surrounded by behavior and development lower than hers. Knowing her own worth and having the strength of character to act upon it, she walked out. The only things she took were what her husband had rejected — the table and the bowl.

The woman could attune to voices, could hear spirits speaking. In this story, they are outer (storehouse deities), but they were symbolic of her ability to listen to inner wisdom. That inward attunement is considered a feminine trait because it is a far cry from the objective, logical stance of the Western masculine energy and value system. The storehouse is the place of food, a dark, cool chamber. Again, both images — food and chamber — are metaphors for what is nurturing and protective, for the feminine. In other words, the woman in our story was consciously connected to her feminine self. And equally as importantly, she acted on her inner awareness. She unhesitatingly followed the suggestion of the storehouse deities, her inner voice, to find a good mate suitable for her.

Outwardly, a charcoal maker was far below her station. But the woman lived on a deeper level than social status. She totally trusted her inner voice. Only a person fully grounded in the feminine could do that. And she saw for herself his humility: his awareness of his poverty and not wanting to bring her into it. She also experienced his generosity: offering her tea and a place to stay. In asking him to marry her, she was opening herself up to the dimension of her own inner male, her animus, that was good and kind, but not yet developed.

The charcoal maker had never discovered the gold in the kilns he had used every day. The woman, sensing the potential within the male, opened his eyes to his own true value. Prior to her vision, he had only worked in black, filthy soot. He had never redeemed it or himself. With her outlook, with her alchemy, the coal entered the furnace, gave off tremendous heat, and became gold.

In this story, it took a woman to enable a man to do this. And in doing that for him, she herself was lifted to a higher level, too. They both became exceedingly rich: not separately, or competitively, not with belittling or fault-finding, but rather together. The woman looked

in a new way and discovered what the man already possessed (or was) but had never seen, so had never utilized. Here the woman is the savior. But what about the first husband? What happened to him? Our story continues.

The fisherman's son fell onto hard times and became so poor he was reduced to becoming a peddler, a wanderer selling whatever meager goods he had. As fate would have it, one day he arrived at Goro's house. His ex-wife recognized him. She was filled with compassion for him, so bought many things from him and paid double their worth. Now her first husband had not changed inwardly at all, despite his many sufferings. Instead of feeling grateful to her, he thought her a fool. He was also greedy, so one day he took an enormous basket to her, expecting to become rich by selling it to her.

The wife knew her former husband well, and rather than letting him get by with his attitude and behaviour, she did as she had done before. She stood up to him, but this time in a very different way. Instead of walking out on him, taking what he had rejected, this time, without a word, she offered back to him the table and bowl he had so violently and rudely pushed away. The man recognized them and was so filled with shame that he bit his tongue off and bled to death. The woman buried him under the storehouse. And every May she offered him cooked barley to feed his hungry soul. In return, she asked him not to complain and to protect her storehouse from mice and other intrusive creatures.

This second half of the story also reveals the wisdom and kindness of the woman and the fullness of life that comes from living feminine values of compassion, caring and helping others to manifest their very best. Her first husband, whom she had rejected after he rejected her, came back into her life. It is a psychological truth that what we walk away from will return to us so that we can have another chance to incorporate that aspect of ourselves into our being instead of cutting ourselves off from it. The first husband, the part of herself the woman had rejected, had not developed and matured at all while separated from her. The male psyche needs relationships to the feminine in order to become less egotistical and more refined.

The woman accepted him back into her life, not to seek revenge, not to maintain separation by showing cruelty to him, but rather out of compassion for him. She gave him double what his goods were worth. Compassion does indeed pour out in abundance, without seeking anything in return.

Even when her former spouse revealed his greedy side, she did not attack him. All she did was to return him to himself. She quietly gave him back his shadow (the table and bowl)

refusing to carry it for him any longer. In mirroring his selfishness to him, not with unkindness, she gave him the greatest wealth of all. She allowed him the privilege of transformation.

Unable to endure what he had done, out of shame he bit off his own tongue. He felt shame from being seen as he was. Without the mask, he chose not to live. By biting out his own tongue, he severed himself from language and from life. He had ill-used both and he knew it; but was not at a level of maturity where he could face up to his shortcomings and transform them. He could only do that in death AND with the woman's direction. She continued to feed him after death, but only the food he had rejected in life (barley), and only sparingly (once a year). She also directed him to protect the storehouse, the feminine potential for nurturance. He could do that only in dying to his old separatist, selfish mind-set and being reborn as a storehouse deity, a protector of what he had previously abused.

So, in this story, a strong, wise, compassionate and humble woman transformed two men by revealing their true potential to themselves. She also drew out the best in both men, thus enabling them to develop their positive sides and to make the world better in the process. The feminine dimension that this story expresses needs to be acknowledged and developed in today's world. Power that awakens and enhances others enables everyone to become inwardly rich and outwardly creative, thus transforming the world in a way where everyone benefits.

