

## An Encounter with Skeleton Woman\*

Memento mori, Memento mori, she whispered to me from the depths of her watery tomb. Her white bones which only moments before had been tumbling across the sandy floor of the seabed, now rose up and out of the water. Over the cresting waves and on to the shore, Skeleton Woman came running clackety clack into my life. Like the Fisherman in Her story, who discovers her on the end of his hook, I too turned and ran.

But our running gets us nowhere.

Stories come into our lives unexpectedly, and though we may want to run, and especially when we do, it is wiser to turn towards them. Stories offer us deep gifts for our journeys through and with life and with death. And in this time of Climate Crisis, of War, of more than human and human suffering, those of us living within the patriarchal and colonial mindsets need to remember what it is to live and to die well.

Skeleton Woman came to me one blue summers day, as I lay on a soft meadow underneath gum trees. She came naked of all flesh, her bright white bones stark against the blue. She came riding on a deer drum as I journeyed to the sound of the beat. My first reaction was disbelief, tinged with fear. A skin prickling fear.

When Skeleton Woman came running into my life, I had no idea that my cells were being transformed by Andeno Carcinoma In Situ (ACIS), an aggressive form of cervical dysplasia. My cells were multiplying and growing this disease. Stories of a deeply wounded feminine, and an out-of-control masculine were engraved in my tissue, written in my body, multiplying in my cells.

Stories are Alive. They are beings who come to us when we call, and who oftentimes come of their own volition, as Skeleton Woman came to me. Though this idea is not popular nor recognised in the dominant western narrative of colonial Australia, it's a truth for many peoples still held in a narrative of a world alive.

For those of us who have lost our way, and it seems much of humanity has, then these stories of a *world alive* offer us another way of thinking, and of relating to ourselves, and to the world. They are a gentle yet powerful reminder that there are other ways to live, other stories to live by. And right now, in this time of extraordinary peril perhaps we need to listen to those stories of a world of wholeness, and interdependence. A storied world where plants, animals, rocks and waters all have cultures and stories to tell. A world that First Nations people here in the multitude of Countries called Australia have listened to and told over thousands and thousands of generations.

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A few weeks after Skeleton Woman appeared before me, I went to the Doctor about a niggle in my tummy, a feeling of something being not quite right. I thought it was my ovaries, but the scans were all clear, so when a week passed and my Doctor called me urgently back into her rooms, I thought she had made a mistake. But it wasn't my ovaries that were troubled. It was my cervix.

Most people only hear of the cervix in two contexts (if at all), one for a pap smear, the other as the opening channel for the birth of children. Mostly the cervix as a part of female anatomy isn't given much thought or attention. But my work in menstrual wellness, had led me to discover more about its many roles and responsibilities in the female body, and in the continuation of life on earth. The cervix produces mucus which can support or repel sperm. The cervix can house sperm in fertile times, facilitate their travel through the vagina, and into the uterus. Or it can make such passage

more difficult. When conception has occurred, the cervix protects the growing foetus through its immune response and by creating a thick impervious barrier. It therefore plays a pivotal role in both contraception and conception. The cervix is essential to the regeneration of human life on earth.

The cervix is also a story keeper. She holds the score, but she can be overwhelmed, exhausted and numbed by the stories she holds. My cervix was telling me a story and she was asking me to listen.

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In the beginning of her story we learn that Skeleton Woman was thrown over the cliff and into the sea by her father, for “She had done something of which her father disapproved.” I wondered what parts of myself I had discarded living within this patriarchal narrative which shames and blames women for so many “wrongs”. I myself was a hoped for boy that came as a girl, so the wrongness of my birth story persisted within me through this larger cultural story.

In our western industrial civilization, with its creation stories of separate and independent selves, adrift in a blue planet there is much debris on the sea floor. There is much that has been relegated to the watery depths. Feminine power and knowing, and all those peoples and knowledge systems aligned with the feminine, for instance, the life/death/life cycles, embodied spirituality, Indigenous wisdom, and Goddess religions. Within this narrative intuition, the heart, right brain thinking and our deep entanglement with life on earth are also subjugated.

But the feminine, like Skeleton Woman, persists. The bones of these stories are rising from the sea bed. Their voices are getting louder, and there comes a time, when we find ourselves hooked onto them, and through we may initially run, our task is to turn towards them.

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For all his running from her, the fisherman in her story, finally relaxes and lets Skeleton Woman be. He softens. His fear diminishes and ‘a feeling of some kindness’ arises. He begins to untangle the tangle of her bones. He rights her body, taking fibula and tibia from over clavicle and lays them down below. He works patiently through the night soothing her with calming words, tending to her.

Like the fisherman in her tale, I saw something in myself worth tending. Skeleton Woman had come into my life, and I knew enough to respect her presence and to act like the fisherman to right myself, to clear away debris and untangle the messiness of my living. This constant pushing, and striving, and busyness. This running that was getting me nowhere.

