

Structuring Our World Through Stories

Part IV : Salvation Through the Feminine

Anne G. B. Thomas

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 led 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 witnessed 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 Words

Cooperation Feminine Consciousness Forgiveness Inclusion Intuition
Reconciliation Salvation Service to others Transformation

Structuring Our World Through Stories

Part IV : Salvation Through the Feminine

Salvation can be not only of oneself, but of others also. In the stories we have seen so far, salvation has been in terms of saving the Feminine Consciousness within each of us. It has meant allowing each person, whether male or female, the right to choose for his/her own life. It has also entailed listening to deep, repressed/suppressed, undeveloped parts of our psyche, hearing their wisdom, and bringing them forth into the light of day.

This theme continues, but in this section it will extend beyond the work of redeeming the masculine and feminine within the personal psyche to include work done in the world at large. We will look at two stories: *The Holy Man* and *The Lone Pink Fish*, and a new version of Aesop's *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.

The Holy Man

The Holy Man, by Susan Trott, was a national best seller and that in itself reflects a growing hunger in the West for a more "feminine" value system. In this delightful tale, a holy man lived on top of a mountain and was visited every summer by many pilgrims. Since

each person was seen individually, the line for an audience with The Holy Man became longer and longer as the days and months passed. Everyone who came had a personal story and motivation. Some came out of curiosity, others out of arrogance, some out of illness, others out of gratitude. Of course, while waiting in the long queue, the hopefuls would strike up many conversations, develop friendships, end feuds, and have a chance to reflect on themselves. It was a transformative time.

In fact, each person in the queue seemed to subtly and magically change for the better, partly from the relationships developed with fellow seekers, partly from being in the wonders of nature for an extended period of time, and partly from anticipating seeing The Holy Man. Indeed, some people waited all summer to see him, but never reached the top of the summit. Even so, their time was not wasted.

One man who was there because of his anger was soothed by gentle birds and felt happy and grateful for the first time in years. A drunkard, who kept running back to town for a drink and consequently lost his place in line eventually settled into friendships with those near him, and offered to buy them small necessities on his runs into the village. From all his exercise, he soon became healthy and strong and no longer needed a drink. When he met The Holy Man, he fell on his knees in gratitude. But the work of transformation had occurred from within the man himself.

Yet The Holy Man himself was also a healer and full of valuable words. To a man grieving over his recently deceased spouse, he said, “Only you are yours. Not your possessions, not your children, not your wife. You will have to give them all back. You do not get to keep any of them” (Trott 1995, 30).

And he could also be very strict. With a grandmother, Liu, who was sad because her grandchildren did not send her thank-you notes, he replied:

“You are suffering from an advanced case of egotism ... I can tell you right now that if they each wrote you ten pages a week you would not be satisfied, would still feel wronged and unappreciated and probably want twenty pages! How can those children love you until you are able to love them? Selflessly. Unconditionally. Goodbye.” (Ibid., 88)

The list of pilgrims went on and on: an impatient woman, rivals, a jealous man, a persecuted woman, a killer, a covetous person. There were several beautiful messages throughout the book, however, all of them related to feminine values. First, the “hero” of the book was not a person most of us would recognize as a hero. He was not aggressive, nor egotistical, nor out seeking adventures. He had no enemy to attack or kill off. Rather, he

was a man so spiritually evolved and yet so practical and down to earth that people sought him out.

Second, this is a story of transformation. In so many modern “hero” tales, the main character never basically changes. He stays the primitive expression of the unreflecting masculine throughout. In this book, however, everyone eventually changes for the better, including The Holy Man himself. When a famous person tried to steal his robes, for example, The Holy Man's sense of ownership got the best of him and he fought diligently to keep his clothes on! Later he reflected on his behaviour and realized he could have acted differently. What was he still holding on to? Where was his true identity?

Third, it is a story of people being themselves and helping each other to transform their negative traits into something more positive. Everyone had the same goal — meeting The Holy Man — but the way to reach him was what really mattered. In fact, to everyone's surprise, each person had no more than a few minutes with the great and gentle man. He opened the door of his hut to each one, walked with them through the hermitage and bowed to them at the back door. That was it. That was the extent of the visit.

The feminine message here is that the process of life itself is what transforms us, not someone else, not even a goal we set in the distant future. Our everyday dealings, our values as we live moment-by-moment, the way we treat others, if and how we reflect upon ourselves, all come together to create who we are and who we become.