B : Assertiveness, continued

Kitchen

The second story, *Kitchen*, carries a similar theme, but in this modern tale the female protagonist is neither as self-confident nor as inwardly stable as the charcoal maker's wife. In *Kitchen*, the central character, Mikage Sakurai herself undergoes a great deal of transformation, from being an insecure child overwhelmed by loss to a strong, secure woman able to face the uncertain future bravely. The story begins with her describing her love and need of kitchens.

The place I like best in this world is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no matter what kind, if it's a kitchen, if it's a place where they make food, it's fine with me. Ideally it should be well broken in. Lots of tea towels, dry and immaculate. White tile catching the light (ting! ting!).

I love even incredibly dirty kitchens to distraction — vegetable droppings all over the floor, so dirty your slippers turn black on the bottom. Strangely, it's better

if this kind of kitchen is large. I lean up against the silver door of a towering, giant refrigerator stocked with enough food to go through a winter. When I raise my eyes from the oil-splattered gas burner and the rusty kitchen knife, outside the window stars are glittering, lonely.

Now only the kitchen and I are left. It's just a little nicer than being all alone.
(Yoshimoto 1998, 3-4)

Mikage was orphaned as a child and raised by her grandmother, who, as the story opens, had just died leaving Mikage all alone. She found comfort in the kitchen, and a messy one at that. Kitchens can, of course, be viewed as symbolic of the feminine. They are places of process, of transformation, of nurturance. They may be hidden in the back of a house, but are often the warmth and heart-center of the place. The tucked-away feminine is the life-giver of the psyche. She feeds us emotionally, mentally, spiritually. Yet, here the kitchen is a filthy mess. The feminine life force has taken over without being balanced by the clarity of orderliness of a discriminating (masculine) mind. In a sense, one could say that Mikage is becoming overwhelmed by her feeling nature, unable to step outside her own inner chaos and grief long enough to get her life in order.

As the story unfolds, Mikage is rescued from her pool of grief by a gentle boy named Yuichi Tanaka, who used to work in her grandmother's flower shop. He takes her to his home, where his mother, Eriko, welcomes her warmly. She and Eriko become friends and only later does Mikage learn that she is really Yuichi's father after a sex change operation. Surely sexual roles are not clearly delineated in this story. The psyche is confused.

Eventually Eriko dies, Yuichi gets another girlfriend (temporarily) and Mikage goes to cooking school, becoming the assistant to a teacher there. However, both Mikage and Yuichi are very lost without the guidance of their father/mother Eriko and tumble into despair. They have parallel journeys, but go them alone.

Yuichi and I are climbing a narrow ladder in the jet-black gloom. Together we peer into the cauldron of hell. We stare into the bubbling red sea of fire, and the air hitting our faces is so hot it makes us reel. Even though we're standing side-by-side, even though we're closer to each other than to anyone else in the world, even though we're friends forever, we don't join hands. (Yoshimoto 1998, 66)

The psyche is split. The masculine and feminine are too weak to pull themselves together and too overwhelmed by the loss of outer security (a male/female in one body) to even reach over to one another. At this point there is no bridge linking the masculine and feminine in a very weak psyche.

The story weaves in and out of the two young people's lives. Yuichi becomes consumed by his loss of direction, but Mikage continues on her route as an assistant chef, albeit without much purpose. One night, however, while in a distant city, something within her comes into sharp focus and she knows she has to reach out to Yuichi, to take him food, in order to save them both. With much difficulty, she finds Yuichi and confronts him with himself, with his fears and insecurities, with his inclination to give up all hope. And like the charcoal maker's wife, she proposes to him.

You see, Yuichi, how much I don't want to love you. We've been very lonely, but we had it easy. Because death is so heavy — we, too young to know about it, couldn't handle it. After this you and I may end up seeing nothing but suffering, difficulty, and ugliness, but if only you'll agree to it, I want for us to go on to more difficult places, happier places, whatever comes, together...

So again, it was the maturing feminine that went over to the masculine, pulling him out of darkness, out of being overwhelmed by affect and by the unconscious. Unlike the solid spouse of the charcoal maker, Mikage remains unsure of the future, but she did gain inner strength and security within herself — through her cooking and her ability to feed others, through the feminine nature. She grew to know life better and to feel able to cope. "In the biting air I told myself, there will be so much pleasure, so much suffering. With or without Yuichi" (Ibid., 104). Since she had incorporated her inner masculine, she could both reach over to Yuichi and also live without him. Her developed animus allowed both relationship and a separate identity. And finally she was able to say:

As I grow older, much older, I will experience many things, and I will hit rock bottom again and again. Again and again I will suffer; again and again I will get back on my feet. I will not be defeated. I won't let my spirit be destroyed. (Ibid., 42)

When the strong feminine is manifested and is aware of herself, both she and the masculine are redeemed.

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