

## **Symbolism of the Black Madonna: A Jungian Perspective**

An Interview with Judy Zappacosta, M.A., by Bonnie Bright, Ph.D.

Sandplay therapist, Judy Zappacosta, first became interested in the Black Madonna at a suggestion from Dora Kalff, founder of Sandplay therapy, visit one of the mysterious iconic figures in Einsiedeln, Switzerland. Zappacosta was immediately drawn into the "silence and dark interiority of the Black Madonna, and has made an extensive exploration of the history and symbolism associated with her.

In this interview with Bonnie Bright for Depth Insights™, Zappacosta reveals the powerful and evocative significance of Black Madonna figure from a Jungian and depth psychological perspective, and shares how she can impact us both individually and collectively. Zappacosta is co-leading a 14-day pilgrimage to Black Madonna sites in Northern Spain in May, 2018.



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Learn more about Judy Zappacosta and the 14-day Black Madonna Pilgrimage at [CaringForTheSoul.org](http://CaringForTheSoul.org)

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BB Hello, and welcome to Depth Insights, where we take a depth psychological look at news and events that are going on in your world. I'm Bonnie Bright, and I'm the host of Depth Insights, and today my guest is Judy Zappacosta, who is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and also a certified Sandplay Teacher. And Judy has become very interested in what is known as the Black Madonna, so we're going to be talking about that, and also about the pilgrimage that Judy is co-leading in May of 2018. That pilgrimage is a 14-day event called "In Search of the Black Madonna," which will take participants to some of the oldest and most interesting Black Madonna sites in Northern Spain. So, this is a very exciting opportunity for anybody who's interested in some travel, some history, and also obviously a Jungian perspective, which we'll be talking about today. Judy, thank you so much for spending some time with me today. Welcome to Depth Insights.

JZ Thank you so much. Glad to be with you.

BB Well, I'm really happy to have you with me. I'm going to go ahead and read your bio before we jump into the conversation so that people have more of a background on you, and then we'll get to all the good stuff just as soon as we can do that.

JZ Okay.

BB Judy Zappacosta, MFT, is a Certified Sandplay Teacher and Sandplay Therapist of America, (also known as STA) and the International Society for Sandplay Therapy, the ISST. She has maintained a private practice for adults, children, and families on the Monterey, California, coast for over 30 years. The focus of her practice is Jungian Psychotherapy, Sandplay, Dreams, and the integration of Psyche and Soma. She consults and supervises therapists using Sandplay and publishes and teaches both nationally and internationally. She is Assistant Editor for *the Journal of Sandplay Therapy* and editor of *Pearls: Defining Moments in Our Lives*, published in 2014. Judy was trained in Sandplay by Dora Kalff—who most of you will know is the founder of Sandplay—and she completed the Body, Soul. Rhythms Leadership Training Program with Marion Woodman Foundation. She teaches summer programs for caring for the soul offering two-week intensive for Sandplay training in Switzerland and pilgrimage trips to Black Madonna sites in Northern Spain and soon Southern France. And of course, we mentioned that a little bit right at the beginning. So, Judy, you have such a really diverse background and of course, I'm always fascinated by the many aspects that Sandplay brings into any kind of a mix. It's really a unique practice, and while the focus of our conversation today will be primarily on the Black Madonna, I'm wondering if there's any correlation between the two that we should know about as we jump into the conversation here. Can you share a little bit about what a Black Madonna is first of all, and then how you became interested in it?

JZ Well, I think it's actually not too far a leap if you think of Sandplay as offering the ability to touch the Earth as sand as a symbolic kind of holder or matter and earth. And that the Black Madonna actually is very much related to the Earth's landscapes—found many, many eons ago which relationship even back to the early goddesses. So, we're talking today about a deep connection to what is nature, what is matter, what is earth, and what constitutes the divine feminine. I first got interested in the Black Madonna after Dora Kalff suggested when I was doing my Sandplay process with her to take a trip to Einsiedeln, which is where one of the more prominent Switzerland Black Madonna cathedrals is found. And after making that pilgrimage to visit that particular Madonna, I was very, very moved by the essence of sitting before a feminine dark figure that had such a deep interiority, maybe, to her that she just pulls you in, into darkness, into silence, and actually into mystery.