At the end of the book, The Holy Man realized he was old and felt ready to pass on his role. He was not identified by his work or by his fame. His aging body could no longer carry on the tremendous task he had set for himself. Yet, he also knew the work of providing a situation, a condition, a safe place where people could transform themselves for the better had to go on. With each pilgrim he sought a replacement, and finally met her. The next Holy Person would be carried on by a young, lively, red-haired nurse. A healer. The symbolism speaks for itself.

... he was distracted by yet another arrival, a slight figure who appeared at the top of the trail and struggled across the yard, buffeted by the wind. She came toward him through the snow, ran the last few steps, and flung herself into his arms. It was Anna. It was the one. (Trott, 173)

The unfolding of the Feminine Consciousness into the salvation of others continues with the next story: *The Lone Pink Fish*.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist priest in exile in France, bridges the worlds

of East and West. He is a great storyteller and has read many folk tales and fairy tales in his own tradition as well as in that of the Occidental. He remarked that he felt concern in Western stories about the overemphasis on the dichotomy between good and evil. He felt that this ethic of the good conquering the bad was incomplete, because it left out the Feminine Principle. Therefore, in stories he has written or rewritten, he has added themes of understanding and reconciliation, of cooperation and healing (Thich Nhat Hanh 1993, vii-viii). It is hoped that this is a direction we, as individuals and the societies in which we live, will follow.

A modern story about a helpful girl is *The Lone Pink Fish*. This tale, which is part of *The Stone Boys and Other Stories* (1996), is a composite of actual events that Thich Nhat Hanh witnessed during the Vietnam War. During that time, he worked to rescue boat people, whose suffering was so intense that he felt he should share it so that people might wake up to the horrors of war (both outer and inner) and work to prevent them. These events are about rape and murder, robbery and beatings, and drownings and cruelty beyond our capacity to imagine. Yet, they all actually happened (and continue to this day). As horrible as those occurrences were, life did not end with them, as we shall see.

Dao is a Vietnamese girl who leaves Vietnam with her fiancé, Dat, and 42 other refugees. As they passed Thailand, pirates swooped down upon them, stole all they had and raped all the women, despite the Vietnamese men's efforts to protect them.

Dao was raped three times and when she violently tried to defend herself, she was thrown overboard. Surprisingly, she did not drown, but was rescued by a pink fish, which took her to a safe, deserted island. Dao mourned her fate, wept from concern over her fiancé, and collapsed into a deep sleep. She was awakened by a young girl, who seemed to know the island well. Her name was Hong and she showed Dao how to survive on the island. Even though Hong was young, she was wise and kind. She had a depth of character well beyond most people her age.

Hong, too, had been a boat person and had experienced appalling hardship and abuse. She had been pushed overboard, but instead of drowning, she had been transformed into a pink fish. Since that time, her self-chosen mission has been to help other people. Whenever she sees a sinking refugee boat, she tries to save one person on it — usually a child.

That has

become her work in the world — saving others. She is both a young girl and a pink fish, filled with incredible sorrow and love, which manifests as compassion and active involvement in the world. (Thich Nhat Hanh 1996, 119-158).

In this story, Hong, and later Dao, incorporated and acted upon truly feminine values: forgiveness, not revenge; helpfulness, not despair. As Hong said, “Many people live not for pleasure, but for responsibility and love. Living for responsibility and love can be a source of great happiness. . .” (Ibid., 125).

She also had the ability to look more deeply at actual events rather than to merely react superficially. In her wisdom, she was able to instill not only hope in Dao, but also an awareness that her inner healing was her own responsibility. Blame and self-pity would get her nowhere.

You endured one part of our people's great sufferings. Who among us has not been wounded? Who among us has been able to keep our body and spirit intact? In my eyes, you are still pure and chaste, Dao. The pirates attacked you and forced themselves upon you, but they could not really take anything from you. You never consented to give your body to them. You bear no blame. Your wounds will heal one day, like the wounds of someone who has survived a shark attack. It is essential that you not allow your wounds to become infected with poison. Wounds can poison your spirit as well as your body. . . no doctor can heal the wounds of your spirit. That is up to you. (Ibid., 126)

So, Dao's first task was to address her own wounds — physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. And as she worked on herself, she could incorporate service to others. Part of her healing entailed forgiveness. True service has to go hand-in-hand with a pure heart, washed clean by forgiving both those who have wronged us, and ourselves for having wronged others.

