



CHAPTER 4

The Mother of All Gods

Good evening women. Welcome back to the fire.

Tonight we talk about story – about the tremendous power story has to inspire and liberate or to control and subordinate. We talk about the power of story *to empower* ... and its power to silence, erase and denigrate. Tonight, we remember the power we reclaim when we refuse to be told what language we will use or what narrative we allow to become *our narrative*. Tonight we remind ourselves of the importance of vibrant, inclusive and diverse wisdom stories to a culture's health and priorities – to a culture's capacity to be a benevolent presence or a force of destruction.

In 'The Book of Joan', writer Lidia Yuknavitch warns us, "Be careful what stories you tell yourselves ... (about beauty, about otherness). Be careful what stories 'count'. They will have consequences that shiver the planet."

Stories and myth are the inspiration to our imagination just as they are an expression *of* our imagination. Stories play a fundamental and critical role in human culture; they serve to remind us of our purpose, of the meaning, value and responsibility we have to each other and to all our people, human and other than human. They also give us images and language for the unique brilliance and belonging, worth and relevance, that live within each of us; all of which are essential aspects that guide intelligent, benevolent and generous human conduct.

For better and for worse, it is true, that if we tell ourselves a story long enough (and, women, it doesn't take too long), it will come to *define, refine or confine* us. When individuals and groups take, or are granted, the power to write the culture's stories, they have an *ultimate* power. With the stroke of a pen, they can erase entire populations and the

historical facts, practices, intelligence and language that belong to them. And those within human culture who's job it is to protect the wellness of Life, can be redefined, silenced and subordinated by the violent insistence of just a few well-planned but nonetheless erroneous stories.

But let's remember a thing our ancient grandmothers and grandfathers understood and honored; that we live within an intelligent world, animate with intelligent beings each of whom has a soul, and stories are among them! Stories are *their own people*. They each have a soul. Like birds, field grasses, water and mountains, like air and the mayflies that are carried effortlessly upon it, stories live *among us, with us, and through us*. And, just like everything else with a soul, stories have their own intelligence and imperative, to thrive, take root and have meaning. The stories we feed and nurture, by telling and celebrating them, become stronger while the ones we forget, by denying and silencing them, atrophy and wither. But they do not die. And the living wisdom stories that have been systematically erased and replaced still live among us, like the forgotten spirits of our ancestors, waiting to be remembered.

So this, women, is a story about the importance of story, about which stories count. It is a story that speaks of the necessity to think independently, claiming which stories we will empower by believing and reciting and which ones we will disempower – by refusing to speak them, refusing to answer to them, by refusing them lodging in the intimate terrain of our blood and bone bodies, or the wild terrain of our souls.

But ... how do we know which stories are rightfully ours? Well, *that* is a contentious question. It is one of the primary roles of healthy human culture that it assist us to identify the stories that are necessarily *our* stories, helping us to listen for the stories that will inspire what is living uniquely and essentially within us, the expression of which is required for the balanced wellness of Life. And what do we do when our human culture has forgotten this responsibility, when so many of us are telling each other and ourselves the destructive narratives? When we are endlessly, violently, coerced into reciting and living these narratives?

If you are listening right now, chances are, you are not easily coerced. And you have likely observed that each of us comes into the world with a particular 'way' which brings with it an intelligent hunger for certain stories over others. It is an essential part of our wellness that we find the stories that are *our* stories. And it is a particularly damaging thing – perhaps one the most damaging things – when we are taught and told to listen to stories *that are not ours*, stories that devalue by disregarding, or outright erasing, what is most essential, brilliant and beautiful in us, when we are born into a landscape that is loud with erroneous stories,

whose purpose is to *tell us what to call ourselves so we forget, in fact, what we are.*

The stories that are ours to tell and live come to us in many ways cunning and strategic, sometimes stealth, sometimes with great force. Sometimes they come quietly like fox, darting in and, just as quickly, darting back out. If we want to catch these stories we must quiet ourselves, standing still long enough to scan in our peripheral vision, for the eyes looking back at us from behind a tree or across the river, eyes that will disappear should we look right at them. Sometimes they come as a feather-light evening breeze or a barely-there scent; one that keeps moving so we must learn to move with it. And women, sometimes they come right at us, like a galloping wild-eyed horse, tail swishing, nostrils flaring, unapologetically threatening our complacency and numbness. Sometimes we make a bold most radical move ... and we grab on to a tangled lock of mane, and we are swiftly lifted to the galloping narrative's broad equine back. Here we might ride for a lifetime ... or ... for the briefest of moments. But while we do, we are alive with the truth of our wild wisdom. Here we are an enemy of the disempowering stories and the humans who are profiting from them, for the wisdom that animates us subordinates itself to no one .

