

# The Vital Spark

## Questions for Reflection

### Chapter 1

1. In “Fitcher’s Bird,” the first sister readily gives the sorcerer something to eat and this seemingly gives him power over her. Think back to a time when you gave some part of yourself away to someone who was undeserving or untrustworthy. What happened that you felt compelled to make yourself vulnerable in this way? What were the pressures—inner or outer—that encouraged this act of self-betrayal?
2. The first two sisters break one rule by going into the forbidden chamber but aren’t fully prepared for this—they haven’t thought to leave the egg behind. Often, growth results from repeatedly making the same mistake before we become conscious and realize there is another way of responding. Where in your life have you had to suffer many painful defeats before you grew wiser and took a new approach to a challenge?
3. The sorcerer is a complex, difficult image—capable of great harm, but also possessing wealth and access to magical powers. He may represent the possibility of a connection to a transpersonal authority, but one that can be destructive. Have you ever found yourself caught up in something that you later realized was not what it seemed at first? Maybe it was an intense personal relationship, a strong political or religious belief, or even a habit that started off healthy but became obsessive. What aspect of this experience was healing or beneficial? What can you say about why it turned dark?
4. If the first two sisters lost themselves under the influence of the sorcerer, the third sister recollects herself. She trusts her own wits and is therefore able to rescue herself and her sisters. Think back to a time when you got yourself out of a difficult situation. What aspects of yourself were important in helping you meet the challenge? Which of your qualities made the difference?
5. The third sister employs the curious disguise of covering herself in feathers. Sometimes, to turn a situation to our advantage, we have to not care about how silly or strange we might appear to others. Have you ever hidden your valuable qualities? Why did you do so? How did that work? What were the costs of doing this?
6. The story doesn’t tell us much about what happens to the sisters after the sorcerer’s house is burned, but in the similar tale, “Bluebeard,” the wife inherits his wealth. When you have managed to work your way out of a difficult or threatening situation, what were the treasures that you gained as a result? In what ways were you stronger, wiser, or more resilient?

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### Chapter 2

1. The princess in “The Frog King” promises to bring the frog home if he finds her ball, but she really has no intention of doing so. Where in your life have you naively thought that you could get something for nothing? When have you felt that you had been treated unfairly by life because you didn’t get your way? What did you do about this? What did you learn?
2. The princess is forced to keep her promise by her father. She must suffer the confrontation with the frog part of herself. When have you been forced to acknowledge something about yourself you didn’t want to know? What did you learn as a result of this confrontation?
3. The princess finds the frog disgusting but continues to try to please her father by taking it to her bedroom. It isn’t until she lets loose her rage that she expresses her true feelings and flings the frog at the wall. When have you chosen authenticity over agreeableness? Was it difficult to do, and, if so, why? What was the result in the end?
4. In “The Little Maid Who Was Wise,” the eldest sister is moved to break her promise to her father when the beggar knocks on the door during a storm. Sometimes, our pity or concern for another blinds us to potential dangers. Where in your life have you been seduced by pity in a way that later proved potentially harmful? What was it that made you so susceptible to the plight of the other person so that you chose unwisely?
5. The older two sisters in the story are compelled by their desire to be charitable. We might imagine that they were focused on appearing kind and virtuous. Our society generally rewards kind and virtuous behavior in women. Has there been a time recently where you can identify that you were swayed in a certain way because you wished to seem kind, generous, or big-hearted?
6. The little maid picks up the big sword and cuts off the robber’s arm. This is a little like flinging the frog at the wall. Sometimes, we have to get in touch with our capacity for violence in order to set a firm boundary. Have you ever had to be very stern—perhaps even to the point of using physical force—to protect yourself? Were you surprised that you were able to do so? What did you learn about yourself from this encounter?

