

The background of the cover is a vibrant, abstract painting. It features a central face with large, expressive eyes and a wide, open mouth. The colors are rich and varied, including deep reds, oranges, yellows, greens, and blues. The style is reminiscent of folk art or primitive painting, with bold outlines and a textured, layered appearance. The face is surrounded by intricate patterns and shapes, creating a sense of depth and complexity.

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THE **VITAL**
SPARK

Reclaim Your Outlaw Energies and
Find Your Feminine Fire

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INTRODUCTION

BANISHMENT

Before there was Eve, there was Lilith. According to a medieval Jewish text, God decided it wasn't good for Adam to be alone, so he created a woman out of the same clay and named her Lilith. But the two quickly fell to arguing. Lilith refused to lie beneath Adam, and Adam insisted it was his rightful place to be on top. "The two of us are equal," contended Lilith, "since we are both from the earth."¹ But Adam wouldn't listen, so Lilith fled. God sent three angels after her, but she refused to return. After this, God created a second wife for Adam, this time from his rib, so that it was clear that she would be secondary to him.

Unlike Eve, Lilith is one with herself, complete and unique. She is not interested in subordinating herself to someone else. She is, according to Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz, an image of an "unbridled life urge which refuses to be assimilated."² For her, autonomy and sovereignty are more important than relationship. Since human society depends on women's willingness to set aside their own needs to tend to others, it is little wonder that we perceive Lilith's fierce independence and assertion of equality as dangerous and demonic. Lilith is said to greedily wait at the bedside of laboring women, eager to snatch the baby as soon as it is born. She likely provided an explanation for the terrifying reality of stillborn births and early infant mortality in a pre-scientific world. On a deeper level, we can understand her as the shadowy opposite of a mother's love and concern. She is an image of everything a woman should not be.

The mythic banishment of Lilith speaks to a universal truth. There are qualities such as kindness, empathy, and agreeableness that can

help us get and stay connected with each other, and there are fiery qualities such as anger, shrewdness, and forcefulness that can help us get and stay connected to ourselves. Roughly speaking, the first set of attributes foster relationship, while the second set enables personal empowerment and assertiveness. Both ways of being in the world are important for psychological health and growth. Generally, women in our culture are permitted to access and develop the former qualities, while we are discouraged from expressing or investing in the latter. A woman's fiery nature can be banished because, like Lilith, her male partner expects her to subjugate herself. But this is not the only situation in which women may lose access to their "unbridled life urge." At work or in friendship, in marriages and partnerships with men or other women, we often tend to focus on the other person, sometimes at our own expense.

Most of us, therefore, get cut off from part of our essential nature early in life. As a child, perhaps you sang loudly, told jokes, laughed heartily—but soon got the message that you should be more composed and quieter. Or perhaps you spoke your mind with ease at the dinner table, but later kept your sharp wit and astute insights to yourself, because you were encouraged to be agreeable. Our fiery, independent nature goes underground and is buried under six feet of niceness. Our ability to be selfish and harsh gets exiled to the dark forest of our soul, where it can hardly be recalled. But these traits don't disappear, even when we banish them. They emerge as dark moods—irritability, resentment, or bitterness. They surface in chaotic or passive-aggressive acts that sabotage us or are ineffective—angry outbursts at work, a mysterious compulsion to shoplift. They turn up as symptoms—anxieties, panic attacks, or depression.

THE CENTRAL FIRE

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung once called this life urge that Lilith represents the "central fire."³ He believed that a spark from this central fire exists in every living creature. But as we meet the demands of

adapting to life, we inevitably lose access to some of our spark. We cut ourselves off from potentially valuable qualities in the interest of developing characteristics prized by our teachers, caregivers, or culture. We learn to hide our enthusiasm and feel ashamed of our audacity. We are taught not to be critical, selfish, or angry. The process of sacrificing our original potential wholeness to adapt to the world's demands is universal. We all must betray our essential nature to some extent to achieve external goals. However, this process generally affects men and women differently.

