

Facing Medusa: Alchemical Transformation through the Power of Surrender

Abstract

In Greek myth, it seems a relief when the hero Perseus valiantly cuts off Medusa's head, liberating her defenseless victims from being turned to stone. However, Medusa was a victim herself, a beautiful queen cursed by Athena to become the monster we know. Ironically, we each embody Medusa, often turning others to stone by objectifying them and robbing them of their humanity. By surrendering to Perseus' sword, Medusa is liberated from the curse while her streaming blood becomes a powerful life-giving component that can heal, and Pegasus, symbol of poetry, is born from her neck. Her victims, having experienced coagulation, the alchemical state of solidification, emerge from their prisons of paralysis and are freed to live their lives with new awareness. Encountering frightful Medusa is an initiation of epic proportions, and Medusa herself, an ancient shaman, demonstrates that embracing death is a key to transformation and new ways of being

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Medusa is the stuff of nightmares. With her hideous swollen face framed by hissing snakes, and her bulging eyes, tusks of a boar, and protruding tongue, one glance turns mortals to stone. The first time I encountered Medusa, my world changed forever.

It was a seemingly normal morning when a conflict escalated outside my closed door. The tension was building to an inevitable explosion, one I had experienced before, so I knew what was coming. I was terrified, waiting as the altercation led to imminent violence. Spontaneously, I froze, holding my breath and suddenly I slipped into an altered state brought on by fear.

I breathed into the fear, willing myself to stay with it until it dispersed--but, amplified by my attention, the fear only intensified into something far deeper and more sustained than anything I had ever felt before. I was frozen in place, feeling the terror. Vaguely, it occurred to me that this must be what happens to those who look at Medusa and are turned to stone: they are not dead-- but only petrified on the outside, no longer able to act, fight, or run away --while emotion continues to course through them.

Suddenly, in the very act of thinking about Medusa, I invoked her instantaneously. And there, in the imaginal realm, as I met her gaze, I was rendered completely and irrevocably paralyzed; powerless in form, turned to stone, as the terror continued its course. This surely must be Hell, I realized. No wonder Medusa is so feared.

Most of us have had the experience of feeling stopped, stuck, or paralyzed in our lives, unable to progress, to access creativity, meet deadlines, sometimes even to manage basic

obligations. Being immobilized is hardly pleasant, but it is absolutely a hallmark of impending change, and it behooves us to understand both the problem and the *power* of paralysis.

Disregard and Dissociation

The irony of *regarding* Medusa is that being turned to stone makes one an object of *disregard*. Disregard may be defined as a turning away from something one doesn't want to see; an avoiding or a dismissal. It implies a choice, conscious or not, to devalue, deny, or relegate something to total insignificance. In western civilization we have trained ourselves to disregard people, nature, and events as a mechanism to protect ourselves. Being the *object* of someone's disregard is often completely disempowering.

In their groundbreaking work, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008) suggest it is impossible to be connected to a world we continually fail to see. This separation or loss of connection manifests in *dissociation*, the distancing or splitting off of affect, a sort of psychic numbing, and in *objectification*, establishing ourselves at the top of a hierarchical structure where we become the "doers" and all else around us, the objects of our manipulations and our doing. Both *dissociation* and *objectification* serve to effectively turn us to stone, either by self-inflicted paralysis or by the immobilizing of others.

Dissociating enables us to feel safe by becoming numb. It cuts off emotion so we can tolerate certain behaviors, acts, or mandates without being overly affected, and it makes us capable of inflicting judgment or pain without suffering evident consequences. Watkins and Shulman (2008) reiterate that this kind of psychological disenfranchisement extorts a heavy toll as *passive bystanding*, *watching* without *seeing*, and *observing* without *engagement*, is a sort of self-mutilation, an amputation of our own sense of sight, a "severing of the self" (p. 66). This tendency has been called *percepticide* by trauma scholar Diana Taylor (Shulman-Lorenz &

Watkins, 2002), an act of *self-blinding* because to *see* and *acknowledge* the atrocities that exist would endanger *ourselves*.

Archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1975) suggests, “The eye and wound are the same” (p. 107): in other words, the *thing* we refuse to see and the *denial* of that thing by the eye that does *not* see are *both* violent acts which result in trauma to the psyche—ours and others. It is almost as if, through dissociation, we turn *ourselves* to stone in order *not* to see. Shulman and Watkins suggest that *when* the practice of percepticide pervades a culture, “watching-without-seeing becomes ‘the most dehumanizing of acts’” (p. 5).

