

# Waking Up Together

Global Transformation and Feminine Wisdom

with Elizabeth Rabia Roberts



Essays from Rabia

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## INTO THE DARK LIGHT: Depression and the Spiritual Journey

*To descend, submit and die — the openness to being acted upon — is the very thing being asked for when we come face to face with the Transpersonal for an extended period. It is a defining part of the spiritual journey. The long periods of sadness, grief, inactivity, and inner suffering which can accompany these times are not evidence of mental illness or a failure of emotional control. Rather, they are part of a restorative and creative time in which we have access to previously hidden realizations and wisdom that can bring us into a new life.*

It is likely, if you are past your mid twenties, you have had at least a taste of the “dark night of the soul.” You may have had months or even years during which you lost your sense of purpose and confidence about the direction of your life. There may have been feelings of deep sadness and grief over what appeared to be lost. You were no longer able to take any pleasure in life’s offerings. During this time you were overcome by existential questions: “Who am I? Why am I here? What is Life’s meaning?” And despite your prayers, you remained lost in a fog of unknowing.

This experience of inner anguish can be had at any age, and can be triggered by many events: a debilitating illness, grief, sexual abuse, getting old, ecological devastation, financial insecurity, traumatic accidents, the loss of a job or a relationship. In fact, any loss that strips away the identity you have cultivated and become comfortable with can start a slide into a serious depression. The “dark times” or the “descent into darkness” are terms I use to describe this sacred journey that begins when one’s personal identity is challenged to the very core. As painful as these dark times are, without them we cannot participate fully in the great rhythms of the Earth. They are necessary for the renewal of life.

This journey can be initiated by, or accompanied by, any number of devastating mental and emotional states that can wreak havoc with our lives. I personally have been dragged through, or catapulted into, three profound descents into darkness. Each one was accompanied by intense feelings of isolation and meaninglessness. At those times when I was slogging through my own hell realms, I felt no purpose, no direction, and no greater meaning. I was in absolute despair. These descents were so painful and lasted so long that they were diagnosed as serious depression — so serious as to be life threatening when suicide seemed to be the only option to escape such a living hell. While no one and no thing made these depressions “go away,” I have been helped for short periods by medications, talk therapy, spiritual counseling, and energy healing. Sometimes I used several different modalities at the same time.

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Each descent left its mark and resulted in a dramatic turn toward further growth in my life. But knowing this is small comfort to the one who has entered the darkness. The comfort of understanding only comes in retrospect. If I could have felt, even the slightest bit, a certainty that these desperate realms were preparing me for grace or growth, the pressure would have been relieved. There would have been hope. But the nature of depression is the absence of all meaning and hope—that is the essential ingredient of a psycho-spiritual descent.

Of course, not all inner suffering or feelings of sadness and loneliness indicate a tumble into the Dark. Patients ask doctors all the time, “Am I depressed?” “Do I have a clinical Depression?” as if the answer could be found by a definitive blood test, like screening for cancer. The only way to know if you have descended into the dark night of the soul is to listen to and watch yourself, to feel your feelings and learn to understand their meaning. If you feel bad without reason most of the time, you are in the dark night. If you feel bad most of the time with reason, you are probably also in the dark night. If you are disabled by your suffering, it is a serious descent. If your suffering is only mildly distracting, you are probably not in the dark night.

I have spent 25 years offering myself as guide and companion to those who are trying to navigate the rapids of a major life transformation. Through my roles as a rites-of-passage mentor, spiritual teacher, wilderness quest guide and trainer of other guides, I have sat in council with hundreds of women and men. One by one they undertook their own rituals and came to tell their stories and pray for help in bearing their own time of “no answer.” All I ever have to offer people through these threshold times is total empathy — no great wisdom, other than *I am here with you and I have been where you are. Take heart.* I feel with them, just as I feel with you. You are not alone. Someone is holding the consciousness of your greater world while you do your inner work.

