

## Menopause, a fairytale?

By Segolene Ferrari

Recently I have found several women amongst my friends and students experience some difficulties going through their menopausal transition. Besides sometimes distressing physical symptoms, it is quite common for women to experience some difficulty on the emotional, mental and even spiritual levels.

As a woman transitions into the latter part of her life, she is leaving behind what her life has been up until now, and what that represents to her. As she loses her fertility, she is leaving behind the possibility of having children. This in itself can be hard to bear for some and a period of grieving may ensue. Also, a woman's body goes through major changes at that time in her life, which often affects her weight, skin, muscle tone, energy levels and looks. Overall, the body image a woman has of herself can transform dramatically.

As per our sense of identity, we all have different elements of ourselves that we take for granted as part of our sense of self, or self-concept. If your fertility, your slim body, youthful looks or your monthly moon blood cycles have been part of your sense of self, then menopause can bring about a 'small death' or a sense of disintegration of who you thought yourself to be. And many women really struggle with that, and with finding their sense of who they are at that crucial time. The difficulties experienced by many here is actually a great gift, because it means that a woman is now ready to let go of superficial identifications and placing her self-esteem in the way she looks, or in her being needed by another person (as in motherhood). The woman is now faced with herself alone, and who she really is underneath the surface, and she has to learn to consciously let go of attachments to previous illusions and inauthentic identity props. Some women are quite oblivious to the deep impact and meaning that this menopause transition can have on their life. Some even see it as a relief to 'not have to bleed again'. But if you go through this change consciously, opening yourself up to the opportunity to let go and access more of your true self, and the inner wisdom that comes with it, then you can really grow into your self, be more sovereign and true, and experience an inner peace and self-respect that few experience. Of course, this journey demands honesty and courage.

Another dimension, which can contribute to difficulty and judgment around menopause is the fact that older women have been devalued in our society. The sacredness of this rite of passage, woman letting go of self-illusions and of the need to be needed by others, and instead going within to access her wisdom, has been put down and discouraged. Menopause, like many important feminine life transitions, such as menarche and birth, has been turned into a disease or medical routine exercise at best. The power and wisdom of women has been repeatedly put down and stolen by patriarchal cultures, for the subjugation and dependency of the feminine population. The devaluing of older women is just another symptom of that. To reclaim the beauty, strength and wisdom of older women is part of reclaiming the sacredness and value of the feminine in our societies.

Now if we look at this archetypally, feminine work/spirituality uses three common Goddess archetypes to qualify the 3 main phases in a woman's life. These archetypes are:

- **The Maiden/Wild Virgin Huntress:** corresponding to girlhood and the young years of her adult life. This phase is characterised by innocence, purity, but also being free of rules and still wildly exploring and discovering both the world and herself. The maiden does not yet know who she is, she is very much learning and growing and focused on herself.
- **The Mother/Matriarch:** brings in a time in her life when a woman begins to extend outside of herself to give birth to, nurture and take responsibility for someone or something else. You do not have to be literally a mother to experience some of this archetype. You can give birth to a project, a business, nurture and look after clients or students...etc. This role is very relationship-oriented.
- **The Wise Woman/Crone:** This is the phase that a woman moves into at the time of menopause. This is about letting go of the struggles of a busy life and the illusions of getting caught up in appearances. This is the time when a woman can draw on her life experience to let go, heal and learn all she needs. To go within and explore the realms of the unconscious make her even wiser and more powerful. She can use this in a loving way, using her experience of the mother to assist others, or she can become a wicked old witch. She can stay connected with her inner Maiden, and explore new realms within herself, as she keeps going deeper.



Everybody knows the story of 'Snow White'. This is actually an old European tale (a teaching tale?), which the Grimm brothers used for their collection of fairy tales. Archetypally, this is a tale rich in symbolism and lessons about the denial of the time of passage into crone-hood/wise woman. There are huge amounts of symbols and hidden meanings in this tale, so we will keep to exploring the main ones that are relevant to our theme here:

The Story outline:

The Queen, who is the witch, is jealous of her new young daughter in law: Snow White. The Queen wants to be the most beautiful, as she was in the past, and cannot bear that Snow White has now become the 'fairest of them all', as her mirror reveals every time she asks. The Queen attempts to get rid of Snow White by asking a huntsman to kill her, but as he is unable to do it, he instead chooses to let her escape and run in the woods. The young princess is taken in by 7 dwarves who help her and love her.