In modern times, it seems many of us have become Medusas of myth; as surely as she turned mortals to stone, we have adopted a method that is equally dehumanizing, of not looking at all, or of looking without really seeing, resulting in a culture of unengaged, immobilized bystanders, going about our lives incapable of witnessing or deeply responding to a call. Not only that, but when we do “look,” our tendency is to turn other people and things to stone.

Objectification: Turning Others to Stone

Author Hazel Barnes, exemplifies this theme as she explores the work of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in relation to Medusa. Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, sets the scene by urging the reader to imagine looking through a keyhole. From my vantage point behind the door, whatever I see *outside* becomes the object of my attention. In this scenario, I am the center of consciousness, the “doer”, the subject who wields the power by directing my gaze to the *objects* of my regard. There is no need or call to reflect on *myself*. Then, however, I am prompted to listen to oncoming footsteps in the corridor! I look up to meet the eyes of another who has already been regarding *me* as I was busy looking through the keyhole.

In a cataclysmic reversal of roles, I suddenly realize I have become the object of *someone else's gaze*. Without warning, I am forced to take into account that I am also an “other” for others. The tendency of assigning other people their place in the world in order to maintain my own controlling position is turned on its head by sudden (self)awareness. The look of another *threatens* me, taking away my free subjectivity, and making *me* an object of their actions. My natural reaction, Sartre suggests, is to respond to this perceived danger by neutralizing the Other before he neutralizes *me*, taking away his agency by rendering him into a powerless object without autonomy or feeling that *I* can control at will.

Cultural historian Richard Tarnas (2006) reiterates the shift between an ancient earth-based worldview in which everything was alive and *ensouled*--to a world that we continually attempt to desoul in order to manipulate it. By imposing our own beliefs, desires, and values onto another that we deem *devoid* of soul gives us the feeling of having the upper hand and makes us feel safe.

This tendency toward objectification exemplifies the growing sense of isolation and alienation which is increasingly common among us. Ungrounded and removed as we are from a web of interconnection and trust, how else can we *survive* except as disconnected bystanders in a world that is increasingly intolerable, where 24-hour newcasts deliver horrific stories of violence, torture, starvation, disease, and man-made crises that affect the earth and humanity? Sadly, the act of disregard or asserting control leads to an irrevocable contagion, a chain reaction which perpetuates objectification throughout a given environment or culture.

This illustrates an important point. Watkins and Shulman (2008) claim there is “a collusion between *bystanding* and *perpetrating* that is often difficult to discern” (p. 80). As an unengaged bystander, *am I* in fact perpetrating damage on another? Conversely, it is significant

to note that Medusa is actually both a perpetrator *and* a *victim* of objectification. Though she unquestionably commits a terrible and destructive act when turning mortals to stone, Medusa was in fact the casualty of a terrible curse that transformed her from a beautiful maiden to the monster of myth. Legend has it that Medusa was a Libyan queen serving the goddess Athena who caught her lying with Poseidon in Athena's sacred temple. Angered, Athena abruptly cursed Medusa with the hideous face and head of snakes (Shearer, 1996).

In fact, on closer regard, we can see that Athena, an ancient vestige of the Great Goddess, herself was objectified by the modern Greeks who remade her into a staunch, rational goddess of wisdom and warfare, closer to a female Zeus than the instinctual, powerful feminine deity from whom she evolved. And *that* Athena, object of the Greeks own urge to control, *was threatened by* Medusa with *her* deep femininity and powerful instinctual connections to the body, the senses, and nature. This fear incited Athena to cast Medusa out. Medusa, then, objectified and violated by Athena's willful and deadly *disregard*, had no say in the tragic events that followed as she turned everyone who met her gaze to stone.

In current day, we see the same archetypal pattern emerge. With our capacity for disregard, we have effectively created a collective experience of the zombie archetype. In horror films, a zombie must turn others into a zombie at all costs in order to prevent being killed himself. Once achieved, that new zombie must do the same, and so on and so on until every new threat has become properly disabled and is no longer a threat. Soon, the entire population has become soulless zombies, disregarding life and turning everything they see into dead objects so they won't be alone, won't fear, won't be alone in their fear.