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### Chapter 3

1. In “Little Snow White,” the queen is envious of her beautiful daughter. Envy between mothers and daughters is not just the stuff of fairy tales. Are you aware of how your mother may have envied you? How do you think she dealt with her envy? How did her envy affect you? If you are a mother, have you ever felt envious of your child? What were you envious of, and when did you become aware of the feeling? Were you surprised by this feeling? How did you handle it?
2. Envy is a major theme in the story. Think about your life right now. What about you might others envy? Often, when others have malice toward us and we don't understand why, it is because they envy us. Where in your life might you be the object of envy right now? How might you be able to protect yourself?
3. The huntsman and the dwarves are kind to Snow White because she is so beautiful. If we have a quality such as beauty that makes other people like us immediately, certain aspects of life may come easily for us, but this can mean that we don't develop other aspects of ourselves. What qualities do you have that win people over easily? How conscious of these qualities are you? How much do you rely on these traits?
4. One of the most striking aspects of the story is how readily Snow White opens the door each time the queen appears. Where in your life have you been overly trusting or naive? How did you eventually learn not to be so innocent? Why do you think it was so difficult for you to learn that you shouldn't put your faith in something or someone?
5. Snow White's transformation comes during a prolonged, death-like sleep. This can be an image of passivity or even depression. You may have suffered through a fallow period of your life—perhaps it was one in which you actually slept a lot. Looking back at such a time, what are the indications you see now that a process of change was underway even while things looked lifeless? How did such an experience help you to transform?
6. The irritable servant plays an important role in the story. He is not charmed by the beautiful maiden who has become such a burden. When have you been treated roughly in a way that woke you up or restored your sense of agency? When have you gotten sick of your own passivity or lethargy and jostled yourself awake? What were those experiences like?



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### Chapter 4

1. Scheherazade must have had great confidence in her abilities since she wasn't afraid to marry the king. When we have strong faith in our abilities, we can take on problems that look daunting to other people. Cunning and trickery are powerful resources that can help us feel confident even in very difficult situations. When has your trickster ability helped you to navigate a difficult situation?
2. Molly Whuppie comes from abject poverty—her parents have turned her out because they don't have enough food. This leaves Molly and her sisters vulnerable, and they quickly find themselves in a giant's house. However, Molly relies on herself. She stays awake when the others go to sleep. When have you “gone to sleep” in a potentially dangerous situation? When have you, like Molly, been the one to stay awake?
3. Molly and her sisters make it away safely, but Molly learns that she can earn good fortune if she returns. When have you been able to face your fears? What helped you to do so? What happened when you faced your fears, and what did you learn from this experience?
4. Molly is able to best the giant repeatedly in part because of her small size. We may be small in size, or small in terms of how much psychological space we allow ourselves to take up. Being small in either way is often a disadvantage, but Molly uses it to her advantage. How have you been able to get the upper hand in a situation because you turned a weakness into a strength?
5. Molly's tricks result in the violent death of the giant's children and then his wife, even though she herself never resorts to violence directly. Molly simply engineers things so that the giant suffers from his own sins. Where have you seen an opportunity to allow someone to experience the natural consequences of his or her actions? Were you able to let that happen? Why or why not?
6. Molly must first steal the sword above the bed, then the bag of gold under the pillow, then the ring on the giant's finger. Each item is more intimate to the giant and requires closer contact. The more we face our fears, the more rewards we gain, until we receive the ultimate boon. Molly is much more ambitious and fearless than we would imagine, given her difficult beginnings. How have you prevailed over difficult circumstances? In what way has hardship helped you to become more resilient?
7. Trickster energy can be playful, fun, and delightful. It combats rigidity and too much seriousness. How do you make room for it in your life? How could you add more?