BB Yes. And, of course, this is the thing that's so intriguing about her—has always been to me as well. And what we do know—I guess maybe we should establish that for those who aren't as familiar with the concept—what we do know is that the Black Madonnas seem to be sort of found around the world. There are hundreds of them if not more, mostly in cathedrals or gracing shrines—often sacred sites, obviously. And they are something of a mystery though, aren't they? Because they apparently originated in early Christianity, but I'm sure if it's in your studies and engagement with the Black Madonna, you have come across different explanations for why they exist.

JZ



Well, it's actually really interesting because there's often a suggestion, "Well, she's black because she's Black." Or "Well, so many people have lit candles at the foot of her altars that she just naturally turned black from the soot of all the wax that has burned before her." But ultimately, there's been no way to know for sure what the direct connections are. But certainly, Marie-Louise von Franz suggested that the Black Madonna actually came back through historically from Isis, and the feted throne of Horus, and that this is the beginning kind of that was coming actually out of the goddess sites that were also found in southern Europe, southern France. Many of the sites-- the ones that belong now to the church—often sit right upon older goddess sites. So, it's interesting that there's a quality of relationship that reaches far, far back, and that we continue to kind of have to suggest what would make her black, why did she show

up as black. But for most people, she represents something that has perhaps been hidden away, perhaps rejected. She shows up as a figure, and particularly for peoples that have been marginalized, and interestingly enough, although the churches are where she's found, it's actually the people that take ownership in the region where she lives or she is venerated. There's an ownership that is taken up by the local people, that they are the keepers of—they'll say—"of the Lady." So, the Lady is part of their lives in a very everyday way where they go and they change her clothing; they have festivals, dances, lots of relationship to fertility, and motherhood, and things that bring them close to the people that are beyond the church's style of owning a particular icon, or a particular way of venerating her. The Black Madonna seems to have slipped through ownership by the church, although she lives within chapels all through the places that you usually find her. But where she's been found is often way upon rural wild wilderness places, less-traveled regions—lots of different ways that she has always been discovered.

BB You know, it's interesting because you had mentioned the mystery, and even as you're speaking and I'm listening to you describe the relationship that local people seem to have with her, for example, and how she is located in these sort of out-of-the-way places, it makes me think that—as you say, we'll never know—but this deep history that seems to accompany her wherever she goes, and that actually goes back to maybe even the Great Mother Goddess, is something that is so profoundly appealing, and yet it's not surprising to me on some level that, as you said, some churches have tried to describe a way the blackness of her skin by the candle soot, or that they have not really maybe necessarily given her the credit for the goddess because that would be contradictory obviously to some of their own needs. I'm really familiar with the stories of how Isis has black skin, obviously coming out of Egypt, and also there's been some portrayals of Artemis, who I've been very interested in for a long time as well as having black skin. And I know for anybody who's ever visited Ephesus in Turkey, which is the site of the great temple of Artemis. That's also said to be a place where Mary perhaps had residence, and so I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about the connection that she has to these goddesses and maybe about the worship of the great goddess.

JZ Well, if you think about the early goddesses—what was venerated—they were often celebrated with what was the agricultural kind of diversity of the land: wheat, animals, seeds, pine cones, early grain, almonds. And if you look—particularly in Italy—Lucia Birnbaum wrote a book on the Black Madonnas of Italy, and she traces all the way back to the early goddesses all of the early celebrations. And if you look back into those early celebrations, they had a lot to do with what was growing in the region. So it's interesting that as you move forward and these Black Madonnas are venerated in this piece of time, she carries the relationship to regeneration and the idea of seeds, black rice that cooked in her honor in Italy, local milk, cocoa, cinnamon, sugar, toasted almonds are all found within festivals and pilgrimages that have the Black Madonna association. If you go back to Ean Begg's work—he wrote the book, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*—he talked about Mary (as one of the reasons and why she's black) is that Mary lived in a hot climate and she would have been they said quite sunburnt. So perhaps that was one of the reasons why she showed up as a darker image, darker brown, because of the early portraits. So it's interesting, they try to reach back and find explanations of this how, this is why—but you really have to go back to the early goddesses like Cybele, Isis, Sarah, Persephone—who was thrown into the underworld into the dark—and they all have an early kind of precursor relationship to what later becomes kind of a veneration of Black Madonnas.