As children, girls are praised for being good, well-behaved, quiet, and likable. We are applauded for following the rules, so we learn to cut off our feistiness, loudness, audacity, and aggression. As adults, women may find themselves attuned to the needs and desires of others with whom they are in relationship, often in a way that makes it difficult for them to know their needs and wants. We strain to make ourselves appealing. We accommodate ourselves to our partner's preferences and subordinate our desires in the interest of our children's needs. We learn to be agreeable in social situations and at work. We are the peacemakers, the nurturers, and the facilitators. We make the coffee, do the menial work others don't want to do, or put our creative aspirations on the back burner to midwife someone else's project. By dint of both nature and nurture, we are focused on the needs and desires of others.

Research attests to the fact that, in general, men are more interested in things and women are more interested in people. Though socialization and culture play a role, there is evidence that at least part of this tendency is innate. For example, there are similar sex-based differences in the behavior of male and female chimpanzees. Male neonate humans are more likely to spend a longer time looking at a mobile than a face, while a female infant will be more interested in the face.⁴ Women, then, come into the world predisposed to being attuned to other people. In 1982, psychologist Carol Gilligan published her groundbreaking book *In a Different Voice*. Her work cataloged differences in how men and women navigate their moral

worlds and pointed out that women tend to be more compelled by care, responsibility, and relationality.⁵

Personality research consistently finds that women score higher on agreeableness and sensitivity while men score higher on assertiveness. What part of this is due to innate factors or cultural shaping is a fascinating and tangled question that is beyond the scope of this book to put to rest. What concerns us here, however, is that such a discrepancy exists. Because of this, the task of psychological development differs between men and women.

Women are the guardians of feeling values in their environment. This is a sacred charge of the feminine and should not be devalued or refused. The sacrifices a woman makes in the interest of relationships can pay rich dividends and be in the interest of sustaining and nurturing others, organizations, and the culture. Caring for others is often intrinsically deeply meaningful and can be one of the most gratifying things we do. A woman's ability to lovingly attune to and care for the needs of another is fundamental to the continuation of the species. But if we don't have sufficient access to independence and fire, our tendency to focus on others can cause us to lose touch with ourselves and the person we were meant to become. We can become alienated from our souls, which leaves us feeling depleted and inauthentic. Then, we must return to ourselves by reuniting with our Lilith nature, our own "unbridled life urge which refuses to be assimilated."

THE UNLIVED LIFE

For women, finding Lilith will mean reconnecting with the repudiated qualities that she embodies. It will mean permitting ourselves to value autonomy, cunning, and assertiveness in addition to care and relationality. Many of us will have spent our early years investing in our capacity for empathy, attunement, and nurture. This developmental focus will likely have helped us find and sustain a loving relationship, get along with colleagues, and perhaps care for children.

But, on the other hand, we may have forgotten what it means to be fierce and demanding. These banished qualities have been waiting in the shadowy corners of our souls where they have formed a kind of unlived life.

Our unlived life may be very different from the one we are living, and we may meet it first by seeing it in other people. Perhaps when we see someone else being audacious, cunning, or desirous, we feel upset, repelled, or even self-righteous. We can't imagine that we could act that way, and we may judge others—especially women—for doing so. If this is the case, you might want to become curious about your reaction. Strong feelings we have in response to someone else often indicate that they are displaying a trait we may need to own and develop in ourselves. Be especially wary of feelings that are toned with judgment, such as outrage, indignancy, or moral superiority. When these arise, it is usually a good sign that we are working hard to hold some disowned part of ourselves at bay. If a woman's stubbornness annoys you, ask yourself whether you need to claim your tendency to be unyielding. If she looks selfish as she pursues her heart's desire, consider what has become of yours.