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### Chapter 5

1. In “The Pink Pearl Prince,” Nazneen makes a highly specific request of her father. She seems to know that the pink pearl is her destiny, without even fully understanding what it is. Many people can relate to knowing early in life that there was something they yearned for, even though they couldn’t know why or perhaps even put words to it. Perhaps they had an early intimation of something that needed to come through them. When in your life have you felt an ineluctable yearning for something? What did it feel like? How did you respond?
2. Nazneen’s sisters seek material riches, but Nazneen’s desire connects her with something beyond mere wealth. When we aren’t in touch with our desires, we can tend to fill up any emptiness we feel with food, shopping, alcohol, smartphone use, or other things that numb us. Where in your life have you made use of addictions and compulsions instead of listening for your heart’s desire? How are you doing that in your life currently?
3. Nazneen’s father’s boat cannot sail because he has not kept his promise. When we don’t keep our promises to ourselves, life’s winds will not fill our sails. How have you failed to keep your promises to yourself?
4. Nazneen is thrown out of the house when her father returns. Questing after our heart’s desire can make others feel uncomfortable, as it may challenge their choices. How have you been received when you have followed your desires?
5. Nazneen’s present consists of three boxes. This is likely not what she was expecting, and yet she receives the gifts graciously. Sometimes, we are longing for something in particular, but life offers us a different gift. Where have you received your heart’s desire in an unexpected form? How long did it take you to recognize the gift that life was offering? What did you do to accept it and make room for it?
6. Nazneen is able to save the prince because she knows bird language. This is something akin to being attuned to our intuition and helps explain why she knew to ask for the pink pearl at the beginning of the story. How do you make room to listen to your intuition? Perhaps you can write down your dreams or write in a journal. When has your intuition guided you toward a solution that your conscious mind would not have found?

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### Chapter 6

1. In “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell,” King Arthur must discover what women want. Men have often asked this question, but how often do women ask it of themselves? When was the last time that you really asked yourself what you want? How did you create space to allow an answer to emerge? What did you do to honor the answer?
2. Dame Ragnell is hideously ugly. If we are not conventionally beautiful, we may feel invisible. What is your relationship with your physical appearance like? Do you feel beautiful and confident in your looks? How has your appreciation of your own attractiveness changed over time?
3. Dame Ragnell reveals to Arthur that what women want is sovereignty. Sovereignty means, in part, the ability to make our own decisions. Would you agree with Dame Ragnell that this is what women want? Why or why not? What has your relationship with sovereignty been? In what ways have you sought sovereignty in your life?
4. Dame Ragnell won’t agree to marry Gawain in a private ceremony. She wants everyone to witness the wedding and is not ashamed of her grotesque appearance. When we feel inadequate in some way, we may have difficulty standing up for ourselves. We may want to remain small and hidden because we feel ashamed. Where in your life have you insisted on being visible even when it was difficult?
5. If you had to choose between being beautiful by day and hideous by night or vice versa, which would you pick? Why?
6. Melusina asks only to have one day of the week to herself. Where in your life do you carve out time or space where you answer only to yourself?
7. When Melusina is alone, she becomes a mermaid. How do you connect with your instinctual nature?



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### Chapter 7

1. In “The Leopard Woman,” the couple is making a difficult journey. How have you managed in your relationships when life has been full of challenges? Have you taken on more of your share of the burden, or do you seek to be taken care of?
2. In the story, the woman turns into a dangerous leopard. What happens when you get angry? Where do you feel it in your body? How do you express it, and how does it usually manifest itself in your close relationships?
3. When we get in touch with archetypal rage, we may become afraid that we will lose control or hurt someone. When has your own anger made you afraid? What have you done in these circumstances?
4. The leopard woman may be a danger to her husband and child, but she also captures food for them. Anger can be lifegiving, helping us to set limits and go after what we want. Where has anger been beneficial for you? When has it helped you to achieve a goal?
5. When Sedna becomes angry, she creates storms in the world above. Anger arises first in our bodies, and we may feel its effects on the surface only after some time. How do you know when you are angry? What subtle—or not so subtle—sensations do you notice?

