Motherhood: Facing & Finding Yourself
by Lisa Marchiano

I always knew I didn’t want children. In college, when a friend confessed a deep longing to become a mother, I couldn’t relate. I had ambitious career plans, and being a mother sounded limiting and ordinary. After college, I worked for a nonprofit organisation in Washington, DC. My work felt exciting, important, and meaningful. Deep down, I knew there were many things I needed to do in my life, and I feared that having children would prevent me from fulfilling my potential.

Bestselling author and psychologist James Hillman proposed what he called the “acorn theory” of psychological development. He contended that we each enter the world carrying something unique that asks to be lived out through us. Just as the destiny of the oak tree is contained within the acorn, we arrive in life with something we need to do and someone we need to become. “What waits to awaken in each person is ancient and surprising, mythic and meaningful,” writes mythologist and author Michael Meade. As a young woman, I wanted badly to find what was waiting to be awakened. I was afraid that becoming a mother would fatally interrupt its unfolding.

My mother had been frustrated with her role. Though I always felt loved by her, she would at times rail about how limited she had allowed her life to become. “Don’t ever have children!” she would shout at us when she felt particularly downtrodden — which was often.

I grew up to have ambivalent feelings about motherhood. Time and age softened my conviction to avoid becoming a mother. Eventually I learned that the conscious part of my personality did not, in fact, have all the answers. At twenty-eight, I was studying international relations in New York. I planned to go to law school next, so that I would be equipped to continue my exciting work with international nonprofits. But some deeper part of myself had other plans. Upon arriving in New York, I began having dream after dream set in the subway. These subterranean dream images mirrored a psychic descent. In spite of my efforts to avoid doing so, I was falling into a depression. The work that had heretofore given my life a sense of purpose and meaning now seemed empty. No matter how I threw myself into graduate school and other aspects of my life, I felt increasingly isolated, sad and tearful. I was being dragged into the depths against my will.

Though I was terrified of such a descent, by early spring I had been led by my dreams to become curious about what was happening to me. I began writing down my dreams each night and reading books by Jungian authors. These books introduced me to a different way of relating to my unhappiness. They helped me see my suffering and symptoms as an invitation to discover more about myself, and I was gripped by what I was learning.

Carl Jung (1875–1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist and one of the great explorers of the soul. Jung identified several drives but posited that the overarching one was an innate desire to realise one’s potential. While he agreed that the unconscious contained elements that
were repressed or forgotten, he also felt that the unconscious could be the source of tremendous creativity and growth. He held that we are all connected to a common source of image and meaning through our access to the deep unconscious with its storehouse of universal, archetypal patterns of human experience. In the midst of my depression and confusion, Jung’s ideas were a healing balm. My dark and lonely passage became suffused with meaning and purpose.

The depression was a major seismic event that altered the flow of my life energy and shifted its course. I yielded to the urges and instincts that welled up from within. With hindsight, it is clear that my “dark night of the soul” in New York that year was my inborn destiny — my acorn — trying to grow. Within a few years, I set aside my plans to study law and began the long road to becoming a Jungian analyst. Around this time, I met and married my husband. He had a deep longing to have children, and I had become wise enough to know how to yield to what life offered. Two years after our wedding, I become a mother. To my surprise, the first year of my daughter’s life was filled with great fulfilment and joy. After the first few difficult and exhausting months, she and I settled into a wonderful rhythm. I adored everything about caring for her. As if having this beautiful, perfect baby weren’t enough, I began my training to become a Jungian analyst just after my daughter turned one. I would push her stroller around the neighbourhood, a heavy volume of Jung’s Collected Works weighing down the diaper bag so that I could sit on a bench and read when she fell asleep. I felt completely whole and content.

But this contentment was short lived. A few months after my daughter turned one, I became pregnant with our second child. The new pregnancy brought with it more exhaustion — and more anxiety. I worried constantly about how the next baby’s arrival would affect my life — my work, my analytic training, and my relationship with my daughter.

My son was born a week before my daughter’s second birthday. Caring for a toddler and a newborn was draining, and I found myself overwhelmed, exhausted, and depressed. Though I continued to see a small number of patients in my private practice, I was forced to take a leave from my Jungian training program, leaving me feeling adrift, without the sense that I was moving forward in my life professionally. I weighed more than I ever had in my life, and I had no time to exercise or eat thoughtfully. The physical exertion, the third straight year of sleep deprivation, the lack of any time to inhabit my thoughts and inner life, and the sheer impossibility of meeting the demands of an infant and a toddler left me feeling depleted, tearful, and incompetent. With two little kids, I felt as though I were losing myself, getting sucked into the mire.

One cold December day, having gone for a walk just to get out of the house, I struggled to push the kids uphill in the double stroller. Everything about being a mother is so hard, I thought to myself. My next thought surprised me: I’m growing so much as a result. What is happening to me right now must surely be an opportunity to understand myself better. It has been over fifteen years since that thought first struck me, and my babies have grown into teenagers. Along the way, it has not ever ceased to be true that parenting is gut-wrenchingly difficult and always offers new insights about myself, if I care to see them. I have learned from my parenting experiences, and I have also been privileged to witness the parenting journeys of mothers in my practice — some of them becoming
mothers for the first time, others managing a relationship with their adult child, and everything in between.