### **Is Depression an Illness or an Invitation to Access Perennial Wisdom?**

It is a tragedy, but not a surprise, to see how many adults and young people today are diagnosed with depression, anxiety, PTSD, bipolar disorder, lethargy, and other “mood disorders” or “mental illnesses.” While these dark times are painful, it may be a mistake to universally label them as an illness. Because as I will soon show you, religion, literature, history, and myth suggest they are likely to be a natural part of human development.

But despite our recognition of the frequency of depression and a body of historical literature suggesting the importance of dark times in our lives, Western culture seems determined to deny the inevitability of mental suffering. We are taught that happiness is a reliable measure of a life well lived. We are encouraged from childhood to jeer at loss and that periods of uncertainty, sadness or extended fatigue are signs of weakness. And the realities of old age, dementia and death are sad failures to be hidden from view. According to our culture, we are born to be happy and to fail to do so is a failure to achieve the “American Dream.”

It may be that our culture’s greatest mistake, and most glaring hubris, is proclaiming to have found the answer to human suffering in consumerism. Consumerism is the belief that you and I would be happy if we only owned (or looked like) x, y, and z. Personal fulfillment now is defined by accumulating, not by learning to let go. We are told that we can possess our lives, our loves, our identities and our belongings.

But we can’t. Life is change. And the gap between this reality and the mistaken approach of trying to hold on to everything is the source of our pain and much of our depression. To experience extended depression and mental anguish in such a cultural setting brings a further sense of isolation.

We humans do not want things to change; it is one of the primary traits of human nature. But rather than

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showing us how to live in symbiosis with this unbending rule of the universe, our culture's primary strategy, developed over the last few centuries, has been to divorce us more and more from all cycles of change. Electric lighting, central heating, and air conditioning protect us from extremes of weather, from feeling the ebb and flow of natural climate changes. Large-scale farming, meatpacking, and big box stores further insulate us from the constant struggle for life at the top of the food chain. And perhaps most devastating, passive large screen entertainment and private pads have replaced direct contact with nature— and with the authentic storytelling and actual ceremony that might help us comprehend the overwhelming changes that surround us.

Despite what we are told, we all eventually stumble upon the dark times. And rather than presume we can avoid all pain, we do better to encourage each other to understand how these dark times can serve as gateways to growth. And as unpleasant as it is, suffering is the very means of renewal, discovery and growth. Darkness and Light are both necessary for the renewal of life and the emergence of human consciousness. After all Winter is not a failed summer! It is a natural part of the cyclical round of Earth.

### **The Painful Search for Happiness**

One of the most astonishing features of human life today is that we believe it is possible to minimize and even eliminate suffering — the inner pain of life — which is one reason why it is so difficult for us to even acknowledge that we are suffering. This is still the land of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, where an unflagging optimism is taken as the means and measure of success. We must therefore carry an added burden: *we feel bad about feeling bad*. We think “this shouldn't be this way” or “I am going to get rid of this somehow.” Some of us believe that since suffering is so bad, so hard, so painful, if we were really good and really smart, it wouldn't arise in the first place. Somehow the pain of depression, loss anxiety or grief is our own fault. If not, then it's definitely someone else's fault. In any case, we should surely be able to avoid it. We should set it to one side and not dwell on it. We should “move on,” go onto positive things, do a little meditation or yoga to get around the suffering and go forward. We constantly go back to this way of thinking.

But depression cannot be banished by injections of optimism or sermons on “positive thinking.” Like grief, it must be acknowledged and worked through. This means it must be named and validated as a normal human response to the situation we find ourselves in. Faced and experienced, its power can be used, as the frozen defenses of the psyche thaw and new energies are released.

As Teilhard de Chardin says, “Suffering is the condition for growing; everything that grows, suffers.”

### **Ancestral Approaches to Depression**

There is a lineage of both religious and secular literature reminding us that times of total darkness are a natural part of the human condition. These dark periods of inner suffering were identified as sacrificial moments by Christians, and *Fana*, or annihilation, by Sufis. The early Sumerians referred to these states as the descent to the goddess, Hindus referred to them as *kundalini* rising, and Greeks identified these initiations with journeys to a *netherworld*.

