The Descent of Inanna

Magic is the art and science of changing consciousness at will.

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Transformation through descent into the depths is a ubiquitous myth. Many cultures have myths of death and rebirth that explain the cycles of nature and the character of the afterlife. It is "another variation of the motif of the Hero and the Dragon… the Katabasis, the Descent into the Cave… It expresses the psychological mechanism of introversion of the conscious mind into deeper layers of the unconscious psyche".¹

Here we examine the myth of Inanna, one that prefigured the Babylonian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz, and the Greek myth of Persephone's kidnapping by Hades.

The Myth

The Descent of Inanna is familiar to the many contemporary [men and] women who have undertaken to journey into their own underworlds and have lived to tell the tale. That descent is a requirement of sovereignty, by which I mean the owning of one's own self and life.²

As the myth begins, Inanna, the Queen of Heaven and Earth has already established a relationship with Enki, the God of Wisdom and Waters. He has gifted her with the fourteen me, or blessings of power, which she readily accepts, including: Truth. Descent into the underworld. Ascent from the underworld. The art of lovemaking.³

Inanna opened her ear to the moaning of her sister Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld and abandoned her realm of heaven and earth, even her temples, to descend into the "great below". "With the me in her possession, she prepared herself:"⁴ placing her crown upon her head, beads of lapis lazuli around her neck, sparkling stones fastened to her breast⁵, a gold ring around her wrist, and a royal robe upon her body. She bound a breastplate about her chest and took a lapis measuring rod and line in her hand. Then she set out for the kur, the netherworld, with her faithful servant, Ninshubur. When she arrived at the outer gates of the kur she commanded Ninshubur to wait for three days, and if she had not returned, to call upon the elder Gods for help.

When Inanna challenged the gatekeeper to gain entry into the kur, he consulted with Ereshkigal, telling her that a giant and powerful goddess arrayed in splendor and with signs of authority, was waiting to enter Her realm. Ereshkigal became upset, then told the gatekeeper to open each gate of the underworld a mere crack, and to remove Inanna's royal garments on her way through.

As Inanna passed through the first gate he removed her crown. At the second gate he removed her lapis beads; at the third, her sparkling stones; at the fourth, her breastplate; at the fifth, her gold ring; at the sixth, her lapis measuring rod; and at the seventh and final gate, her royal robe. Naked and disarmed, Inanna entered the throne room of her sister. Immediately, she was surrounded by the judges of the underworld, who ruled against her.

Then Ereshkigal 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. ⁶

After three days, Ninshubur went to Enlil, God of Air, who refused to help, for the Underworld was not in His domain. Ninshubur went to Nanna, God of the Moon, who also refused to help, for he had no jurisdiction over the Underworld. Finally, Ninshubur went to Enki, God of Wisdom and Water, who originally blessed Inanna with the me of descent into and ascent from the kur. Enki was grieved and troubled. From under his fingernails he took dirt and created two creatures, neither male nor female, and gave them the food and water of life to carry to Inanna.
These creatures snuck into the kur like flies, slipping through the cracks in the gates. They entered the throne room and found Ereshkigal lying naked and unkempt, moaning "Oh! Oh! My inside!" Following Enki's instructions, they also moaned "Oh! Oh! Your inside!"

Again she moaned "Ohhh! Oh! My outside!" To which the creatures replied "Ohhh! Oh! Your outside!"

She continued to moan out her agony and they continued to name her pains back to her. Finally, she stopped moaning and blessed the creatures, offering them any gift they desired. They asked for Inanna's corpse, and revived her with the food and water of life. Inanna then arose and ascended to the upper world.

Commentary

At the beginning of the myth, Inanna has been prefigured to descend into the underworld. It has already been named as her destiny by Enki. Inanna, as Queen of Heaven and Earth, represents the ego, the conscious ruler of the known psyche. And yet, it has been foreordained that she must experience the depths, that the underworld awaits her. A periodic lowering of the mood is a natural part of human existence. Life is full of cycles, and human affect is not immune from them. The healthy course is for people to experience a lowering of mood, a turning inward, a contacting of unconscious depths, and then to return to "normal" functioning.

The prophesied result of Inanna's journey through the netherworld is that she will gain Truth. In one translation, Inanna is frequently referred to as "the pure Inanna"7 In her purity, she is a child of light, lacking the experience of darkness. She has no Truth, only naïveté.