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### Chapter 8

1. In the beginning of “Psyche and Eros,” Psyche is very passive. It is only once she has the confrontation with her mother-in-law that she begins to find her agency. Where in your life have you been passive? Where in your life right now are you reactive rather than agentic?
2. Psyche is happy to enjoy her nights with her mysterious husband. How have you allowed yourself to be unconscious about important things? Perhaps you let your partner handle the finances, or you allow yourself not to think about important issues that you will nevertheless have to face someday. What do you think the costs are of remaining unconscious of these things?
3. Aphrodite doesn't like Psyche very much and sets her many impossible tasks. Where is there an Aphrodite in your life? Perhaps it is another person who carries authority—a boss, a family member, or even a literal mother-in-law. Perhaps it is an institution to which you are answerable that makes many demands on you. What is the attitude you carry toward this person or thing?
4. Psyche must be sure to avoid succumbing to pity for the corpse if she is to complete her final task. Carrying authority often means making difficult decisions and valuing structure and fairness over concern for the plight of the individual. Where does pity get in the way of you making hard choices?
5. Psyche opens the beauty box, and the clever daughter-in-law secretly eats the talada. The stories show us that claiming some-thing for ourselves is part of assuming authority. Where in your life have you been bold in reaching for something that you want? How did doing so help you become more authoritative?
6. The daughter-in-law in the Indian tale is badly mistreated by her husband and his mother, but she doesn't try to leave her situation or seek revenge. Instead, she uses her wits to become a worthy opponent and, in that way, prevails. Though leaving a bad situation is sometimes the best thing to do, we may have more power to make changes than we thought we did. Think of a time when you were being treated badly. In what way were you able to become a worthy opponent and advocate for yourself or assert yourself to make changes?



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### Chapter 9

1. The girl in “Frau Trude” doesn’t listen to her parents’ warnings and becomes firewood for the witch. Where in your life have you been overconfident? Maybe you didn’t pay attention to clear warning signs that a situation wasn’t right for you. What happened? What did you learn?
2. When Vasilissa is troubled, she has an inner resource that helps her keep things in perspective and face hardships. When you are facing a challenge, what is your inner dialogue like? How do you talk to yourself? What do you tend to do when you are down or facing adversity?
3. Vasilissa has some wicked stepsisters who are selfish and unkind. Where in your life are you like Vasilissa, at the mercy of someone else’s meanness? And where are you like the stepsisters, pushy and arrogant?
4. Vasilissa must travel into the depths of the forest to meet Baba Yaga. Vasilissa is frightened, but she knows that she has her little doll in her pocket. Have you ever had a time in your life that felt like a journey into the dark forest? Perhaps you were grieving or depressed. What inner resources did you rely upon during this time?
5. Baba Yaga is an image of a powerful, archaic, transpersonal energy. Living with her, Vasilissa gets in touch with the raw, instinctual wisdom that Baba Yaga carries. When have you made contact with your inner Baba Yaga? What was it like?
6. Vasilissa uses the skull to light her way home, but then almost throws it out once she arrives. When we are adults, we may gain clarity about maladaptive patterns in our family of origin. However, we often find ourselves falling back into the same patterns when we return home for a visit. What are the patterns that you tend to fall into when you visit family members?
7. Vasilissa is able to bring the skull inside—she can now access her aggression. Where in your life are you able to be appropriately aggressive? Where is this difficult for you?

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### Chapter 10

1. Nothing ever seems to go right for the heroine of “The Ill-Fated Princess.” Where in your life have you felt that nothing ever goes your way, as if you were ill-fated? How do you understand that situation? What did you do to try and change your fate?
2. When the princess realizes she is the reason her sisters aren’t marrying, she decides she must go. She leaves home to meet her Fate. Where in your life have you made a bold decision to leave familiar things behind? How have these experiences worked out for you?
3. The princess works for a queen who understands her predicament and can help her with it. She did not find this same understanding and aid from her mother. Sometimes, we need to find someone outside of our family who can help us understand our fate and learn what to do about it. Doing this hard work of changing our fate always requires that we separate psychologically from our parents. Where in your life have you found help in understanding yourself that you could not get in your family of origin?
4. The princess must find her Fate and convince her to take a gift. Confronting our fate means being able to acknowledge both the strengths and limitations inherent in ourselves and in our life situation. When in your life have you been asked to confront your fate? What was the result of the confrontation?
5. The princess’s Fate gives her a ball of thread, but it isn’t clear at first how this will be helpful. Sometimes, life gives us unlikely gifts and we are not sure how they will serve us. What are the talents or fortunate happenings that you have had that, at first, you were not clear on how they would be helpful to you? How have they developed over time in your life?