I pray,
I pray that those who hurt me
Will find kindness in their hearts.
I pray,
I pray for their happiness.
— Yoh (1996, 10)

If a woman is attacked, it is helpful for her to pray for the person who did the injustice. Pray for his soul and that some day he will be enlightened and understand his error.

— Ni (1991, 74)

So, this lone pink fish is carrying on the task of redeeming matter, of finding a spiritual perspective in the midst of worldly suffering. She is deeply involved in the nitty-gritty of

life, yet at the same time aware of and open to the reality that life goes on and things do change. She has chosen to work with the life force to bring about change in a positive direction.

What is the most important thing for people?

The heart!

A soft heart, a kind heart!

...

I found out!

I found out who I am and why I was born.

I found out what I should do.

I do not live for myself.

I am here for all others,

For the whole universe.

— Yoh (1996, 34)

Of course, history is replete with actual people who have devoted their lives to helping others. In Buddhism, such people are called Bodhisattvas; in Christianity, co-creators with God, or saints. Two examples in recent times that we all know are Mother Theresa and Lady Diana, who ironically died within days of each other. Mother Theresa devoted her life to expressing love and assistance. She was anchored in her Christian belief, which enabled her to steadfastly work towards her ideals. Most of us are not so saintly, however, so we can respond to the extraordinary life and work of Mother Theresa with awe and respect, but also with a sense of impossibility for oneself to do likewise.

Lady Diana was much more accessible to most of us. Although she started out in the public eye as a fairy tale princess made manifest, she was very human. She was beautiful, gracious and fashion conscious. For her wedding, she wore a fluffy white dress in which to literally marry a prince. As we all know, however, as the years went by, she became more approachable because of her humanness. She had been anorexic, supposedly had attempted suicide, was divorced and had had several lovers. In her personal life, she seemed very unstable, yet despite that (or because of it), she could open her heart to the suffering of others and work to make their lives more hopeful. A lone pink fish, she brought the fairy tale world right down to reality.

A third example of this “salvation” by means of the Feminine Consciousness occurred by surprise in one of my classes. My students were to give a dramatic presentation of Aesop's fable of *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. In the original tale, as we all know, the ants work very hard all summer in preparation for the long winter ahead. The grasshopper, however, made fun of their diligence and played during that hot season. When winter came,

the ants, of course, were snug in their cozy home, while the grasshopper was desperately cold. He called to the ants for help, but they refused him. The moral is that, on the one hand, hard work is necessary and pays off, and on the other that laziness is reprehensible and should be condemned.

My students worked on their own to dramatize this ancient story, but they decided to make several changes to reflect their own values. It should be added that these students were pupils at a women's junior college in northern Japan. Considering that context, their rewriting of the story may not have been all that surprising. Being Asian, their psychic structure differed from that of Occidentals. In the West, the psyche seems to be split, almost separated into two parts. So, the task of the Western person is to form a link, a bridge between the split-off parts, the conscious and unconscious, the outer and inner self and other (von Franz 1997b: 261-62). That is the hero's task. And it could be called THE task of the Western psyche: to work towards individuation.

In Asia, however, the split in the psyche is not so great. The "separation" between "opposites" is less marked and more fluid. An example is given by both Joseph Campbell (Campbell and Moyers 1988: 149-50) and Hayao Kawai (1995b: 100-101) about the meaning of the dragon. In both cultures the dragon can be viewed as part of the unconscious contents. But in the East and in the West it is viewed entirely differently. In the West, the main character has the task of slaying the dragon in order to become a hero and a king. He faces many challenges, the greatest of which is when he meets the dragon. A battle of apocalyptic proportions ensues; the hero suffers many wounds before becoming victorious. The dragon dies and the world cheers the new king and the new order, replete with a beautiful princess won at the price of the dragon monster.

In Japan, however, the dragon is not such a fierce and destructive beast. He is not such a threat to the individual ego of the hero in the making. Rather, he himself is a king who lives in a palace under the sea and who has a very beautiful daughter. In the Asian tales, a human man somehow finds his way to the abode of the dragon, marries the princess and enjoys the riches and pleasures of the abundant life in the depths of the ocean (the unconscious matrix). Despite his pleasant life under the sea, however, after awhile he misses his parents, so with tears on the part of both him and his wife, he returns to fulfill his filial duties to them. But he knows he is welcome to return any time.

