

MOONSTONE

THE GODDESS RETURNS:
MY JOURNEY WITH INANNA

By Jana Bouck Remy

*From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.
From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.
From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.
My lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
She abandoned her office of holy priestess to descend to the underworld.*

THIS PASSAGE IS from the myth of Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth in the Sumerian pantheon.¹ Although she is a goddess with great status and power, many tales recall her choice to abandon her royal office and descend to the underworld.

Inanna is a queen whose value is not tied to her role as a maternal goddess. Like Athena, she is a goddess of war. Like Aphrodite, she is a goddess of love. Yet Inanna begins to feel uneasy when she hears cries of pain from her sister, Erishkegal, the goddess of the underworld. So Inanna decides that she will journey to the underworld to see why her sister is suffering.

Many interpretations of the Inanna story explain that she desires to visit her sister's kingdom because she wants knowledge of the underworld. Prior to her descent, Inanna is described as "pure" and "naïve." Many writers also point out that Inanna's sister is a mirror of Inanna herself, so her journey to the underworld is a journey to gain self-knowledge, to understand her own darker side, her shadow-self.

I encountered the story of Inanna's descent during a time when I was suffering from depression. Inanna's story was an important archetype for me. As I read about

Inanna, I felt her story paralleled my own "underworldly" experience.

My depression occurred while I was a stay-at-home mom and my husband was rarely home because of a demanding job. At this time, my identity was primarily defined by relationships to others: I was a mother, a housewife, a daughter, a Young Women's leader, and so forth. I was caught up in the hum of daily life and had very little time for myself.

My life had lost the luster and spark that made me want to get out of bed in the morning. At the same time, a betrayal from a family member left me obsessively angry. I spiraled down into despair.

INANNAS descent to the underworld is, in some ways, a Dante-esque parallel to a temple experience. In contrast to the temple, where a patron moves symbolically upward in a journey to the celestial kingdom and in the process dons symbolic priestly clothing, Inanna is stripped, piece-by-piece, of her royal robes and identifying jewelry as she moves systematically downward through the gates of the underworld.

At each of these gates, Inanna asks questions and seeks to understand what is happening to her, but instead of receiving "light and knowledge" from her journey, Inanna is told she must not question what is happening to her.

WHEN SHE ENTERED THE FIRST GATE,

From her head, the . . . crown was removed.

Inanna asked: "What is this?"

She was told: "Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned."

WHEN SHE ENTERED THE SECOND GATE,

From her neck, the small lapis beads were removed.

Inanna asked: "What is this?"

She was told: "Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned."

This process then continues through seven gates. Erishkegal, who has orchestrated Inanna's underworldly striptease, explains that the systematic removal of Inanna's clothing is so the goddess will enter the underworld "bowed low."

Erishkegal's desire to humiliate Inanna stems from her worries that Inanna seeks to take over the underworld. Therefore, when Erishkegal sees her sister naked and vulnerable, she is not compassionate towards Inanna. Instead she condemns her to death.

The myth states:

Then Erishkegal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.

She spoke against her the word of wrath.

She uttered against her the cry of guilt.

She struck her:

Inanna was turned into a corpse,

A piece of rotting meat,

And was hung from a hook on the wall.

IN Inanna's loss of queenly stature and power, I saw my own struggle with depression. I saw myself as someone who was defined almost exclusively from the outside, by others, through my familial and social roles. In my depression, I no longer found value in these outward trappings of identity. Like Inanna's darker sister-self, my self-critic told me that I was guilty, that the bad things that had happened to me were all my fault, that I deserved to be unhappy and miserable. My inner voice echoed the condemnation of Erishkegal when it said I was worthless, a husk of a person, soul-less, corpse-like.

Inanna hung on the hook in the underworld for three days. Soon her servant, who was waiting patiently for her return, realized that something had gone wrong and sought help from other gods.

Eventually Inanna's servant finds a compassionate god who creates two minions to rescue her. However, as these minions enter the gates of the underworld, they encounter Erishkegal writhing in pain. The minions, on the advice of their master, listen to Erishkegal's cries of pain and echo her expressions.

The myth reads:

Like flies, they slipped through the cracks of the gates.

They entered the throne room of the Queen of the Underworld.

No linen was spread on her body.

Her breasts were uncovered.



