

Descent to the Depths, Spirit Rising

Plate 8

May to June 1986

Brasilia, D.F.

acrylic on paper

46" x 60"



The *axis mundi* or world tree is a universal symbol or archetype. Under its protective canopy occur rituals of death and renewal. For tens of thousands of years, in cultures ancient and modern, the *axis mundi* appears in the collective psyche as a symbol connecting the earth (physical world) with the sky (spiritual realm). On the left side of the world consciousness *axis mundi*, a *feminine embryo* falls into the center of a *black vortex*. On the right side of the *axis mundi*, a *crystal* ascends. In this spontaneous painting a creation drama plays out, one in which powerful opposing forces within my inner world are struggling to find a state of balance and give birth to a new feminine consciousness. This struggle yields a reorganization of my masculine and feminine internal forces and a new state of balance between them. A new feminine way of knowing is beginning to take form in my thoughts and behaviors and in the global interconnected consciousness of humankind.

The world tree serves as a central axis to receive the forces of creation. The life force travels down its branches and trunk to nourish the roots deeply embedded in the earth. The *roots of the world tree* are connected to the *cranium of a female embryo with large breasts* (located in the lower left). This image, representing the feminine force, is securely attached to the roots of the world tree as she makes her descent into the center of the black vortex, the fertile womb of the Earth Mother.

The center is the point of absolute beginning in mythical reality, where latent energies of the sacred first break through. Philosopher and religious historian, Mircea Eliade writes:

Ultimately all creation takes place at this point, which represents the ultimate source of reality. In the symbolic language of myth and religion it is often referred to as 'the navel of the world,' 'Divine Egg,' 'Hidden Seed,' or 'Root of Roots'.¹⁹

After painting this I consulted with Jungian psychoanalyst Dra. Nise da Silveira. For more than forty years, she served as director of an artistic atelier for mentally ill patients at the Psychiatric Hospital Dom Pedro II in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. When I showed Dra. Nise this spontaneous painting, she reassured me that it portrayed my descent into the underworld. This arduous and at times turbulent period was part of my spiritual journey to individuation. Dra. Nise assured me that I definitely should continue painting.

Now the veil clearly demarcating my conscious and Unconscious life was fairly transparent, thus causing me great confusion. My external life was still in chaos, there was no clarity as to how my mission would unfold, but I knew that I had one. I had no clear idea at the time how the theme of balancing feminine and masculine polarities would take form in my life. My new feminine identity, integrated with my Authentic and Higher Self, is struggling to ascend from the darkness toward the light.

During this period I was able to coordinate and manage the practical aspects of the ego-logical world while simultaneously staying in contact with the subpersonalities alive within my inner world. I held the tension of both realities within me while I tried to remain grounded in present time. We walked together. The inner me who felt she was a prehistoric shamanic cave painter while simultaneously the outer me functioned as teacher and mother, buying vegetables for dinner at the corner market in Brasilia. I was learning how critical it is to maintain a grounded inner center of balance, so as not to be engulfed by powerful primordial archetypes.

The fact of the matter is that in all of us, only a hair's breadth below the level of conscious rational functioning, there is quite another state of being with an altogether different view of the

*world and an altogether different way of going to meet it. And that state of being, or that world, since it is experienced in terms of images and symbols, metaphors and myths, is considered mad and unworthy only of banishment from the sane world of common sense.*²⁰

Creation comes out of chaos. Unfortunately, chaos is a terrifying concept to the acculturated Western mind. However, chaos need not be feared by the ego; rather, it must be seen as a necessary experience in the journey to Self-realization. In this darkness, renewal and new life begin. From here alone, it ascends. Renewal means giving up identifying with “I,” the part of ourselves that sustain the conventions in which we are taught to believe. Our egoic consciousness does not define who we really are.

*The possibility therefore opens for the individual that a break-up in his conscious attitude can be superseded in time by a new integration at a more basic level of the psyche. If this is accomplished, it means that consciousness has been brought into a closer relationship with the Unconscious and that the new conscious attitude is on a more solid base.*²¹

Many philosophers, psychologists and spiritual practitioners such as Karlfried G. Durckheim discuss how one’s limiting beliefs must be given up and left behind before beginning the pilgrimage upward to the reintegration of the personality. In this ascent to the true light, the person discovers a new philosophy of life, giving him or her a belief system and framework of values that will serve as a guide for the rest of the journey in this lifetime. As Jung comfortingly reminds us, “To be on the path is to reach the goal.”