We can't stay cut off from our vital spark without paying a great cost. Sooner or later, the unlived life asserts itself. It produces symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or physical ailments. It visits us in dreams filled with troubling imagery. It may even orchestrate accidents or spectacular failures to get our attention. If we continue to ignore it, we will likely become bitter, resentful, and rigid. When the unlived life demands to be known, we may feel frightened as our previous assumptions about our life and identity are challenged. We are asked to admit that we may not be the person we thought we were. It may feel safer to stay small and cling to our former certainty. Being connected with the central fire can be exhilarating, but it can also be terrifying. "Everybody is dealing with how much of their own aliveness they can bear and how much they need to anesthetize themselves," according to the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips.⁶ Staying cut off from our vitality is a form of anesthesia.

If we can embrace the challenge presented by the unlived life, we turn our ship around and begin our homeward journey—our return. This part of the voyage may call for a reversal of values from those to which we previously adhered. To fulfill the promise of our original wholeness, we must attend to and develop those traits and attitudes that have become alien and unfamiliar. They may even seem frightening and strange. They have been quietly waiting for us in the wild wasteland of our souls. Finding them will confront us with unlived possibilities and an invitation to reclaim them. Connecting with split-off or undeveloped parts of ourselves can enliven and rejuvenate us. It can allow us to become more of who we were meant to be. And it can help us move toward the potential for wholeness with which we came into the world.

THE POWER OF STORIES

Our tools for this journey back to ourselves are age-old stories and fairy tales. Stories are ancient medicine. They are humankind's earliest method of conveying wisdom. The insights they offer are deep and timeless and have to do with the very bedrock of our nature. Throughout the millennia, the keepers and tellers of these stories have, for the most part, been women. So it is not surprising that fairy tales should mark, with exquisite accuracy and poignancy, the main stations on a woman's psychological journey.

Fairy tales vividly image the retrieval of those split off and unlived parts of ourselves. They can guide us in recovering those values that were disregarded or discarded. They speak of self-betrayals and self-discovery, of aching loss and ultimate triumph. They are the storehouse of the essential psychological experiences that women undergo during our development.

“All fairy tales endeavor to describe one and the same psychic fact,” wrote Marie-Louise von Franz, “but a fact so complex and far-reaching and so difficult for us to realize in all its different aspects that hundreds of tales and thousands of repetitions with a musician's variations are needed until this fact is delivered into consciousness; and even then

the theme is not exhausted.”⁷ That fact is the psychological reality of our essential potential for wholeness, a potential that Carl Jung called the Self. If we have known fairy tales mostly through childhood films, we may be surprised by their darkness and brutality. The stories in this book are filled with beauty and magic, but they also contain images of violence and terror. It can be important to remember that they communicate their important messages in metaphor. Whether they are enchanting or savage, they reveal universal truths about the soul in the eloquent language of symbol.

“We are participants in a substantial and abiding mystery,” writes Jungian Heinz Westman.⁸ Fairy tales reveal this mystery by clarifying the universal substrate that joins us all. When one of my clients, Christine, was a child, she listened again and again to a recording of “Beauty and the Beast.” “I think I wore that cassette out,” she told me. As a teenager, she devoured *Jane Eyre* and it has since been one of her favorite books. In the course of our work together, we came to realize that these are the same stories. They both tap into the same archetypal bedrock and speak to a yearning for a closer connection with the masculine principle that a girl first encounters through her relationship with her father. As a child, Christine had longed to feel closer to her father, a distant figure often tied up with work who had little interest in his young daughter. The fairy tale reflected a yearning she herself could not consciously understand or find words for.

Jung called the timeless patterns that occur in fairy tales and similar material “archetypes.” The archetypal layer of the psyche is like an underground river that runs beneath each of us, connecting us to the inexhaustible storehouse of eternal patterns. We recognize that which is archetypal because of the emotional response it evokes—the shiver of truth, beauty, and awe. Archetypal stories move us and have the potential to heal because they remind us that we are a child of the universe, embedded in and held by the cosmos. The tales in this book come from all over the world. They feature heroines who undertake the difficult quest to find the central fire. All the tales are retellings in my own words of traditional versions.