Here, of course, the dragon king is not a threat. It is big and at first a bit frightening, but it soon shows its warm, hospitable side. The unconscious is not a split off, overwhelming, life-threatening terror, as it is portrayed in the West. Rather, it is easily accessible, helpful, life affirming, and generous. It is not an entity to fear. As Kawai said,

It is rather threatening for a Japanese to encounter the Western ego, which is developed as an independent entity, as if utterly distinct from all that is not “I” (i.e. everything else). The Japanese presuppose a connection — with other, with all else, in the sense of oneness. They develop the ego without severing that tie. (1995: 21)

Seeing the Asian psychic structure, in that light, let us look at the story my students devised. The first half of the story paralleled that of the original. All summer the ants worked very hard as a team. Being Japanese ants, the teamwork was paramount. In fact, my students stressed the power of team co-operation, of each member fulfilling her part to the very best of her abilities. The grasshoppers laughed, played, and sang, first as they did in the Aesop tale. However, in my students' version, when the grasshoppers knocked on the door of the ants' home asking for help, at first the ants were annoyed, but then they said:

“Oh, you need help. Please wait a minute. We need to talk among ourselves about what to do”. They then had a group discussion and came up with the following solution.

“You must be very cold outside. Please come in. You did not prepare food for your winter months, but you did play such nice music for us while we worked. That made our job much easier for us. We saved more food than we ourselves will need, so we will be happy to share it with you. Please come live with us for the winter. To pay for your room and food, please play for us on your violin and teach us how to dance.”

This new version of the Aesop story has many elements that could be seen as Feminine. First, everyone's contribution was appreciated and rewarded. The ants worked as a team towards a specific goal. The grasshopper sang and played, but was also rewarded for those talents. Her strengths were not condemned, but rather appreciated. Second, the grasshopper did not fit into the collective, but rather expressed her uniqueness. One of the traits of a feminine way of relating to life is the appreciation of celebration of diversity. And, in the end, both the individual grasshopper and the collective benefited. The grasshopper received basics for survival. She could eat. And the ants could expand their single-minded focus and learn to dance.

Third, the grasshopper was not condemned, not belittled, not “forced to learn her lesson,” not ostracized. She was welcomed into the group, nurtured, and encouraged to teach others about her wonderful, joyous way of life.

Of course, it could be argued that my students' story reflects a naïve outlook on life which whitewashes over unpleasantness and conflict, or that it overlooks the genuine

menace of certain aspects of the psyche, which should be guarded against if a strong, healthy ego is to develop and survive. However, considering the theme of this series of research papers — the Feminine Consciousness - the above interpretation of this new version, which promotes “feminine” ways of relating, such as reconsidering one's initial negative reactions; seeking ways to enhance everyone's talents; and making efforts toward inclusion not exclusion; is where we should focus our attention and efforts, while not neglecting or demeaning other ways of structure one's values.

To conclude, just as the Holy Man embraced his female succession, as Hong's work continues forever, and as we learn, like the ants, to be open to inclusion of differences, so we are being invited to join the ongoing process of the evolution of consciousness. At this point in our development, part of that means opening up to, listening to, and following the Feminine Principle. This we must do within our own selves, and yet we must also move outward to practice it in the world at large. We should never go back to where we have been: neither back to matriarchy, where women were dominant and where our ego consciousness was not yet differentiated from others or from the unconscious, nor can we stay where we are now, in the overdeveloped, separate, domineering split-off ego consciousness of patriarchy. Rather, we must move forward and learn to blend assertiveness and compassion, a strong sense of self and of relationship, logic and intuition, ideals and the demands of daily life, achievement and process. In other words, we must learn to live the dialogue of the masculine and the feminine, working together as equals.

References

- Aesop's Fables. 1988. Tokyo. Kodansha International.
- Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. 1988. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1976. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen XVII, 2d. ed. rev. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. 1996. *The Stone Boys and Other Stories*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Kawai, Hayao. 1995a. *Dreams, Myths and Fairy Tales in Japan*. Einsiedeln, Switzerland:
- . 1995b. *The Japanese Psyche*. Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications.
- . 1996 *Buddhism and the Art of Psychotherapy*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press.
- Ni, Hua-Ching. 1991. *Harmony: The Art of Life*. Los Angeles: College of Tao and Traditional Chinese Healing.
- Trott, Susan. 1995. *The Holy Man*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Yoh, Shomei. 1996. *Little Buddha*. Tokyo: Kosei Shupansha.