Motherhood, with its intense physical and emotional extremes, is a crucible in which we are tested and altered. In the alchemical vessel of motherhood, the heat is turned up high. Outdated parts of our personality are melted away, and new structures are forged. Motherhood is a dizzying high-wire act, a masquerade, and a communion with mortality. It is a falling from and finding of grace, a falling in and out of love, and heartache by the hour. Motherhood is the ultimate confrontation with yourself. Whatever is there to discover at the bottom of your soul, whether dross or treasure, motherhood will help you find it.

One of Jung’s most important ideas is that we continue to grow and develop throughout the course of our lives. According to Jung, we never stop growing and changing. In fact, as we age, we have more opportunity to become ourselves — to tend to the unfolding of our unique blueprints, to grow into the oak trees we came into the world with the potential to be. Jung called this lifelong maturation “individuation.” Individuation is the slow process of tuning in to your authentic self. It takes a lifetime. It requires you to stay open to life so that with each blow or disappointment or mistake, you befriend some new part of yourself that had been unknown or despised by you before. If you go through life tending to your authentic voice and making it your job to learn and accept as much about yourself as you can, you generally wind up being one of those older people who are happy and wise, rather than an older person who is bitter and small-minded.

At my first symposium in Jungian training, I had a direct experience of what individuation can look like. The conference, attended by hundreds of analysts and trainees, was in a large hotel in downtown Montreal. It was my first time at such an event, and I felt intimidated at being in close quarters with some of the Jungian authors whose books I had found so influential. Hoping to be a good student, I dutifully attended every lecture despite being exhausted due to being a few months pregnant with baby number two.

Renowned Jungian analyst Harry Wilmer was speaking in the afternoon about yarn paintings. Dr. Wilmer was a pioneer in social psychology who had developed a new technique for working with veterans. Never having before heard of yarn paintings, I assumed Dr Wilmer would be presenting on artifacts from some indigenous people and discussing the archetypal symbolism found therein. It sounded a little dull, but I was determined to be conscientious. Wilmer was in his mid-eighties, and his voice was halting and tentative as he took the microphone. He began by explaining that during World War II, he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and had been in a TB sanitarium aboard his naval vessel for nearly a year and a half. This had been a difficult and lonely time for him, and he had felt compelled to take yarn and needle and make “paintings” using a technique that he spontaneously developed. His long illness gave him a deeper understanding of himself, and his yarn paintings reflected this inner process. He showed us several slides of his artwork, revealing his attempts to come to terms with sadness, heartache, and loneliness.

He told the story of his adult son dying in a motorcycle accident and showed photographs of yarn paintings completed in the aftermath of this tragedy. The paintings were colourful and interesting, but their artistic merit was not the point. Wilmer shared how he started sewing from the middle of his “canvas” and never knew how the final result would look. These were spontaneous products of his unconscious, in many ways as simple and artless as a child’s. “Everyone at heart is an artist,” he said.
At some point early on in the presentation, my tears began to flow, and they never entirely stopped. I had been expecting a dazzling if arcane intellectual discussion from this famous analyst. Instead, a man stood before us entirely undefended and shared his simple efforts to make meaning out of unbearable anguish. I wasn’t sure if my tearfulness was in part due to the hormones of early pregnancy. When I ran into a friend later and asked if she had attended, she said simply, “Oh yes. I cried the whole way through.”

Harry Wilmer died a year and a half later at the age of eighty-eight. Jung says that the goal of psychological growth is to become more whole. Becoming whole means being able to experience all of our emotions fully, doubt ourselves, admit our faults, take a passionate interest in the world around us, embrace our ambivalence, hear our inner voice, and marshal our power and authority in the interest of protecting ourselves and those whom we love.

Becoming whole means being able to be playful, feel awe, and laugh at yourself. It means being able to defend yourself when needed but able to drop those defences at other times so that you are meeting the world around you with an open heart, awake to the wonder and vulnerable to the pain. Maybe most of all, becoming whole involves being curious about yourself so that as you face each new challenge that life presents, you have the opportunity to learn more about the mystery of your soul.

Few other life experiences provide an opportunity to know yourself like being a mother. Being a mother will tire you out, fill you with dread, and move you to tears. It will inspire joy, self-doubt, hilarity, contentment, rage, terror, shame, irritation, inadequacy, grief, anxiety, and love. You will probably see yourself at your very best and your very worst. If, at the end of the day, the point of life is to be made larger by your experiences so that you know more of yourself, motherhood provides a rich arena for self-understanding.