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*Her hair swirled around her head like
leeks.*

*Erishkegal was moaning:
"Oh! Oh! My inside!"*

*They moaned.
"Oh! Oh! Your inside!"*

*She moaned:
"Ohhhh! Oh! My outside!"*

*They moaned;
"Ohhhh! Oh! Your outside!"*

*She groaned:
"Oh! Oh! My belly!"*

*They groaned:
"Oh! Oh! Your belly!"*

*She groaned:
"Oh! Ohhhh! My back!"*

*They groaned:
"Oh! Ohhhh! Your back!"*

*She sighed:
"Ah! Ah! My heart!"*

Their compassion to Erishkegal heals her pain. She discovers that she needed only the love and recognition of another to be free of her distress. In gratitude, she offers the minions a gift:

*She says:
"Who are you,
Moaning - groaning - sighing with me?
If you are gods, I will bless you.
If you are mortals, I will give you a gift. ...
What do you wish?"*

*They answered:
"We wish only the corpse that hangs
from the hook on the wall."*

*Erishkegal said:
"The corpse belongs to Inanna."*

*They said:
"Whether it belongs to our queen,
Whether it belongs to our king,
That is what we wish."*

When they receive Inanna's body, they bring her back to life.

A GAIN this section of the myth mirrored my own experience. Like Erishkegal's pain, I was feeling the loss of my self-identity, and I needed others to hear my pain and show empathy for my experience. Fortunately, like Inanna's servant, I had the blessing of some friends who were concerned about me and were empathetic to my pain.

While suffering from depression, I became ill with chronic bronchitis and laryngitis. For several months, I could hardly speak without choking and coughing. My voice became a hoarse whisper. I realized that my inability to speak was linked to my emotional pain, and this drove me further into despair as I lost the ability to carry on simple conversations. Yet one day, perhaps

on a whim, I bought a piano. I had learned to play as a child, and I thought that music might comfort me. Singing the lyrics from the following Enya song was particularly healing:

*Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear its music ringing.
It sounds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?*

*While though the tempest loudly roars,
I hear the truth, it liveth.
And though the darkness 'round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth. . . .²*

The songs I played became my cries of pain, like those of Erishkegal. As I sang the songs, even in my hesitant voice, I found the comfort I had craved. I began to discover the self-love I had lost. I again found the glimmer of hope that I would overcome my under-worldly experience.

AFTER Inanna is resurrected, she is still trapped in the lower kingdom until she finds someone to take her place.

*The myth explains:
As Inanna was about to ascend from
the underworld . . . , the judges of
the underworld seized her:
"No one ascends from the underworld
unmarked.*

*If Inanna wishes to return from the
underworld,
She must provide someone in her place."*

Eventually she strikes a bargain with the underworld judges. Inanna's husband Dumuzi, who is portrayed as a "faithless husband" because he didn't look for her while she was gone, takes Inanna's place in the underworld for six months of the year, and Inanna is allowed to return to her throne.

The myth tells of Inanna's encounter with Dumuzi when she sentences him to take her place in the lower kingdom.

*Dumuzi, the husband of Inanna, was
dressed in his shining . . .
garments.*

*He sat on his magnificent throne. . . .
Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of
death.*

*She spoke against him the word of wrath.
She uttered against him the cry of guilt:
"Take him! Take Dumuzi away!"*

*The galla . . . seized Dumuzi.
They made him stand up; they made him
sit down.*

*They beat the husband of Inanna.
They gashed him with axes.
Dumuzi let out a wail.*

The words of Inanna's condemnation of

**I appropriated
Inanna's story
and made it a
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scripture.**



Dumuzi are almost the same as those of her own death sentence at Erishkegal's hand. In condemning her husband, Inanna takes vengeance for her own painful experiences.

To me, Dumuzi was a symbol of the person who had hurt me. I could see that Dumuzi's banishment to the underworld was the result of his selfishness. He thought only of himself and didn't worry about Inanna's disappearance. I realized that I did not need to suffer for the selfish mistake of someone else. It was not my responsibility to feel guilty about the betrayal. It was not my fault.

The myth ends with Inanna resuming her former status. The story of Inanna holds great power. It is a narrative I have repeated to myself over and over: how a goddess went to the underworld, died, and had lived again. I repeated this as a mantra during my darkest days. And through this process, and I could see my own self returning, too.

HOW can such an ancient story apply to me, a twenty-first century Mormon woman? Actually, for years the Mormon side of me has been doing this, taking scripture verses and "likening them" to myself. There is a dearth of scriptures that discuss women, that give voice to women's experiences. Therefore, I appropriated Inanna's story and made it a chapter in my own personal book of scripture.

Inanna's story was a healing influence in a very dark time of my life. And it has made all the difference for me.

NOTES

1. All quotations from the Inanna myth are from Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

2. Lyrics from Enya, "How Can I Keep From Singing?" *Shepherd Moons*, 1991.