In an attempt to be again the most beautiful, the Queen will have three attempts at poisoning Snow white, until she uses a poisoned apple to kill her. The dwarves cannot revive her and presume her dead, placing her in a glass coffin. Fortunately, Snow White only goes for a long deep sleep and, some years later, is reawakened when a charming Prince falls in love with her and requests to have the coffin. As the dwarves trip while carrying the coffin, it causes the piece of poisoned apple to be dislodged from her throat, and she comes back to life. Snow White and Prince Charming marry. The Queen is doomed to a punishment of wearing heated iron shoes and dance until she falls down dead.

Of course, the Queen/witch is a symbol for the older woman realising that she is losing her youth and looks. She does spend a lot of time in front of her mirror, which is a distraction away from more meaningful matters. She lets herself be caught up in the illusion of appearance and the shallow identification with her looks, rather than who she really is inside and all the wisdom she can gain from looking within.

Snow White, whose name denotes something pure and virgin, then becomes both the object of the Queen's fury and jealousy as the younger woman, and also a representation of the Queen's own younger 'Maiden' Self, which she is losing.

As the queen goes through her denial of her transition into 'wise woman', she clings to the past and lets her shadow take over. She lets all her fears and insecurities get the better of her and instead of letting go, she uses her fury to become a mean old lady. Instead of transitioning into her "wise woman", she becomes the evil witch. In this process, she kills her own inner Maiden (Snow White), using a poisoned apple which is no innocent reminder of another well-known story involving an apple, a tree and a snake and something about 'original sin'...

As she seeks to destroy Snow White, we see the symbol for any of the purity that was in her heart being destroyed. By wanting to remain the fairest of them all, she actually destroys herself. This is a great metaphor for what happens when you let envy drive you – you often end up destroying the very person you seek to impress or become.

In the end, the Queen loses and is punished in a mocking yet painful sentence. So yes, attachment, vanity, envy and denial are a dangerous game to play.

It is interesting also to look at the fact that she has just become the new 'Queen' of the kingdom, which is a symbol for being strong and sovereign in one's own life (The Queen of your own life). She actually was set in a position of great power and authority, which Snow White would never be able to hold as she was still too young and inexperienced. Yet she wasted that opportunity away because of refusing to let the natural cycles of life unfold, and accepting her own changing nature.

Another thing that is missing in the 'Queen' is the Mother archetype. Where she could have developed a sort of motherly/caring attitude towards her new daughter in law, she instead went into competition and destructiveness, still seeing herself as a Maiden

competing with another maiden, rather than taking her role as either Mother or Grand-Mother in relationship with Snow White. This kind of conflict can actually happen even before menopause, at the time of Motherhood. When their daughters begin to grow up into their womanhood, mothers sometimes begin to experience a sense of loss of their own youth and can sometimes unconsciously compete with their daughters.

Between her denial of the Wise Woman, and the absence in her of the Mother, as her inability to extend herself to support another, she was definitely set for trouble!

If we rewrite the story with the Queen actually embracing her menopausal life transition and inner Mother, what could happen?

Well, for instance she could fully take her place as Queen, next to her King's side, and become a wise ruler for her Kingdom. She could become less focused on her looks or her past, or on playing silly girl games, and instead more focused on the person she is inside and the deeper, meaningful connection she can develop with herself. She would learn a lot and become much wiser from the experience. Perhaps then she would be able to share of that wisdom with her daughter in law, and ensure that she herself becomes a great Queen in due time. This means that she would actually also help herself get more into touch with the purity and innocence in her own heart and guide that 'virgin' part of herself with all the wisdom she has acquired. As a witch, she could enjoy using her gifts to make a difference in her kingdom, and be greatly loved and revered for it. She would no longer care about being fairest, and care more about being wisest and more fulfilled in an authentic sense. All would then be truly happier, including herself, and her kingdom would prosper joyously around her, happily ever after! THE END.

So come one women! Allow yourself to become the wise Queen of your kingdom, rather than a bitter 'good looking' evil witch. The archetypes of Maiden and Mother will always be and live within you, for we all have a bit of all three inside of us, always. Yet you need to be able to embrace the phase of life you are in. This is how Nature made it, this is the way it is meant to be and within this acceptance of life passing lies a key to your 'happily ever after'.



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