And it is here, we find the girl – who might be you, just as she is entering the powerful and dangerous terrain of young womanhood. Now a young woman, she perceived a great and increasing discrepancy between the power she felt in her body and spirit, and the demeaning stories she was forever being taught and told, stories that were accompanied by language that had no names for her, stories that carried expectations that had no relevance to her.

Among these were the endless stories telling her that, as a female, she should be afraid; afraid of the dark, afraid of the wild, afraid of being alone yet also of being seen or heard. She was told to be afraid of herself, and afraid of men and afraid of her sisters. She was warned to be afraid of her thoughts, of her instincts and of her pleasure. She was told to especially fear her emotions and her intelligence. She was told to be afraid of being taken advantage of but she was also told to be afraid of speaking up for herself.

Yet no matter how loud and even violent these small stories became, telling her to fear everything except her smallness, her inconsequence, or the innate inferiority that was her inheritance by virtue of her femaleness, she was *not* afraid. When we listen to the stories that are *our rightful* stories, even just enough to lean in here and there, the stolen strands of our wisdom and belonging find their way back to the loom of our wholeness, and here, the radical nature of our spirit is rewoven.

The young woman had already discerned that while there are many distinct stories being told, there are only two *lineages*; one lineage of story describes a man-made world where humans do not answer to Life or Death, and in this self-imposed orphaning, they are not concerned with the wellness of the world around them for they, and their new god, are above it. In these stories, wealth and domination are the noblest attributes, where men are god-granted leaders, and women are ornaments, objects and commodities. Where the diverse and wild world with its elaborate, intelligent, constantly evolving ecosystems of beings, are either resources for consumption or they are to be disposed of for they stand in the way of progress which is just another word for profit. So many of the humans she loved believed these stories as if there were no others; as if *these* stories were more factual, more intelligent, than any others. There were institutions established to venerate these stories, in which mostly wealthy men would create the rules which they would use as weapons to argue and debate about the validity and superiority of these stories' details and merits; where there seemed a constant need to establish and maintain dominance within these debates. And she noticed a curious thing that happened in the midst of these stories; they *demand*ed allegiance in the form of exclusion and intolerance. They required a never-ending campaign of violence to maintain their dominance. Those who believed in these stories seemed caught in a spell that required they disdain and dismiss *all* expressions, practices, languages and beliefs falling outside the very narrow, dark universe of domination and power-*over* this lineage of story described. These stories felt hard and cold within her, perhaps because she could find almost nothing within them that celebrated those things she most cherished; nor could she find any examples of her authentic experience and intelligence described within their words.

The other lineage of story, the one that felt *alive* within and around her, was more like a breathing body of story. It came from a place that had no clear origin, and was an evolving multi-layered universe of images, possibility and mystery all honoring the benevolent and omnipotent unending nature of Life and Death *within which* humans are inextricably nested, no greater or less important than the forest elephant, the meadowlark or the water strider. This lineage of story had no institutions erected to secure its dominance, for there was no more magnificent cathedral than the wild world itself or greater reminder of its eminence than in the perfection of each living creature.

When she listened closely for *these* stories, they seemed to come from *everywhere*. They dripped from the leaves when it rained. They sparkled in the stars as they hung in the night sky. They moved through her own body with every breath, with the miraculous experience of her blood and

the new, yet somehow very old, sensation of the fertility that had just begun to cycle within her. *These stories* were inclusive, they had a generative intelligence and thick wild roots, they had a buzz and hum that reminded her of the very pulse of the Mother; the pulse of the Earth. These stories celebrated the interdependent wisdom of all humans, women, men and those who were neither and both; as well as the essential wisdom of the other-than-human people; they taught reciprocity and accountability. And above all, these stores described the practices and ways of being that guide intelligent, respectful and generative human conduct.