BB Yeah, I'm laughing still at the sunburnt idea. Of course, we know as we begin to look back into those goddesses and obviously to symbolism that many of the goddess images portray, and the association for example with the moon and the phases of the moon and, of course, the darkness of the moon, I think that we begin to start to see much more clearly some examples of what the symbolism of the Black Madonna might be. Who is really I guess if you could look at it from the standpoint the sort of the great goddess in disguise, let's say through the syncretization that's happened of bringing these ancient goddesses and rituals into the church when it came up. And this way people are able to keep those sorts of rituals and beliefs alive and yet integrate them over time into maybe their current belief systems that exist within an organized religion or church.

JZ I think you're absolutely right. And that's how these kinds of archetypal energies go underground for many eons of time as we know that there was these early goddess....almost kind of a religion and a way of life that was there...and then re-emerge when the time seems to be right. And the earliest times it seems to be, right, when you look historically, is almost back to the 12th century. And in the 12th century is when the idea of the cathedral actually became an important part of city life. There was never anything that was called “city” until the 12th century. And the idea of “university,” and learning, and intellectual expansion began to happen then. So, it's interesting that the divine feminine has been around in many different renditions for many, many eons of time. Particularly the Black Madonna—because she relates to nature, fertility, and the earth—has a much more human connection than sometimes the Madonna or the Virgin Mary of the church in a more Catholic style would be seen as virginal, perfection, untouchable....kind of the Immaculate Conception idea, where the Black Madonna is very much alive in terms of the people's ability to be close to her, to



relate to her, to find ways to see their own lives mirrored in how and what she represents. That's one of the reasons why she's often called the Lady of the Forest, or the Lady of the Snow, or the Lady of the Cave as Montserrat is often referred to, or the Lady of the Mountaintop. She's often called by many different names and that's why I think the people have a much closer relationship to her sometimes than other kind of really religious icons.

BB I'm so interested in the many different names of her. And I got really interested in the Black Madonna when I was reading a novel called *The Secret Life of Bees* which probably you're familiar with that people may have heard of.

JZ Absolutely. Absolutely.

BB So, it shows up as a theme in there, and I was doing the symbolic interpretation or assessment of this novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. And what I realized in that particular book is that—and actually, this is something that Fred Gustafson, who's a Jungian analyst who has written about the Black Madonna....I'm sure you are also familiar with that work—he says that the Virgin Mary is one side of the life principle, the light and feminine side of it. But the Black Madonna kind of picks up another side of the life principle and that is this capacity or opportunity for us to explore the deeper side of the psyche—the darker side; the side that may not always be positive, but may have really rich rewards for us if we're actually willing to come into some kind of relationship with that.

JZ I think we're in such need at this particular time to find a new balance point between light and dark and just the collective universals that are around us right now, that we're living particularly in a time of what probably many would refer to as “shadow.” And yet within the darkness is the light, and within the light is the darkness, and that really is the challenge and the task of coming into relationship with an archetype. It always will hold both sides of a tension of opposites, if you will.

BB Yeah. Absolutely. And you're pointing to something really important and that is that we are in great need of this particular aspect of exploration right now and relationship in our lives, and it makes me think about that book, for example, that I mentioned, *The Secret Life of Bees*...It's quite a contemporary book. And I noticed that the Black Madonna, it does seem to be showing up in various kinds of pop culture. And also, I noticed a number of books coming out, particularly from the Jungian world, but from others as well about exploring her. So, can you say a little bit more about what you see her offering as a symbol to us as a culture and as individuals?