Viewed this way, it doesn’t matter whether we are perfect mothers — whether we work or stay home, make our own baby food or sew our own Halloween costumes. What matters is whether we engage in the experience in an openhearted way so that we are there, truly present to our own life with all of its heartaches, disappointments, and joys. If you mother in this spirit, you cannot go wrong no matter how many “mistakes” you make. “The right way to wholeness . . .” said Jung, “is full of fateful detours and wrong turnings.” If embraced consciously, motherhood can help you become more whole. If you let it, motherhood will be an opportunity to grow into the fullest version of yourself. But it can be hard to heed this call. We might find ourselves choosing away from the struggle of parenting.

Mothering will often bring up difficult feelings that provoke shame, doubt, and sometimes even self-hatred. You may understandably find yourself tempted to avoid these feelings by avoiding your children, either by spending as much time away from them as possible or by emotionally disengaging from them. Or you may silence the promptings of your inner voice and be overly reliant on collective dictums about how to parent. Doing so can relieve the tension of self-doubt, but this relief will come at the sacrifice of authenticity. You will also be missing out on an opportunity to know yourself better. The dark days of motherhood are painful. But it is in these experiences that we stretch our roots right into our deepest ground of being.

Of course, when we are stumbling and sleep-deprived beyond reason as we nurse the baby, it can be hard to remember that we are growing psychologically. When we are heartsick and terrified as our teenager careens into depression or self-harm, an
awareness of transformation is hardly the main thing on our mind. It can be difficult to know that our trials have meaning. Luckily, those who have come before us have left an inexhaustible trove of stories that can serve as guides. We can turn to these to make sense of our experiences, to reassure ourselves that we are not alone, and to connect our travails with their universal expression so that suffering becomes soul-making.

Fairy tales are these guiding stories. A wise person once said that a fairy tale is a story that is false on the outside but true on the inside. Myths and fairy tales are rich storehouses of universal psychic patterns. They illuminate life themes we may struggle with at one time or another. The vast majority of tales have something to say about this process of becoming whole, or individuation, that we have been discussing. When we recognise ourselves in a fairy tale, we know we are not alone. Others have been there before us. Maybe we can see our plight a little differently, or maybe we can imagine more options for ourselves. And we have some sense of where we are going because we know what story we are in. At least, it is a balm to our worried heart to know that whatever struggle we are engaged in is part of the universal human story. We are all, in the end, actors in a divine drama. Hearing our concerns echoed in the beautiful, timeless language of fairy tales and myth is deeply healing.

The hero is one of the two fundamental archetypal patterns that each of us may live out over the course of our lives. The mother is the other one. While the hero is commonly associated with men and the mother with women, both sexes may be called to live out either pattern — or both — over the course of a lifetime. The fundamental aspects of the hero’s journey are revealed through the numerous myths and tales in which a hero must venture out into unknown territory, conquer dragons and other challenges, and return with new wisdom.

The mother’s journey has likewise been elucidated in ancient and timeless tales. Her pattern shares much in common with that of the hero, but it differs in one vital way: hers is not a journey out but a journey down. Heroine stories usually involve a descent.

The symbol of the well frequently occurs in myths and fairy tales. It is a rich image symbolising contact with the deep, life-giving waters that mysteriously well up from the underworld — the unconscious. In Celtic mythology, sacred wells were points of access to the other world, and their waters had magical or healing properties. As a child, I spent summers visiting the Georgia farm of my paternal grandparents. Though the house had been fitted with modern plumbing sometime in the 1950s, my grandmother still liked to draw water from the large wooden well that dominated the back porch. A deep well is an uncanny place. I recall the shivery feeling of leaning perilously over the edge. The sense of dizzying depth, the odd echoes, the coolness that wafted up on even the hottest days intimated the existence of another realm. When my grandmother loosed the bucket, the winch unspooled noisily with great rocking vibrations, and the bucket fell down, and down, and down for an impossibly long time before we heard a far distant splash. The Book of Symbols tells us that at a well, “we are connected, it seems, to another mysterious realm, underground, underworld, evocative of our own, unknown, reflective depths, a psychic matrix perhaps infinitely extensive.”

Year after year, decade upon decade, my grandfather channeled his existential anxieties into a fear that the well would go dry. But the well never did cease to offer up its cold, quenching water. No matter how many times we sent the bucket spinning down into the cool depths, it always came back full. Wells, then, remind us of our connection with the deep, mysterious source of psychic life with its inexhaustible font of intuition, dream, and imagination.
You contain a well that will never run dry, though at times it may not feel like this. The well within connects you to the deep source of wisdom, intuition, and instinct that is the heritage of humankind. The challenges of motherhood are an invitation to connect with this source — to descend into your depths to discover the boundless wellspring of creativity, image, and meaning in the inner world. Tough my grandfather always feared the well would go dry if we used too much water, we used to remember that wells were most likely to go dry when they weren’t used. The gifts of the unconscious are truly limitless — the more you look to the unconscious for wisdom, the more of its abundance you’ll receive. My book will guide you in journeying down this well and drawing from its secret source. Fairy tales, myths, and dreams are aspects of the riches that await you in the following pages as you begin your descent — a descent that will serve as an initiation to your own depths.