And *this*, women, is how we learn to listen to the *right* stories, to the stories that are ours to listen to, and to live. In the very places where we do not fit, where we *cannot* fit, into the culture's small and demeaning expectations of us, the very places where we are inclined to make ourselves wrong, to doubt the empirical fact of our own felt and known experience, it is *right here* where we find the true stories that empower us, that *belong* to us; the stories that remind us of our rightful ecological place within the intelligent web of Life, for the benefit of all.

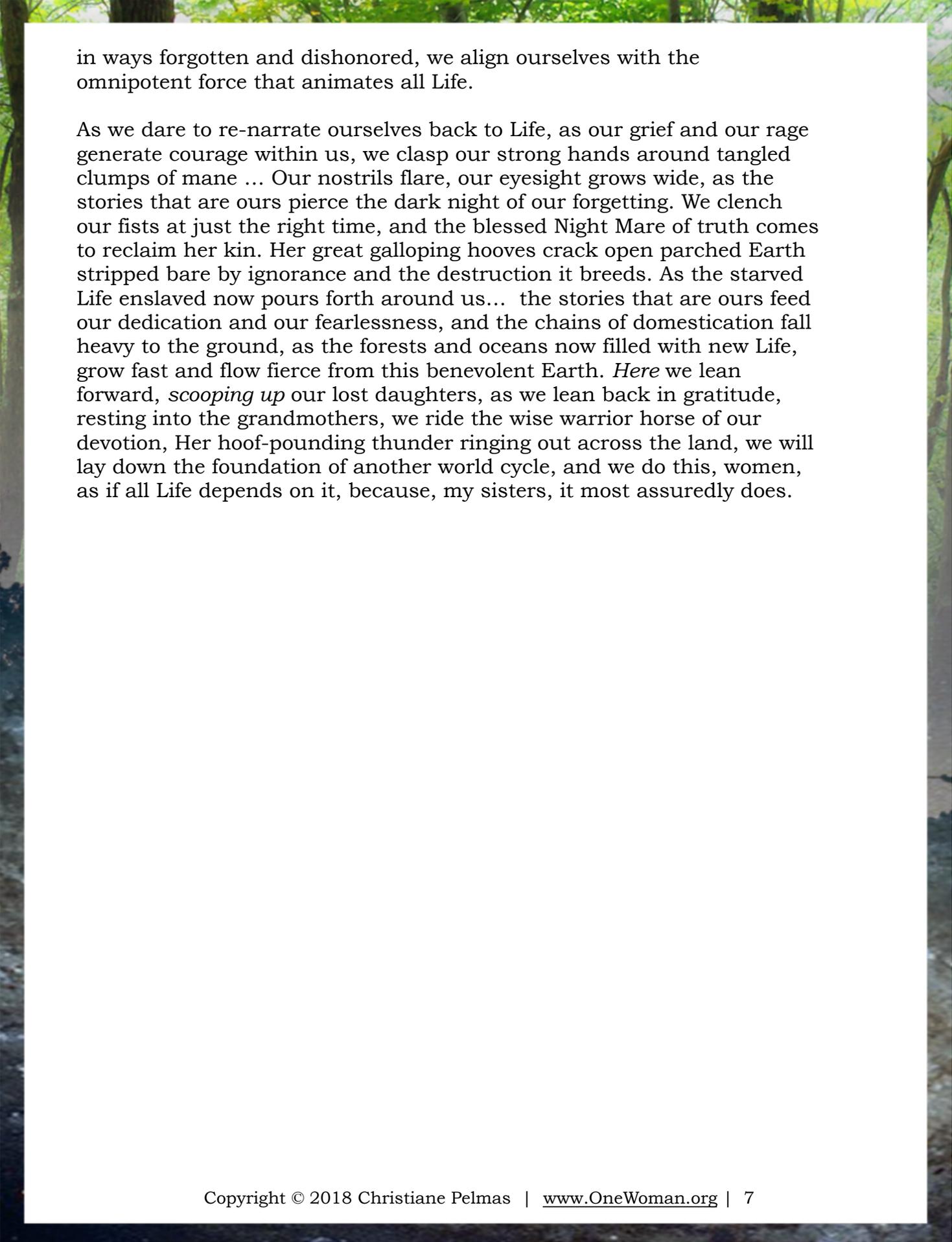
So it was, that as the too-small stories that *would not fit* piled up at the young woman's feet, the stories that were her stories *found her*. Though no one around her understood why (which, for these kinds of things, is often a sign we're on the right track), she was compelled to befriend the horse; to find ways to spend time with the horse as a way to listen, and feel, and therefore *know*, more deeply. In heeding this rather curious calling, little did she understand she was grabbing a hold of the tangled mane and scrambling to the back of one of the oldest stories from our female mythology; about the ancient partnership between the horse and cultures of independent warrior women who were called 'Beautiful Ones' for the way in which they lived their lives guided by their devotion as the single-minded protectors of the vast and beautiful ever-unfolding expression of Life that is this Earth and all its beings.