JZ Well, if you have any belief right now that the patriarchy as we know it is kind of beginning to break apart and break down by our institutions, by everything that we're kind of thrown up against right now. You can suggest to yourself or at least consider that if things are breaking down, it also makes room for something new to emerge or merge. And if, in fact, we have energies that are archetypal and connected to a deeper feminine earth quality, then it would suggest that this energy of the Black Madonna has always been there. It's kind of been what Marianne Woodman would say, it had been *smoldering* and now begins to threaten and erupt in a way, in our planet, on our planet, and demand kind of a more conscious recognition. So, that would be redeeming, kind of redeeming what we have rejected, hidden, or not wanted to make room for as a balance point, which could also, for

many us, be considered the re-emergence of the divine feminine as something that had been cast aside or relegated as an unimportant piece during this kind of rise of reason, enlightenment, and, ultimately, a patriarchal way of life that's become too one-sided. And if we believe that things can become too one-sided, then really what the Black Madonna offers us is a balance point to come back into relationship with that which would be a balancer for becoming too one-sided in our belief systems.

BB Yes. It's so important, of course. And as we know, Jung talked quite frequently and profoundly about that need for balance. I'm wondering, actually, as you're talking about this...because for me, the symbolism is really moving and I find that there's something about it that has grasped me and makes me want to delve into that mystery a little bit more. You even used the word smoldering, which I thought was a very interesting choice of words because it seems so representative of what we're talking about here. How do you think, though, that people, ordinary people like us and others who might be listening to this, can actually engage into that relationship? Do you have suggestions about how we can begin to avail ourselves of that energy that exists through the Black Madonna and begin to incorporate that in some creative way?

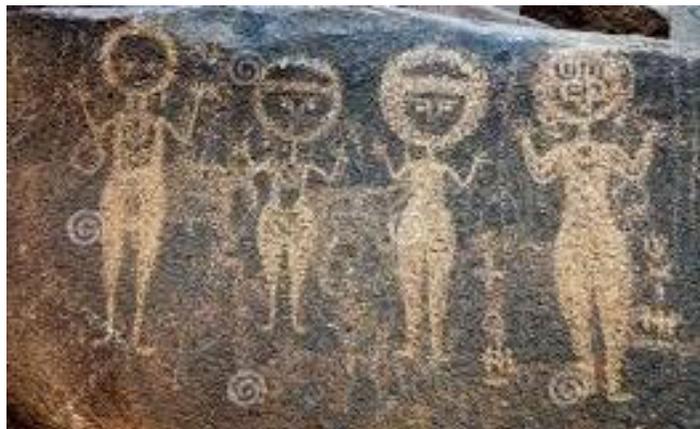
JZ Well, it was interesting: we did a group study trip last May and we were with 15 participants, and we were in the middle of Barcelona, where there is not a Black Madonna until you get to Montserrat, which is far out of Barcelona. But I set the group on a task. I said, "I want you to go into Barcelona this afternoon and wander the alleyways, wander the streets, and just look in a large urban city for the pulse of the feminine." And people looked at me and said, "Well, what do you mean the pulse of the feminine?" And I said, "Well, look for things that feel representational of what the feminine might be—seen in art, in advertising, in window shopping... Where do you see a divine or spiritual element of the feminine emerge?" And people came back with the most wonderful images that they took, of course, with their cellphone cameras all over town. But some of it was actually quite interesting because it was graffiti, it was literally graffiti: A woman drawn in chalk—white chalk on a black wall—who had many feet that were dancing in every direction and holding bushels of wheat. It was a very kind of primitive and archaic but very timely kind of image of the feminine in an urban setting. And other people came back with spiral that they'd seen on the walls and some kind of rendition of architectural design. And foods, that actually—as I mentioned before—are a natural connection to Black Madonna: energies that are kind of celebrated and remembered. I mean, I had a grandmother that used to make crescent-moon sesame cookies. And those crescent moons were beautiful renditions. You could think of them as the moon, or as the horns of the bull which often relate back all the way back to Isis.



You can see that the sesame seeds, the early kinds of grains, still follow and come through the everyday life of people. Whether you be in Spain, Italy, France. Le Puy, France, is known for its lentils. And what's in Le Puy, France?—A beautiful rendition of a Black Madonna, two in fact. One is called “The Egyptian,” and one who's actually called The Virgin of Le Puy. So isn't interesting that the everyday is right before us around the symbolism of the Black Madonna.

