

DEMETER & PERESPHONE PLAY-ACT

The following is a greatly simplified version of the myth of Demeter & Persephone that takes the two myths (abduction or willingness) and meets them somewhere in the middle. As a female grows and leaves her mother, it is not easy for either mother or daughter. Very often, in many experiences, there is a man involved somewhere (as there was Hades) ...the following play-act is a simple one, but even the most shy participants can join in easily. And new people found it easier to understand the myth once they have participated in this.

The stage is the entire room, so feel free to spread out to have room to move. The creativity can be as much or as little as you want. As for props, simple is better. The soul masks worked for us, because, as “luck” would have it, the newest people each chose “soul” and they were very happy at being able to “hide” behind their masks. In fact, I would say to be sure to have a random drawing and let the Goddess choose the parts, as ours were perfect. Do not worry about who is chosen as “Persephone” because we are all beautiful women. In our case, the youngest woman in the room was chosen as Persephone, which was quite appropriate, too. She made a beautiful Persephone and was long overdo the adulation Persephone received. If an older woman gets it, so much the better. At one point, Demeter and Persephone began talking from their hearts, which is as it should be. The dialogue is only given as a guide. Go with the flow.

PASS A BASKET AROUND AND HAVE EACH PARTICIPANT TAKE SOMETHING OUT OF IT. Items in the basket include:

- Flower, or picture of flower
- Leaf, or picture of tree
- “Mother” (only 1)
- “Daughter” (only 1)
- “Soul” (or you can use a picture of a human face)

Have enough items for one for each participant, no more, no less. You can also add in “vine” or any other interesting element of nature that will be affected by this story. The “Souls” play 2 parts: dead souls and live people. I had them run from one side of the room to the other to play those parts, in order to keep them truly separate in their minds. The masks can lie on the side of the room where the souls will be (in the underworld). Explain to everyone that the object each chose is her role in the telling of the myth. Everyone may remain in their seats until their part in the story has arrived. The dialogue can be repeated by the players or just used as a guide as the story is played out, depending on the players.

Read the story and have participants act out the roles, pausing in your reading while they do their parts. This is as much about their experience as your reading.

PROPS, IF YOU LIKE: Watering can (for Demeter). Poster of Jack Sparrow (or some other equally appealing man). Scream masks (one for each “soul” you have). I made my Scream masks out of small white poster board and paint stirrers—drew a simple sad face on each one, cut it out, and stapled it to the stirrer--fast and easy!

Story:

“There once was no winter. Leaves and vines, flowers and grass grew into fullness and faded into decay, then began again in unceasing rhythms. (*flowers & trees come and act out roles, blooming, growing, being flowers and trees going through the seasons*) Demeter oversaw them all (*Mother comes to stage, happily surveys her world*). Demeter was the Grain Goddess of the Harvest. She had many children and loved them all, but the most beautiful one of all was Persephone (*Daughter comes beautifully to stage*). Persephone stood tall and willowy in the field (*Persephone acts willowy*), swaying with the wind, and everyone who saw her sighed out loud at her beauty (*everyone sighs*). She was also very kind and treated everyone she saw with respect. (*Persephone goes around greeting trees and flowers.*)

Everyone loved her, but her mother, Demeter, loved her most of all (*they hug*). While she watered and fed the many plants and trees on the earth, (*Demeter waters & feeds; flowers and trees respond*), Demeter would watch proudly as Persephone played in the field...dancing and spinning and skipping. ... (*Persephone dances, spins, skips*)...but [and here is where the two tales differ] she was not the only one who watched her daughter!

[Now, I have learned from my experiences that a male almost always figures in somewhere as a daughter is leaving her mother. So, let’s consider that option today in our story.]

From his opening to the Underworld, Hades watched Persephone, too. (Show picture of “Hades”—*I hung him on the back of a door, then opened the door “to the underworld” to reveal him.*) Now, Hades was not a happy fellow. How could he be? His home was dark and cold and gloomy. His job—making prisoners—had little joy in it. He spent most of his days being quite grouchy.

One day, Persephone caught his eye (like she did everyone). She was so beautiful! So full of light! (*Persephone displays beauty and light*) Hades fell in love. He returned to his gloomy home (*remove picture from sight*), but he could not stop thinking about Persephone up on earth, frolicking in the fields (*Persephone frolics*). Finally, he couldn’t stand it anymore. He returned to earth (*return picture*), determined to convince Persephone to return with him to the Underworld.

Persephone was skipping and dancing in the sunshine when she spotted Hades watching her again from the shade of a tree. (Hades did not like the sun.) She stopped, intrigued.

“Hello,” she greeted him. “I’m Persephone. Who are you?” She walks up to him.

Hades wasn’t good at speaking...he had done so little of it! Finally, in desperation he resorted to what he understood—taking souls to the Underworld whether they wanted to go or not. Jumping out, he wrapped his cold clammy arms around Persephone’s warmth and dragged her to his home. (*Persephone goes to underworld.*) And on earth, Demeter suddenly stops her watering and loving of her plants. (*Demeter acts accordingly.*) Something is wrong! Persephone is gone! (Isn’t it something how a mother just knows things like that?) Jumping up, she searches the horizons, seeking sight of her daughter, wanting to be re-assured that she was mistaken. But she was not mistaken and she knows in her heart where Persephone is—she has gone to the world of the dead. And a wail is heard throughout the earth as Demeter cries,

“Persephone! Persephone! My daughter is gone!”