It was here, with her ear pressed to the Earth of the horse as they moved through the woods, or as she laid in the fields pressed to the Earth of the ground in her old way, while the horse ate the tall grasses around her, frequently raising its head to scan the horizon, that she would do a thing that to her, resembled 'remembering', though the curious thing was that she had never been told the things she was remembering, at least not in the way everyone around her was always *telling* her things. Nor did she have words or names to accompany these rememberings – because the words and names had been erased and replaced centuries before she was born.

But if she had words and names and the stories to go with them, they would have sounded something like this: once upon a time lived civilizations of warrior women who were as awed by the beauty and preciousness of the world as they were fierce protectors of it. Unlike the women of our day, these wild, warrior women, did not fear being alone, or speaking up, or being powerful. They did not fear their intelligence, their emotions or their pleasure. They did not fear the wild, or the dark. And they most certainly did not fear men or each other or any other thing for that matter. They did not fear any of these things because these warrior women were betrothed to the very thing that made all of Life possible. For these ones who tended to the foreknowledge and deep knowledge, there was only the service of their devotion, guided tirelessly by the fiercest love and endless gratitude.

The mother of these warrior women was Medusa, the beautiful Amazon Libyan Gorgon Queen, mother of all gods, She who birthed the gods before even childbirth had been invented. She who was the original guardian of Death and therefore protector of Life, who was adorned with a headdress of wise serpents, creatures who, for millennia, have partnered with women as those who share the magical powers of eternal life. From Medusa, as the mother of all mothers, the original Triple Goddess representing Wisdom, Strength and Universality, flows an endless and abundant river of warriors-in service to Life, women who sometimes appeared as women riding on the horse and sometimes as half woman, half horse. Warrior women who were said to be the first humans to partner with the horse, believing this noble generous creature to be the one with the power to safely transport human souls as they made the treacherous journey from Life to Death. She has also been called Saranyu, India's mare-mother; Athena, originally known as Neith also called the White Mare Mother; mare-headed Demeter, or Crete's Leukippe who was simply White Mare. Api, Artemis, Hestia and Gaia were also her names. They span more than 20,000 years of our history and they reach every continent and nearly every country.

Women, these names and stories are the silenced and denigrated heritage that lives in, and for us, as an imperative. They inspired and empowered our ancient grandmothers to hold themselves accountable as critical wisdom-keepers and leaders. These names and stories lived as reverence in our ancient grandfathers. Let these names, with the complexity, intelligence and power they celebrate, stir you awake. Let the living wisdom stories they speak nourish you with permission for women, the generative Earth is constantly telling its stories, directly *to us*, *through us and for us*. As the ones within whom "lies the unfathomable secret of the beginning of Life", the Earth's stories *are* our stories. They cannot be entirely eradicated or silenced. When we dare to know things



in ways forgotten and dishonored, we align ourselves with the omnipotent force that animates all Life.

As we dare to re-narrate ourselves back to Life, as our grief and our rage generate courage within us, we clasp our strong hands around tangled clumps of mane ... Our nostrils flare, our eyesight grows wide, as the stories that are ours pierce the dark night of our forgetting. We clench our fists at just the right time, and the blessed Night Mare of truth comes to reclaim her kin. Her great galloping hooves crack open parched Earth stripped bare by ignorance and the destruction it breeds. As the starved Life enslaved now pours forth around us... the stories that are ours feed our dedication and our fearlessness, and the chains of domestication fall heavy to the ground, as the forests and oceans now filled with new Life, grow fast and flow fierce from this benevolent Earth. *Here* we lean forward, *scooping up* our lost daughters, as we lean back in gratitude, resting into the grandmothers, we ride the wise warrior horse of our devotion, Her hoof-pounding thunder ringing out across the land, we will lay down the foundation of another world cycle, and we do this, women, as if all Life depends on it, because, my sisters, it most assuredly does.