These times were recognized as important and transformational because suffering is the predominant feeling of the process through which a human being must pass as the ego deconstructs and the transpersonal self is birthed. Suffering and Depression, precisely because they threaten and attack the defenses of the separate self, become the crucible of transformation.

Our ancestors identified these times of great confusion and inaction as “initiatory” states. An initiate is one

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who accepts the Dark Times on its terms. We may not like it, but we do our best to turn our most vulnerable selves toward the hottest part of the fire and wait patiently for the messages of the dark light. Most people begin to inquire more deeply into their lives not because there is joy, but because there is pain. Pain denotes the limit of the territory of the imagined self, the “safe ground” of the self-image, beyond which a kind of queasiness arises at being in the midst of the uncontrollable. This is our edge, our resistance to life, and the place the heart closes in self-protection. When you are near your edge you are near truth — and that truth is usually defended by psychological and physiological demons warning that if you continue and cross over this edge, loss and death are on your path. W.B. Yeats puts it this way: “The price of a soul is sorrow.”

To descend, submit and die — the openness to *being acted upon* — is the feminine essence of the human experience. It is the very thing that is being asked of us when we come face-to-face with the transpersonal, and it is a defining part of the spiritual journey. If these dark times are a natural part of our spiritual growth, then the long periods of sadness, grief, inactivity, and inner suffering which can accompany them are not evidence of weakness or a failure of emotional control as we are too often told. Rather, they are part of a restorative and creative time in which we have access to previously hidden realizations and wisdom that can bring us into a new life.

There is a striking passage in the Gospel of St. John in which Jesus says, “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone, but if it dies it brings forth much fruit.” In this context the idea of suffering and death is linked with that of rebirth and fulfillment. In joining suffering and death with the idea of transformation and the continuity of a total process, life’s apparent contradictions are resolved. Life does not die, but is expressed in constant transformation and movement. Ironically, it is this necessity of constant change that can bring the human mind into chaotic, irrational, and disturbingly helpless states.

### **Seeing with the Dark Light**

Throughout history, cultures have given us many myths and stories that offer insights about navigating these “dark nights of the soul.” The word “darkness” implies that we can’t see with our usual sight. We are plunged into an abyss, a deep well of mystery, of not knowing, where we no longer see things from the outside as witness. Instead, we depend on the grace of an inner “dark light,” gifts of cellular insight left by those who have gone before us. These glimmerings help reveal the underlying patterns that characterize every transformative journey. It is this other way of “seeing, that is not-seeing” that, for me, held the promise of renewal and spring.

A singular aspect of this process is the need to move from our thinking capacities to our deeper knowing, the light within the dark — those insights laid down in the right brain long before the gifts of the left rational side were even recognizable. To make this shift to the powers of the earlier right hemisphere of the brain with its liminal capacities for wholeness, image, raw feelings and the transformational paradox of birth and death, the ancestors learned to help each other through ceremony, ritual, myths and music. They seem to have accepted, more than we, that the dark times are a necessary part of life’s cycle.

Over time they created stories about a descent during which our old identity is stripped away as we await our rebirth into greater awareness and wisdom — wisdom that will serve not only the individual, but also the community as a whole.

### **A More Primordial Cultural Understanding**

If experiences of depression, grief, anxiety, mental suffering, isolation, and other examples of the dark night are not to be relegated to a catch-all bin of mental illnesses, and cannot be assuaged by a lifestyle of

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consumerism, how then are we to psychologically, culturally, and spiritually engage with life's deep suffering?

As tribal peoples have always known, when one person changes, it brings the challenge of change to everyone. When, after an arduous process, a woman gave birth, her status in the tribe or kin group changed as did the role of her mother and her sisters. When a teenage boy returned to his tribe from his vision quest, which may have lasted from a few weeks to a year-long solo journey into the wild, he was recognized as a man. It was understood that he brought new gifts to his people. His father and mother and others in his family circle all were called to change in response to these new insights and wisdom.

This is how communities have grown and changed throughout history: as one changes and grows, the greater whole is affected. Thus the dark times were endured both for the sake of the individual's growth and for the health of the larger whole. Despite what they are feeling in the moment, there are psycho-spiritual gifts for themselves and their people in completing the process.