BB That's beautiful. I love that because what we're really talking about is how she represents, I think, the unconscious. And so finding ways through symbols that unconscious can manifest itself into some kind of consciousness, which we can then come into some kind of relationship with, I think, obviously, that's what depth psychological work is about for me, quite profoundly. And I love the idea of you giving participants the task of going around the city and looking for these kinds of emanations or manifestations, because we know they are in front of us all of the time. And when we begin to look at the signs and symbols that emerge, then we can begin to bring some kind of context to whatever it is that we're looking at. It occurs to me as we were talking about the darkness and the black and the unconscious, that this probably relates to alchemy in some way because you have the *nigredo* state, or the dark or blackened state, which is the raw material the *prima materia* that you start with when you're looking at an alchemical process. Without going all into it, of course, we know that Jung really saw alchemy as the individuation process, the process of developing ourselves and becoming more whole.

JZ Well, I would just suggest to you that you're absolutely right. The world of alchemy, and the world of the tarot card—which has the major Arcana archetypes—all came into this 12th century period where esoteric teachings, schools of initiation. The Black Virgins, Ean Begg says, are often associated with all of these things and alchemy as well. So, it's not a far reach, and if you remember in the 12th century we had what was called the *troubadours* who were the singers and the oral history tellers of the stories. And they were most active during that time as well. So they became kind of the folks that would pass along these messages and underground parts of the church that were not any longer being venerated by the so-called “church of the day.” But they lived on with the people and I think that's the local kind of color, and *The Secret Life of Bees* where the label of the honey had the Black Madonna image on it. I mean, I think that's exactly how it lives on and lives through. And also through the world of animals and instinct, because most of all the stories and legends of the Black Madonna, there's an animal—an ox, a cow, a bull—that begins to dig somewhere on the hillside, and the poor shepherd goes looking to see what's going on. And suddenly, there's a sacred well that holds a beautiful icon of a Black Madonna that's uncovered by an animal, not a person. So that brings us to the side of the instincts being very, very enlivened and part of the story here as well.



BB Oh, that's great. I've never heard that about the animals but it makes so much sense to me, and again, it takes me back to Artemis who I mentioned I was so interested in before. And of course, Artemis has a connection to bees, which I'm interested in. So I'm kind of making these links as your talking about it. I have to say, we're talking about the ways that she manifests and I think what we're talking about here is the ways we can start noticing in our own lives places where Black Madonna imagery or symbolism might be showing up. Have you noticed or heard stories of her emerging in people's dreams as well?

JZ Absolutely. Marion Woodman was most classic in her explanation and her understanding because she was very, very interested in the Black Madonna, as well as the energy that was reemerging during this time. But she'd often say that women that were coming into relationship again with their natural feminine impulse would often begin to dream of perhaps just a woman that was cleaning or sweeping in the room, that would be part of the dream material: a stranger that was standing in the shadows; or a child that was found at the bottom of the stairs that one had to climb down, down, down below normal flooring to find what was either lost or hidden that needed to be brought up into the light of day—or we would say in a Jungian sense—brought into consciousness in a some new way. So this idea of a locked away bird, locked away piece of potential that the child often symbolically



holds, or the woman in the corner that can't quite be made out but she seems to be sweeping and cleaning. So, in dream world—men and women's dreams—there seems to be a lot of imagery that would suggest that dark unknown aspects that need to be brought into some new light or understanding are waiting for us; are waiting for us now at this particular time. And that has such relationship to our recovering the health of the earth—as well as anything else— is that what we are not paying attention to is sometimes right before our very eyes in terms of how we take care of; how we learn to teach children to recycle; how we teach our own families to take actions that ultimately are in behalf of the earth. And if we go further than that, then we say in behalf of an archetypal holding of earth, goddess, mother—you know, our earth mother.

BB Yeah, I can really begin to see how critically important she is, and I really appreciate the way you explain that. And other things that are also emerging for me is you talk about that is I can imagine she's showing up in issues around self-care, for example—these things that need to be brought to our consciousness that need to be addressed. And then also in a wider world for any groups that are facing injustice or things that have been marginalized, voices that are not brought forward or allowed to be brought forward. I mean, there's a lot going on in our world today so I'm sure we can probably point to almost any situation and see places in which those kinds of things need to be brought to consciousness and then to be addressed and to be tended and to be dealt with. And of course, she is a Madonna still,

and so that brings forth the whole mothering aspect, too, and an opportunity for caring and tending.