These universal themes don't only show up in fairy tales. They appear each night in our dreams as well. Dreams and fairy tales spring from the same deep source in the unconscious, and therefore dreams can be full of sorcerers and treasures, talking animals, and strange transformations. Dreams are communications from the Self—the guiding center of the personality. They let us know where we may be out of balance or have the wrong attitude. They speak to us in the mysterious language of image and metaphor. Mining the wisdom of dreams will require us to tune our ear to their symbolic language.

When working with dreams, we assume that, most of the time, everything in the dream is an aspect of our own psyche. Dreams are one of the easiest ways to catch a glimpse of the unlived life. Those parts of ourselves that we have despised and shut away will visit us in our dreams, often in the guise of some element that evokes disgust but at the same time is oddly compelling. Aspects of ourselves that we have split off because they threaten our fragile equilibrium will appear in dreams as frightening monsters who chase or attack us. Dreamwork will be an important resource for learning where we have cut ourselves off from our vital spark—and how we can reconnect with it.

When you are gifted with a dream, ask yourself what the dream maker might be trying to point out to you. What part of yourself have you left behind that is now trying to contact you? Often, the aspect of the dream that is the scariest, the most enraging, or strangest represents some essential part of your soul that needs to be reclaimed.

GLOWING COALS

When repudiated parts of ourselves fall back into the unconscious, they become wild and feral—untamed and undeveloped yet waiting in the recesses of our soul with all their original energy and potential. The loss of our original wholeness is the price that must be paid if we are to grow up and establish ourselves in the world, but those forgotten parts are not lost forever. “The social goal is attained only at

the cost of a diminution of personality,” wrote Jung. “Many—far too many—aspects of life which should also have been experienced lie in the lumber-room among dusty memories; but sometimes, too, they are glowing coals under gray ashes.”⁹

Anna Mary Robertson was born in rural New York in 1860. Her father was a farmer, and she had very little formal education. As a child, she loved to paint what she called “lambscapes” using lemon juice or grape juice as colors.¹⁰ She recalled her delight as a small child when her father would bring home white sheets of paper. At twelve, she left home to work doing chores for other families. One employer noticed how much she admired their Currier and Ives prints and purchased wax and chalk crayons for her.¹¹

Anna eventually married and had a farm of her own to care for. She gave birth to ten children, five of whom survived past infancy. Her whole life, she loved to make art. She decorated household objects and embroidered. When she was in her late seventies, arthritis made embroidery too difficult, so she switched to painting. Her exuberant, luminous paintings with their simple themes of country life soon came to the attention of collectors, and she became known to the world as Grandma Moses.

Anna Robertson was born with a burning need to become an artist—a glowing coal banked under gray ash through all the long decades of caring for her children and family and managing the farm. Only late in life did this flame burn brightly enough for the whole world to see. In 2006, her painting “Sugaring Off” sold at Christie’s auction house for \$1.2 million.

This book is about uncovering these glowing coals and gently fanning them until they burn brightly so we can renew our connection with the central fire—our unbridled life urge. There are numberless possibilities as to what those glowing goals might be, and each of us will have particular aspects of self that we have left on the lumber-room floor. We will each have our individual un-lived life. However, there are broad themes in women’s lives that allow us to examine eight qualities from which we may have alienated ourselves and now need to

reclaim. They are shrewdness, disagreeableness, cunning, desire, sexuality, anger, authority, and ruthlessness.

Shrewdness, disagreeableness, and cunning allow us to care for and protect ourselves, respond to danger, and find our unbridled playfulness and humor. Desire and sexuality invigorate us and have to do with our capacity for joy and creative exploration. They help us to feel alive. Anger, authority, and ruthlessness have to do with our ability to take a stand and assert ourselves. Used effectively, they empower us. Together, these outlaw energies help a woman to hew to her own path and become the fullest version of herself possible. In the following pages, we will explore each of these attributes and how developing them can expand the personality and bring a greater sense of wholeness.