The plants are forgotten as Demeter walks to and fro, seeking her daughter. Neglected by Demeter, the trees lose their leaves (*trees act*) and the flowers wither and die (*flowers wither and die*). The sun hides its face and the earth becomes cold. Demeter does not care. People on earth grow cold (*people shiver*). They begin getting hungry for there are no crops (*people cry and beg for food*), but Demeter is glad, because she is miserable and she does not want anyone else to be happy (and as we all know, when mother’s not happy, nobody’s happy!). She only wants her daughter to return to her.

And in the Underworld, Persephone is frightened at first in the cold dark place. She curls up into a ball and cries her heart out. She wants her mother! Then, when she has no more tears, she lifts her head and peeks around to see if she can find a way home.

The Underworld was a horrible place indeed. The souls of people who had died were sitting down there, bored, scared, wanting to get out, but there was a 3-headed dog at the entrance that would bark and snarl whenever anyone tried to leave. So, they were afraid to leave and they, too, sat in the darkness, crying, moaning, and screaming (*souls moan and cry and scream behind their masks*).

Despite her own fears, Persephone felt sorry for them.

“Don’t cry,” she told them, “it will be all right.”

A few sniffed away their tears and looked at her. “How in the world did someone as light as you get down here?” one asked.

“Hades brought me,” explained Persephone, “and I don’t know how to leave.”

“Do you want something to eat?” one asked, offering her some black dirt.

Persephone shivered and pushed it away. “No, I’m not hungry.”

Then, Hades himself came walking through and all the souls scrambled to get out of his way, except Persephone, who raised herself up to her full height. “You *must* take me home,” she insisted.

Hades shook his head. “No can do,” he said. “I like you here. Marry me, Persephone, and be my queen. I can make you happy.”

“How can you make me happy without the sun or the stars or my own dear mother?”

“Let me try. You make me happy.”

“You don’t look happy.”

“Well, you make me less unhappy, then.” And Hades tried to turn his mouth into a smile, which looked pretty funny on his sad face.

When Hades left, the souls implored Persephone, “tell us what it is like on earth now.”

“Oh, it is so beautiful!” Persephone sat down and began telling stories to the lost souls, stories about the flowers in the field and the rabbits and deer drinking from the lakes. And all of the souls sighed, seeing its beauty in Persephone (*souls sigh*).

“Oh, how I wish we could return!” one said.

Persephone looked around. “Nobody should make such a cold, dark place their home,” she said. Getting up, she followed after Hades.

“I must go home,” she said to him. “You have no reason to keep me here.”

Hades said, “I want you, Persephone, because you are beautiful and kind and good, and you bring sunshine to my dark home.”

“That is all well and good,” said Persephone, “but I really don’t belong here.”

“Perhaps if you ate something...” Hades held out his hand and offered her the most beautiful pomegranate she had ever seen.

Persephone took it and ate a few seeds, but it did not help. (Persephone pushes the food away.) **“I must go home,”** she said.

Seeing Hades’ sad face, she felt his pain. “It’s not that you haven’t been good to me, Hades, it’s just--”

Hades sighed. “I know. It’s just not your home. Nobody ever wants to stay here. Go, if you must.”

Persephone returned to earth then. (*Persephone goes toward Demeter*) **When Demeter saw her daughter, she was so happy! She laughed and danced, then raised her hands in blessing.** (*Demeter reacts*)

“My daughter has returned! May all the earth rejoice!” she cried out. All the plants began turning green and growing (*trees and flowers grow and bloom*), **and the people cheered** (*people cheer*). *Mother and daughter hugged happily.*

“I am so glad you are home, Persephone,” Demeter exclaimed. “That was such a horrid thing for Hades to do.”

Persephone thought of the souls she had left behind (*souls scream and moan and cry*). **“I am glad to be home, Mother, but I must return.”**

Her mother was horrified. “No! You don’t belong in such an ugly place!”

“The souls need me, Mother. They were losing hope. I can help them.”

Demeter sighed. “You are growing into a wise and wonderful woman, my daughter. Stay with me for a time—only a short while—then, if you still feel you must go, you can return.”

So, every winter, Persephone leaves to go live with Hades and help lost souls. While she is gone, her mother, Demeter, becomes sad and does not care for the plants until her daughter returns in the spring. And the souls that were once bound, now have hope of being free and living again.

(Persephone returns to Hades and sets souls free.)

Everyone returns to their seats.

Following the story, point out that Persephone's descent into the Underworld can be seen as the beginning of every woman's adult journey of self-understanding. Discuss how this story reflects the story of every woman there in one way or another.

Obviously, the story of Demeter & Persephone is also a story of the seasons. So often, our lives reflect the natural world we live in and we can find our answers there, if we just look. Discussion.

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