From decades of working with myself and others who are going through a rugged life passage, there is an alternative, or at least a helpful supplement, to the medical regime we now prefer. Most people suffering through a descent can be helped by empathetic relationships and by understanding that what is happening to them is a difficult but normal human experience. They may be experiencing a descent and return experience that is as old as our species.

### **A Story of Sacred Descent into the Dark**

The oldest known myth that states this motif of a descent into the dark feminine was written on clay tablets in the third millennium B.C. as the *Descent of Inanna* (though it is probably much older, reaching into preliterate times.) It can be seen throughout history influencing the far more recent stories of descents into hell made by male divinities of which the Christ story of the stations of the cross, denunciation in the temple, flagellation, crucifixion, entombment, and ascension is the most well known. Here is the story.

Inanna, queen of heaven and earth, goes into the underworld of her own will — possibly to visit her sister, who is mourning the death of her husband and is suffering her own birth pangs in the netherworld. “She set her heart from highest heaven on earth's deepest ground. Abandoned heaven, abandoned earth — to the Netherworld.” This is an important difference from more recent myths taking root after the ascendancy of the patriarchy, in which female divinities were usually “cast into hades.” Inanna chooses her own journey.

As a precaution she instructs Ninshubur, her trusted female executive, to appeal to the father gods for help in securing her release if she does not return within three days. At the first gate, Inanna is stopped. She asks for admission to the “land of no return” to witness the funeral of Gugalanna, husband of Ereshkigal. She knows from the demeanor of this Guardian of the gate, this wrathful deity, that suffering lies ahead of her. True to form, Ereshkigal becomes furious and insists the upper world goddess be treated according to the laws and rites for anyone entering her kingdom — that she be “brought naked and bowed low,” the same way the Sumerians are buried.

The orders are followed, and at each of the seven gates of her lapis lazuli house the gatekeeper removes one piece of Inanna's magnificent regalia until she is stripped of all signs of authority or honor. The procession to deeper consciousness requires the total sacrifice of identity — the upper world aspects of the self are exchanged for the sake of the dark, repressed, undifferentiated ground of being. Thus she is brought naked and bowed low.

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Here one might expect a reprieve; having surrendered all her powers, all her ways of being, we might expect Erishkegal's permission to enter the underworld. But the archaic irrational potency of the descended feminine is neither nice nor predictable. It is the Destructive-Transformative side of the cosmic will. Erishkigal, in her destructive fury, flings Inanna onto a stake like a piece of meat and lets her hang there dead and rotting, green with maggots. The myth conveys the complete horror of this underworld death.

The stasis of Inanna at this point seems to suggest dissolution and slowness, both of which require great patience of those who enter. Once in the dark realm we are barely conscious. We are reduced to a slow decaying of all the "shoulds" — we are in the dark, amoral side of intuition. Here there is both inertia and an elemental healing source unknowable in the upper world.

After three days, when Inanna fails to return, her assistant Ninshubur sets in motion her instructions to rouse the people and the gods with "dirge drum and lamenting." Ninshubur goes to the high gods of sky and earth and to the moon god, Inanna's brother, and the sun god, her father. All refuse to meddle in the demanding ways of the underworld. Finally Enki, the god of waters and wisdom, hears the plea and creates two of the most endearing creatures in all of Western mythology. Enki creates from the dirt, from the humus under his fingernail, two tiny genderless mourners. They slip unnoticed into the netherworld, carrying the food and water of life with which Enki provided them. But first they align themselves with Erishkigal, who is both groaning the death of her husband and is voicing her primal birth pangs.

They go alongside and commiserate with her. They groan with her, "O my pain, my great misery," "Oh your pain, your great misery, queen of the underworld." They offer no solutions or succor to Erishkigal. They do not tell her how to get out of hell. They simply offer their empathy. Erishkigal is so grateful for the compassion that, at their request, she finally hands over Inanna's rotten corpse.