JZ That's right. And that winds us back to those parts of ourselves psychologically that we have either rejected, or not paid enough attention to, or not believed we were worthy of. Clarissa Pinkola Estés has had a newer publication out called *Untie the Strong Woman*. And in her book, she talks about the Black Madonna as well, and her grandmother's way of burning wood sometimes in the fires of their garden, looking for the embers that shaped (by what was left in the ashes) a shape of what she called the "Dark Madonna." And evidently, her grandmother then would use those in her vegetable gardens to help the vegetables grow with somehow renewed strength and regeneration. But it's a beautiful story of thinking about regeneration of the earth, caretaking the earth, and if we think of that also as caretaking our own bodies as matter. Clarissa talks about "SHE" (with a big capital S-H-E) carries the ember through every dark as the image of the Black Madonna. I think that's beautiful way of thinking.

BB I do too.

JZ Yeah. Beautiful way of thinking about it that as we kind of look around us, that's exactly is how do we see this energy integrated as part of our life, and then how do we help regenerate and bring it more alive, and enliven it at this particular time. Because I think it is the energy that we have been lacking and then sorely out of balance with.

BB It is such as an evocative image, that of an ember. It does really speak to what you've been talking about—the regeneration bringing things back to life and enlivening them. It's really wonderful. I so appreciate your knowledge. And I'm really excited to hear about the pilgrimage that you're planning to Spain. I know a few lucky people will be able to join you for that. Do you want to just say, as we wrap up here, a few words about what that experience is going to be like?

JZ Well, I think anybody's who's interested could look forward to really not only just visiting a site, but learning how to have sort of an intention of bringing it alive inside their bodies, so that after a trip like that that, you just don't go home and say, "Gosh. I took this wonderful trip to Northern Spain"—that you come back actually with a feeling of how to live with some of these energies very much alive in you. And the ways we do that have a lot to do with the activities that we do in the afternoon of our travel days to integrate, which oftentimes may be doing mandalas. We may be doing prayer bundles. We may be finding our own stillpoint and standpoint as we watch and see how these Madonnas are shaped, held, and venerated. So, we try to really bring it alive in a very kind of conscious, personal, somatic way so that you come home with something in your body not just in your mind.



BB That sounds really lovely. Well, I'm so thrilled to be able to learn more about the Black Madonna. Judy, it's been just really exquisite to hear you describe her, and I really wish you all the best of luck with the pilgrimage. You've inspired me to take more notice of the places in my own life where the Black Madonna is showing up. I've been speaking with Judy Zappacosta, who is a licensed marriage and family therapist and also a certified Sandplay teacher. And of course, as we've been talking about, Judy is co-leading a 14-day pilgrimage, "In Search of the Black Madonna," to some of the oldest and most interesting Black Madonna sites in Northern Spain. And of course, that will include a Jungian perspective and all kinds of activities as Judy's just been mentioning. And if you want to know more about that pilgrimage, or about any of Judy's work, you can find out more at [www.caringforthesoul.org](http://www.caringforthesoul.org). Judy, thank you so much for spending some time with me today.

JZ Thank you, Bonnie



**JUDY ZAPPACOSTA, MFT**, is a Certified Sandplay Teacher, in Sandplay Therapists of America (STA) and the International Society for Sandplay Therapy (ISST). She has maintained a private practice for adults, children and families on the Monterey, California, coast for over 30 years; the focus of her practice is Jungian psychotherapy, sandplay, dreams, and the integration of psyche and soma. She consults and supervises therapists using sandplay, and publishes and teaches both nationally and internationally. She is Assistant Editor for the *Journal of Sandplay Therapy* and Editor of *Pearls: Defining Moments in our Lives*, published in 2014. Judy was trained in Sandplay by Dora Kalff and completed the BodySoul Rhythms® Leadership Training Program with the Marion Woodman Foundation. She teaches summer programs for Caring for the Soul offering two week intensives for Sandplay training in Switzerland and pilgrimage trips to Black Madonna sites in Northern Spain and soon, Southern France.



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