Alchemy: Coagulatio

Meanwhile, when we do find ourselves in that state of inertia, of being immobilized, objectified, disregarded, of being shut down when all our options or wished-for exits seem to grind to a halt, we tend to despair, thereby amplifying our feelings of powerlessness. But there is something to be said for a state of solidification, of *stillness* in which the body is deliberately quieted and all that was moving comes to rest. Only then can the mind turn to the present moment and become aware. By regarding our *selves*, by *engaging* with the moment, we no longer *identify* with being stuck, stopped, or overwhelmed by emotion but instead allow ourselves to participate in the unfolding of something new that suddenly has the time and space to unfurl and to incubate within. In the ancient practice of Alchemy, of transforming matter into gold, this state of stillness is symbolized by *coagulatio*, the union of matter and spirit.

Ancient texts confirm that coagulatio is a phase that allows taking root in the earth. “Soul begins in the moist solid earth, the realm of ordinary experience,” says Thomas Moore (in Cavalli, 2002, p. 146). “Without this embodied world, there could be no soul.” For Edward Edinger, coagulatio represents the connection of ego with Self, of individuation by creating a rooted, grounded, down-to-earth ego. Coagulatio can ground lofty fantasies and emotions that have run away with us, and “*fix*” high-flying ideals. It is about integration, a *re-membering*--a coming back together again after dissolution to join reworked memories or emotions so they deliver something new--often deeper insights, changes in behavior, and improved levels of functioning (Cavalli, 2002),

Alchemy itself is symbolic of the archetype of change. True change occurs with awareness and intention and a willingness to *witness and engage with the plight of the self and of others*. Carl Jung remarked that one’s vision will become clear only when they look into their

own heart because one who looks *outside* only dreams, while the one who looks inside awakens (in Tart, 1987). But, if coagulation is *unconscious*; it becomes fixation, *stasis* in the most destructive sense—related to its etymological counterparts: statue, stand, stay, *static*, *stuck*. Being turned to stone may *not* be a curse, but a *liberation*. The poet Rumi put it this way: “You think I’m torturing you. I’m giving you flavor, so you can mix with the rice and spices and be the lovely vitality of a human being” (in Cavalli, 2002, p. 192).

Medusa’s Transformation

I ultimately realized my own experience with Medusa was an invitation to regard my fear and paralysis, an initiation of sorts, to engage with my state to understand both the feeling of my own powerlessness as well as the way I objectify others and turn them to stone. Challenged by this new understanding, I decided to dialogue with Medusa on a regular basis:

The first few times I approached her, she turned me to stone immediately. I would enter imaginal space: call her name, seek her out, find her on a park bench or a rocky beach looking out to sea, and she would turn her gaze to me and immobilize me instantly. Subsequently, as a thing of stone, I was repeatedly violated and abused by others that made an object of me. Nevertheless, each new day, I returned, willingly surrendering to my fear. Gradually, I found, as the days of approaching Medusa wore on, it took longer and longer to turn me to stone. Increasingly, we would have a few moments of conversation before she suddenly got fed up or spiteful and zapped me. Finally one day, something shifted. On that fateful day, when she tried it, nothing happened.

I had seen Medusa angry and sometimes, not surprisingly, very, very sad. Her life was distressing, devastating even. The day she could no longer turn me to stone was life-changing for her. The fact that I could look at her meant she was being regarded for the first time, and this was transformational. She told me after that she had begun to think there may be others like me and wanted to seek them out and build relationships with them so she could have some semblance of her life back. Something shifted in both of us through that beholding.

Of course, it is clear that Medusa is more than merely mortal beneath the horrifying mask. By all evidence, she is an ancient icon of the sacred feminine, connected with the original Great Goddess (Baring & Cashford, 1991). Medusa’s frightening aspect, suggests Marija

Gimbutas, archeologist and scholar (1989), may in fact have been indicative of the goddess' association with death; with nature at the end of its cycle *before rebirth occurs*.

Indeed, author and poet Patricia Monaghan, reminds us that Medusa's terrifying face at Greek doorways reveal her powerful role as a watcher-- as one who *sees*, and as a guardian of the threshold, while her wings enable her to move freely as an intermediate between worlds. In the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, ancient images of Medusa with winged feet and a healing caduceus of snakes on her belly while presiding over childbirth divulge a connection to healing, fertility, and the deep instinctual creative aspect of nature (Monaghan, 1994).