Restored to life, Inanna begins her return journey through the seven gates, reclaiming each of her vestments. Erishkigal rages a reminder that Inanna will need to send a substitute to take her place. The last part of the myth involves the search for her substitute, and the revenge she reeks when Dumuzi, her consort, ignores her and sits enjoying himself on her throne. This last part goes on in considerable detail while Inanna is remaking her relations with all of heaven and earth. This is a reminder that remaking the Self takes time and is embodied in our re-inspired life and its newly defined relationships.

The poem ends with the words: "Inanna placed Dumuzi in the hands of the eternal dark. Holy Erishkigal! Sweet is your praise."

### **Embracing the Forgotten Feminine**

To me, Inanna is the most meaningful image we have of the feminine when it is approaching the dark night. The poem suggests that if we follow Inanna into those depths, we are given a sense of the one cosmic power; there we are moved and taught through the intensity of our feelings. Here the conscious ego is overwhelmed by passion and numinous images. Shaken, perhaps even destroyed, we are coalesced into a new pattern with a new power to reorder our world.

For the goddesses and gods of antiquity, the descent was never a story of confronting a little bit of darkness inside themselves; of dipping their feet in their feelings, paddling in the pond of their emotions and trying to bring them into the light of day. It was a question of going right through that darkness to what lies at the other end. It was always a death experience.

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Over time these myths were amputated. Western philosophy learned to focus on the One, the True, the Good and the Beautiful, and cut out the need for the descent. This permitted cerebral-intellectual Apollonian, left-brain consciousness, with its ethical and conceptual discriminations, to become dominant. We no longer even notice that it happened. The problem is that when the divine is removed from the depths, particularly the feminine depths, we weaken our own interiority and start viewing the depths with fear. We end up struggling, running from ourselves, trying to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps into the beyond. But it is impossible to reach the light at the cost of rejecting the darkness.

The darkness haunts us. We may become obsessed with dogma or ascension, but the power of the descent is too subtle and too strong to be ignored. It is not even a matter of attitude but a question of perception — the perception that light belongs in darkness, clarity in obscurity, that darkness can't be rejected for the sake of light — because everything contains its opposites.

Inanna symbolizes that feeling capacity to evaluate periodically and afresh that comes with the inner knowing of life as a changing process. She is not afraid and does not resist change and the turmoil it brings. But her receptivity is active. For her time, the goddess Inanna (her Semitic name is Ishtar) provides a many-faceted symbolic image of the feminine beyond the merely maternal. Like Demeter, she is an image of impersonal fertility. She is also from the beginning a goddess of the heavens, of gentle rains and terrible storms and floods. She is called “queen of heaven” and the “morning and evening star,” awakening life and setting it to rest, ushering in or out her brother, the moon god, and her father, the sun god.

She represents those liminal intermediate regions and energies that cannot be contained or made certain and secure. She is consciousness of transition and places of intersection and creativity — all in human consciousness that is flexible, courageous and never certain for very long.

Most of what Inanna represented for the Sumerians has since been exiled. Most of the qualities of the upper world goddess have been desacralized or taken over by masculine divinities, or have been overly idealized by the patriarchal moral and esthetic codes. I believe this is one reason why the passionate, powerful, independent, self-willed feminine; the ambitious, regal, many-sided feminine, is now erupting through dark times in both males and females as a wrathful, withdrawn, wild, sad, grief-ridden depression.

To me, this is the key point: the descent is not, as our culture suggests, an aberration, an illness, or a running-off-the-rails. It is a vital, sacred, and irreplaceable part of human wholeness. I can think of no better example of how modern culture has lost its way than in the describing of “taboo” as told by Joseph Campbell. “The term ‘taboo’ comes from an ancient tribal island culture. In the sacred rites of initiation, young men were required to spend extended periods of time outside the protection of the tribe. This meant living beyond the markers that indicated the boundary of tribal protection. Those markers were called ‘tabu.’”

This underscores the wisdom we have lost: for while it is necessary for social order that we live within the boundaries of social convention, it is absolutely crucial that we also become familiar with the “demons” that lie beyond those boundaries. When we befriend our demons, we discover that they are nothing other than unrecognized angels — and that potent gifts await us if we can follow them into the dark light.

