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Excerpts from *Channel A Muse*

by Nor Hall, Ph. D.

Editor's Note:

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If you studied mythology in high school you may be forgiven for thinking the Muses boring: light-footed, ethereal, white-robed maidens with sweet, virginal voices who show up in classical dictionaries standing still as stone, holding an accoutrement symbolic of their territory — flute, scroll, staff, tragic mask. And yet, these benign looking creatures stand for creativity in art, music, performance, dancing, and poetry, which leads now — as it always has — to those intimate recesses where "sorrow enters the bone with stabs and hoverings" and silence protects us "until the moment when the sun rises, and memory with it." (Levertov)

The mother of the Muses is Mnemosyne. Mother memory. Memory draws us back in time, through space, to search for who we were before we were born, beginning with the misty time-before-time when the great Father lay upon Mnemosyne in a place remote from gods and mortals. After the seasons had passed once around she gave birth a little way from the topmost peaks of snowy Olympus to nine singing daughters, who are described as being "all of one mind." The Reminders. Their Mother's mother, the Mother of memory, was the Great earth Mother Gaia, foundation from whom all aesthetic blessings flow.

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Born of the body of memory, the Muses work as conduits for imagination: Klio celebrates history. Thalia is festivity, lyric and blooming. These two elevate the commonplace, making certain days extra-ordinary and therefore memorable. (Rilke's Thalian love letter to Lou Salomé proclaimed: "You are my festival!") Melpomene and Terpsichore sing and dance, measuring life's impressions in sound, movement, and rhythmic pattern. Erato awakens images of desire. Urania is the heavenly one who inspires through sweeping and exact planetary movements. Polymnia is the "many-hymned" who makes occasions for praise-songs. Kalliope is "beautifully voiced" and Euterpe, or "pleasure," is the muse who flutes inspiration. Even though these sisters have singular talents, they move in unison as vehicles of memory, carriers going to and from the source. They are not only inseparable — they are aspects of each other in the way that inspiration, form, content, and performance are aspects of one event. They are the great Awakeners, the divine uplifters of our psyche's life.

Muse movement often ranges upward. Even when one of the Muses is raped, she is not pulled downward, like Persephone plunged into the blackness of Hades, but rather she is transported by a great eagle who takes her in his talons. This upward rape is accomplished by a bird of the species called *raptors*. She is seized by the wings of rapture which is the other side of the hellish rape. To be rapt is to be transported by the Muse, carried away by a seizure of imagination.

It is said that the mountain the Muses lived on strained so hard to hear their singing that it rose higher and higher until it began to encroach upon the domain of heaven. The winged horse Pegasus saw the mountain coming and stamped it down with his moon-shaped hoof causing a fountain to burst forth. This spot became the pivotal dancing ground for the daughters of Memory. From this vantage they are able to lift the spirits of suffering by translating grief and harrowing experience into remembrance — memory becomes meaningful. They accomplish this with magically woven words, exquisite dancing, and haunting strains of flute.

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The Muses dance gently wherever there is a natural spring. Where we feel lifted and pushed by the bubbling of imagination, Muses are dancing. They are also known to be present at the less gentle dances of maenads, the moon-maddened women who tore apart the enchanted singer Orpheus when he betrayed them. The Muses are the ones who go around collecting the scattered limbs of a dismembered body. They reassemble that which madness tears to pieces. When a woman is in-the-muse, she is among the "mindful ones" who recollect. The Muses usually rallied in the night for mid-night processions or all-night "mountain walks." Hesiod says "...the dark earth resounded about them as they chanted, and a lovely sound rose up beneath their feet as they went on their way."

Who is the woman that rises up in you in the night? She strives to put back together what rage has torn apart. If you follow along, she points out forgotten parts of the picture.

When the body sleeps, the soul stirs. Someone gets up to run free, like the young woman who told me a dream of running down sand dunes with her mother, both laughing and singing, dressed in white cotton dresses of another era. The feeling in this dream is from an altogether

different era of happiness that the dreamer does not remember from an unhappy lifetime with her mother. Before going to sleep that night, she had meditated on her mother's graduation portrait in a small oval frame on the dresser and actually seen herself in the gentle, unlined face captured before she was born. The dream closeness made her see how much of a sister to her mother she had become, how like this woman she now dislikes. She's gained weight, wears dark clothes, does not laugh much — like her mother. Her shock at the unacknowledged similarity sets a process in motion, a reassembling rage forces her to gather shattered pieces of a vessel that once held her life.

Singing and running over the dunes are muse movements. It's their poetic feet that either strike us dumb or get us moving. Nadezhda Mandelstam watched her husband writing poetry:

"Restlessness was the first sign that he was working on something... When he was composing, he always had a great need of movement. He either paced the room or kept going to walk outside on the streets."

In one of his pieces he calls attention to the "worn splendor of a visiting poet's shoes."

Essentially the Muses inspiration comes feet first. The word that describes their hymns translates as "(feminine) wandering-journey-song," the *prosoimia*.

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Sometimes women discover that the image anchoring their sense of identity is inherited unconsciously from a personal mother. When working on the myth of Demeter, for example, and identifying with the daughter's adventure of leaving home to become entangled in the underworld of sex and survival without mother, I found out that my mother's mother used to tell the story of Persephone "by heart" at bedtime.

Our soul-work as living daughters is to keep the Muses out of museums, to keep their healing arts alive, to note the moves of imagination day and night. By day the nine daughters danced circles around wells, and on threshing floors where they beat the grain into golden halos with their feet. By night they lead us off, one by one, into the remote hills where Mnemosyne first conceived.

It is easy, in a world that does not value the patient work of the womb, to conceive of something and then forget about it. As in the dream of the woman who says, "I suddenly remember that I am pregnant and that I haven't felt any 'life' for months"... The problem of forgetfulness is not new. There was a Greek woman called Ithmonike whose story was inscribed on a clay tablet two thousand years ago. She was desperate for a child and had been unable to get pregnant. So she went to the healing sanctuary of Asklepios to ask the god to grant her this favor. The god said she would conceive and added that if she asked for anything else, it too would come about. But she said she had all she'd ever wanted and went on her way. She was indeed pregnant and carried the child well — but she carried it, and carried it, and carried it for three years until she finally approached Asklepios regarding the birth. She fell asleep in the sanctuary and had a dream in which he told her that, since she had come to ask to give birth this time, it would be

accomplished. Whereupon she quickly left the inner chamber, went outside the sanctuary, and gave birth to a girl.

Did Ithmonike forget what she was doing? Or, did she just slip into a long (familiar) memory lapse between the initial inspiration and delivery of her fully fashioned creation? Sometimes it takes years to be reminded of what we want to make of ourselves. Mothers often go for years without being able to show anything for all their conceptual effort. But memory finds a channel. Even when you cannot perform or deliver, your body holds on to what it knows and cradles it in darkness.

Nine sisters circle mortals at that edge of the dark — eager to inspire every woman's attempt to collect herself. They hold out eternal suggestions for how to proceed. Urania has evident devotees in those who figure out their journey according to an astrological imagination. And Euterpe reminds us of the place of aesthetic pleasure in the exercise of fashioning a biography. For example, Colette's prose is drenched in Euterpe's sensual radiance when she tells her many-layered mother-daughter story through the lens of the backyard flower garden.

Mythology tells us that we are blessed by the constant availability of these avenues of research. The only requirement is Memory's — that we seat ourselves in her lap from time to time and then remember what we came to ask.