Medusa as Shaman, Alchemist, Sacred Force (Initiation)

In fact, Monaghan points out that Medusa has many *shamanic* traits. Her affiliation with snakes, a chthonic symbol, emphasizes her connection to the Underworld, and signify her role as a *psychopomp*, an escort for the dead. Her ultimate beheading lends itself to symbolic dismemberment, a common event for initiates before being reborn as a shaman in a new body. Medusa's connection to Poseidon also links her to his trident symbolic of the *world tree* which shamans use access the three worlds in their journeys. Additionally, the archeological discovery of a Siberian artifact of a sun-faced shamanic being surrounded by snakes that appear to emerge from its head seems directly correlated to the image of Medusa (Monaghan, 1994).

Author Roger Walsh (2007) insists that the "confrontation with fear has long been central to shamanic training" (p. 60). I believe regarding Medusa is one form of initiation on the path to individuation. By staring fear in the face, the experience of being turned to stone accomplishes two feats: it encourages *surrender* to all that is and it *allows stillness* and silence to create space in which to regard oneself—opening the door to the alchemical phase of coagulation, grounding us and integrating our experience so new birth can occur.

Medusa's individuation: Surrender & Death

Walsh also reminds us that “Jung regarded shamanic imagery as an indication that *shamans* themselves go through a process of individuation” (p. 219). Over the course of my work with Medusa, as she gradually began to regard her own condition, she also began to regain her power. Through the course of witnessing her own deplorable state, Medusa managed to come to terms with her lot, no longer identifying herself as the victim, the hideous, cursed one who is reduced to *hell* or to *nothingness* by her fate. She also began to regard others (me included)--for *who they are* rather than simply as helpless, petrified victims of her curse.

Though Perseus was well-armed by the gods in his quest to kill Medusa, it is my belief that in the end, Medusa yielded to Perseus' sword of her own free will as a final intentional act of strength and surrender. In choosing death, she was granted new life. In alchemy, *mortificatio* is an important stage. Death is not necessarily an end to bodily existence in this realm, but a necessary change that must precede transformation. This phase is not without pain, suffering and sacrifice as the ego relinquishes the known and seemingly secure ways of being for the *new and unknown*, ultimately resulting in a new way of being in the world. It offers a reward, the loss of something lesser in lieu of something greater. Jung reminded us that the realization of the Self is always a defeat for the ego (Jung, in Cavalli, 2002, p. 150), but it is in service to being whole.

With the final capitulation to the will of the Self, Medusa was freed from the paralysis of her own state. She was reborn into her true calling as a goddess and a shaman, no longer the monster of myth. In death, her blood brings new life and hope with the power to heal. And, from her severed neck sprang beautiful Pegasus, new life which is also connected to “poetry”. (Downing, 1999). Even Athena placed Medusa's head on her breastplate, next to her heart.

Final Surrender

And, the story goes that through her death, all those she has turned to stone are released, completing their own initiatory process and allowing them to be reborn, free of the numbness and fear that has petrified and haunted them. Like the teleological pull of an acorn to grow into a massive oak tree, or a caterpillar into a stunning winged thing, we each have wholeness encoded inside us. The key is to surrender to the process, to truly regard it, and allow it to unfold. It is no coincidence, surely, that, as James Hillman points out, in alchemy there is an expression, *petra genatrix*, which means “out of the stone a child is born” (Hillman, 2005, p. 65). Marion Woodman (1996), Jungian analyst and author, says that “rebirth to a higher level of consciousness...is recovered through encountering the chthonic devourer, the dark side of the Great Mother” (p. 58).

I close with a call to *surrender*, to allow the aesthetic nature of change to engulf you, to embrace where you are *wherever* you are--and to regard it, gently tending and honoring the place in which you find yourself at this moment---for, in witnessing, engaging with yourself and others, honoring and regarding both... transformation—and then the *unimaginable* occurs. From 16th century princess and poet, Mirabai (in Mitchell, 2002, p. 79):

O my friends,--What can you tell me of Love
 Whose pathways are filled with strangeness?
 When you offer the Great One your love,
 At the first step your body is crushed.
 Next, be ready to offer your head as his seat.
 Be ready to orbit his lamp like a moth giving in to the light,
 To live in the deer as she runs toward the hunter's call,
 In the partridge that swallows hot coals for love of the moon,
 In the fish that, kept from the sea, happily dies.
 Like a bee trapped for life in the closing of the sweet flower,
 Mira has offered herself to her Lord. . .
 She says, the single Lotus will swallow you whole.

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