I was running from my grief of a world on fire. I was running from my grief for the personal pain and shame I had inherited and experienced, and now I had nowhere to run. I had to face my ACIS. I had to slow down and face all the parts of myself still tangled and knotted in my own unconscious. The fisherman is an ordinary man, he is the masculine who is willing and able to be with and tend to the mess of the maligned feminine. He is the masculine willing to restore her place in him/her/hyself and in the world. I had to tend to that which was written in my body and in my multiplying cells.

Having been untangled by the kind fisherman, Skeleton Woman sits and watches him as he sleeps. She sees a tear escape from his eye, and recognising her deep thirst, she “puts her mouth... to the tear and drank and drank and drank”. This tear satisfies a long deep thirst within her. This tear of kindness, of compassion, of grief is nourishing. And she is willing to drink it in. She drinks of this tear.

Tears and grief are necessary parts of our healing. Loss is true and real. In this time of Climate Crisis, where the Australian bushfires of 19/20 led to the loss of roughly 3 billion animals, we must feel our grief. Three billion lives lost in a blaze that that choked our breath for weeks on end, that

overwhelmed our hearing and startled our senses. Pacific Climate Warriors are fighting for their homelands, for their culture and life and the War in Gaza continues on and on. We are wise to be courageous like the Fisherman, to be willing to show the tears of compassion to ourselves, for our communities grieving such devastating loss, and for our part in the continuation of inadequate narratives. Skeleton woman invites us to drink of this tear. How else should we or could we really respond to the traumatic times we are all living in?

Our tears and our grief can be a way into right action, into care and creativity. Just as I had to listen to the Stories alive in my cervix and in my heart, all of us are offered the gifts of the fisherman and Skeleton woman. All of us invited to listen to the stories the fires, the floods, that mass extinctions, the refugees, and that dead are telling us. It is this patient, willing and resourceful work of ordinary people who can restore the world Alive.

After my diagnosis I turned towards the ACIS, and to my cervix. I called in rest and rejuvenation. I called in somatic awareness and listening. I called in birdsong, and soul song. I tended to my internalized shame. I called my grief home. And still my cells multiplied. Still the ACIS grew from the edges of my cervical crypts out into my body.

In November 2017 after a second cone biopsy, I learnt from a doctor over the phone that I had cervical cancer. What could I do but weep? I put the phone down and ran out to the garden, lay belly down on the grass and wept. I let my tears flow down into the earth. And I drank of them.

Having Cancer is not what I imagined. It is not a battle that you win or lose, though that is a narrative writ large in our culture of domination and control. The cancer is you. It is me, this cervical cancer, a story of me, written into my body over and over. Having Cancer was a deep call within. I was pulled further into my own heart, further into my sorrows, and further into my love, the great loves of my life, and into love itself. This Cancer was a bone deep dance with myself and the World, propelled by my meeting with Death and with Skeleton Woman.

Having drunk of his tears Skeleton Woman reaches deep into the fisherman's body. She pulls out his heart and drums it. His heart becomes a mighty drum, and she bangs out a restorative rhythm. And as she does, she sways, she sings and her body begins to re flesh itself. I too was beating out the rhythms of my heart, singing up the loves for a World Alive and my place within it.

While fleshing herself out with the drum Skelton Woman was reminding me to be present to all that was alive in me, and in the earth. Her invitation was to re flesh and regenerate myself in very bodied and deeply spiritual ways. In nearly every culture ecstatic dance, drumming and singing were and are means to actively engage in the cycles of life death life. These are portals into the seen and unseen worlds. I was being shown to deepen my engagement with drumming and dance, to dive deeper into my grief, and my joy.

Though embodiment is central to the story of Skeleton Woman it is sorely missing in the cultural narratives, which separate head from heart, human from more than human, intellect from feeling. But the fisherman shows us we can offer our hearts back to the world. Our hearts with all the grief and all the love can lead us back into ecstasy and union with Life/Death/Life. For he and Skeleton Woman come to find themselves tangled under the covers 'in a good and lasting way'.

And so we ask ourselves too, what is a good and lasting way of loving and living? Not only for ourselves but in ways that honour those who came before and will come after us

At the end of the Story, we learn that Skeleton Woman and the fisherman live out their days, well fed by the creatures she had known in her life under water. If we are to feed ourselves and future

generations such nourishing possibilities and to meet the challenges of these extraordinary times we would do well to listen to the wisdom of Skeleton Woman. We would do well to untangle the wounding of our ways, restore the feminine and Life/Death/Life cycles, give a tear to our grief, and offer our hearts back to the world.

\*The Story of Skeleton Woman was Gifted to Clarissa Pinkola Estes by Mary Uukalat and was then shared with the world through her phenomenal book, *Women who Run with the Wolves!* The quotes in this essay are from my 1992 Rider version of this book.