The descent begins when Inanna hears the moans of her sister, Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld. The conscious mind hears something stirring, something related but rejected, consigned to the darkness. Ereshkigal is the shadow consciousness, that repository of everything rejected by the ego. The shadow is more than just a collection of ego jetsam--it also includes "the insufficiently developed functions and the contents of the personal unconscious"8. The "pure" ego must be reunited with the undiscovered and rejected psychic contents in order for integration to occur. Enthralled, the ego must descend, must hearken unto the cries, abandoning everything in this quest, risking all.

The descent is not made naked and defenseless. The ego insists on defending itself with all its conscious powers. Inanna dons a crown, representing intellectual functioning, the power of "being in her head". She places a circle of beads around her neck. The circle is a symbol of eternity and of the womb--she claims the power of eternal creativity. She fastens sparkling gems to her chest, pretty, "nice", positive feelings to protect her from the underworld. She places a gold ring around her wrist, a symbol of her power to act. She takes her lapis measuring rod in her hand, her critical ability to judge. She armors herself with a breastplate for protection, and covers herself with a royal robe. The armor is whatever psychic defenses and walls a person casts up to protect themselves from others. The royal robes make a nice analogy with the persona, the ability to look good for others. Thus arrayed, she set out for the depths.

The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well.9

At first, Inanna cannot gain admission to the underworld. When the gatekeeper finally allows her to enter, he narrows the gates so that she must abandon all that she had depended upon for her safe journey into the underworld. At each gate she barely squeezes through, as if she is repeating a birth process. Seven times she passes through a gate and seven times she abandons an implement of her power.

In descending into the depths, the weapons of consciousness become impediments. The work of descent cannot be done by the well fortified, but only by the vulnerable, by the helpless and disempowered. At the first gate, she must leave her intellectualizing behind. At the second gate, she must quit relying on her cleverness and creativity. At the third gate, her niceness must be surrendered. At the fourth gate, her armor; at the fifth, her ability to do; at the sixth, her critical judgment; and at the final gate, her persona is stripped away from her. She enters the underworld naked and helpless as the day she was born.

In this vulnerable state, she faces her sister, her shadow self. Unprotected in the depths, she finds herself judged and crucified, left putrefying hanging from the wall. Alone and in the darkness, Inanna decomposes. In the underworld, the place where rebirth is possible after the death of the ego – all the things that have been left behind, Inanna encounters a sense of hopelessness, feeling as if nothing will alleviate her misery. She literally “hangs” around in her private hell.
All is not lost, however, for Inanna's faithful servant seeks help. Ninshubur, Inanna's servant, is that remaining consciousness who is willing to seek help, to take some action, no matter how small, to solve the problem. Ninshubur first goes to the Sun God, but gets no help. Power and enlightenment are not what will rescue the descended consciousness. Then, Ninshubur goes to the Moon God, and gets no help. Neither mystery nor emotion, nor even the personal unconscious can solve the situation. Finally, Ninshubur goes to Enki, God of Wisdom and the Waters.

Enki solution lies not in great intellectual power, nor in great emotional power. It comes from Wisdom, which encompasses all of the psychological functions. Enki takes action--and he is a God of action and the God who predicted/arranged arranged this situation. Wisdom accepts the descent into darkness, knows that as unpleasant as it may be, it is necessary for completion of growth.

When the beings Enki created arrive in the underworld, they do not confront Ereshkigal in a power struggle for Inanna. Instead, they listen to her moans. They hear her pain and they name it back to her. This is the action of Wisdom. Healing begins when hidden pain is named and honored. After the creatures retrieve and revive Inanna, she returns to be Queen of Heaven and Earth. No longer is she pure delightful lightness, for she now knows pain and darkness. She has experienced them for herself. The Wisdom which originally orchestrated this descent into the underworld has also arranged her return. After she made the passage through the narrow doors, Inanna encountered uncertainties for which she had no preparation. All her tools had been stripped from her. Enki, the power of Wisdom and the ability to "go with the flow", brought her through. One must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty . . . it is the world of water.10

References
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Notes
1. Jung, 1968, p.41
2. Worth, 1996, p.38
3. Wolkstein & Kramer, p.14, 15
4. Wolkstein & Kramer, p.53
5. Henderson & Oakes, p. 102
6. Wolkstein & Kramer, p.60
8. Jung, 1953, p. 66
9. Jung, 1969, p. 21
10. Jung, 1969, p. 21