While many women struggle to develop a conscious relationship with these qualities, each of us will have our own unique experience of them. A woman might have no trouble at all accessing anger but may have difficulty finding her genuine authority. Another woman might enjoy her sexuality with abandon but have trouble allowing herself to be disagreeable. Developing any one of these qualities is likely to help us access the others as well, but we all might start in a different place and travel a different road to wholeness. Moreover, these qualities can appear in varied ways depending on our unique personalities and talents. One woman may express the trickster through her sharp wit, while another may excel at subtle political maneuvers that get the job done. One woman's desire may express itself in a creative endeavor, while another woman may feel compelled to pursue a profession or a spiritual practice. We will all have our individual experience of learning to claim these outlaw energies. This work won't be easy. As we grow into the fullness of ourselves, there will be losses. We may lose friends. We'll likely have to consciously sacrifice some goals and dreams so that others can flourish. Most of all, we will lose the comforting but constricting smallness that has helped us to feel safe and find easy approval from others for many years. But there will be many gifts—new friends, wide new horizons filled with unexpected and extraordinary adventures, and a life infused with a sense of meaning and purpose.

Women today benefit from the remarkable gains of the women's movement over the past century or so. There have been substantial advances in women's quest for equality, and as a result, we have an enormous degree of choice and freedom regarding all areas of our lives. But throughout my years as a psychotherapist, I have seen again and again that each woman must wage an inner struggle for liberation. Whether we are accomplished professionals, stay-at-home moms, women navigating a mid-life transition, or young women just getting started in life, we will have to contend with internal forces that hold us back, cut us off from our instincts, and cause us to question ourselves.

Many of us are caught in a pattern where we compulsively seek relationship—with friends, colleagues, supervisors, and family members. Without realizing we are doing so, we orient powerfully toward connection and seek approval rather than finding a self-serving attitude. Though we may be praised for our caring, our service is usually not rewarded the way we would hope, and we become cut off from our sense of deservedness. Doing the inner work of connecting with our vital spark will help us to claim our heroine's journey, heal our wounds, and assert our personal power. It will allow us to return to the things we love, become who we were meant to be, experience the fullness of our potentials, and have our unique voice heard. Many of our most meaningful moments spring from experiences relating to love, attachment, relationship, and nurture. Personal fulfillment often requires us to be bold, assertive, and fierce. To live fully, we must develop both ways of being in the world. Integrating these two aspects will allow us to live expansively.

This book is for any woman who finds it difficult to discern what she wants or to speak up for her needs. It's for women who feel cut off from their deep source, whose anger wells up from their gut, only to be strangled and silenced before it can be heard. It's for women who are too often tentative, apologetic, or uncertain. If you compensate for self-doubt with frantic doing, if you often feel resentful or thin-skinned, this book is for you. It's for the woman who has forgotten the wisdom of her body, a body that has grown alien to her. It's for

any woman who struggles with the tension between what she knows in her gut and the story that everyone else tells her. It's for any woman who spends too much time swimming in shame because she feels as though she is either too much or not enough. It's for the woman who doesn't feel like she belongs anywhere—because she does not yet belong to herself. And it's for the woman who has struggled to hear the inner voice that speaks with quiet insistence and lets her know what is deeply right for her.

Jung noted that when we commune with ourselves, we find “an inner partner; more than that, a relationship that seems like the happiness of a secret love, or like a hidden springtime, when the green seed sprouts from the barren earth, holding out the promise of future harvest.”¹² When we welcome our full self back, we can return to our aliveness and sense of being firmly planted in our own ground. We can come home to our body, its wisdom and capacity for pleasure. After a lifetime of worrying about what others think of us, of striving to please, of attending to the needs of others, we can take our own advice, laugh at our own jokes, and find ourselves rooted in our authentic desires. We can learn to hear our silence instead of needing to fill it to put others at ease.

When our fierce self shows herself, wild and assertive, expansive and true, we may demand that she behave or try to domesticate her. Then she flies away to some dark part of our soul, where she waits for us. We become convinced that she is a demon who must be held at bay, but that is only because we have refused to know her. Though she is a bit savage and uncivilized, she is also the very best of us, our brightest spark. She is waiting to return to us so we can access her wisdom, her fire, and her life.