The spiritual artist has the ability to descend into the Unconscious depths and then return to consciousness with a hidden treasure encoded in symbolic form. This treasure embodies her inherent potential, her unique gift to the world. In aligning with this generative, creative life force I began to believe that I had a spiritual mission.

During this stage of my Spontaneous Painting Process, reorganization took place on the deepest levels of my psychic structure. The generative symbols I painted transformed a feminine identity I had inherited from my ancestors for generations. As I came to reject the belief that “I am a victim” I assumed my newly emerging feminine power, transforming into a woman capable of taking care of herself, and who believes in her own voice as an authority.

In this painting, the ancient symbol of the *ouroboros* represents the generative principle, the life cycle of endings and beginnings. It is guarding the entrance to the Unconscious, where the transformation ritual of death and rebirth will occur. According to Jung, certain symbolic images such as the *ouroboros*, *the serpent biting its tail*, originated back in the earliest of times. It and other archetypal images are recorded in our collective Unconscious. Before painting this, I do not remember ever seeing an image of the *ouroboros*. After finishing the painting I researched the meaning of the images that spontaneously appeared and was very surprised to discover that some of the exact symbolic images expressed in my paintings, existed thousands of years ago.

Archeological excavations of sites from the Neolithic period to ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Crete and India provide evidence that the serpent was one of the most frequently used motifs in the myths and artwork of these cultures. In many of the earliest known creation myths, the serpent was venerated as a sacred animal, symbolizing transformation and new life. In matriarchal societies, from the Neolithic period onward, the cobra was believed to be a manifestation of the Goddess Mother, and from Egyptian times the image of a cobra was

the hieroglyphic sign for the word “goddess.” From ancient Egyptian records we know that the cobra was also known as the Eye, a symbol for mystic wisdom and insight.

About 5,000 BC, invading armies conquered the Northern European matriarchal societies and destroyed the Goddess religions, implanting a domination model that subverted women’s freedom and power. The conquerors introduced their own mythologies, such as the Adam and Eve myth that defamed the sacred symbols of the Goddess culture. Eve became associated with evil, and the serpent was feared rather than venerated for its healing powers.²²

Since that time feminine power has been driven into the underworld, and continues to live in a dormant state within the collective Unconscious. Incubating in the darkness for thousands of years, my symbolic image of the *feminine embryo* is ready to ascend into the light. Her emergence or rejuvenation is generated by the creative life force. We are like surfers riding on the wave of this life force when we spontaneously paint our Unconscious.

On the opposite side of the *world tree* we can see a symbolic image of the *crystal* ascending, bringing a new vision of light to myself and to the world. This symbolic image is an example of the **New Nucleus**, because it contains the generative power of the life force guiding my life in a new direction. There is no predetermined time for how long it will take for a symbolic image to manifest, influencing the painter’s behavior and beliefs until its purpose has been realized. (The *New Nucleus* is further explained in Part Three.)

This painting exemplifies a spontaneous painter’s ability to access symbols from the collective Unconscious, symbols which activate energy on both the individual and the collective level. It reassures me for as my consciousness evolves, the world grows with me.²³ In my own work and the work of my students, I have observed that the symbols first appear on the canvas in the form of images. Once the symbol energy has been unleashed, it begins to guide the painter to align with activities and interests that will enhance the development of her unique potential. The symbol directs the painter’s conscious mind to attract and be attracted to what she needs in order to become whole and develop her Authentic Self. A symbolic painting can be likened to a multifaceted diamond, revealing a multitude of different possibilities that may come to fruition over time. Based on my personal experience and the paintings of my students, I have come to believe that certain symbols can initiate a healing process that may navigate an artist’s path over several lifetimes.

The energy conveyed in the symbolic images may actualize in the painter’s life tomorrow, next week, or next month, foretelling the promise of a future waiting to become. As the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us:

*To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the Unconscious, beyond the reach of one’s own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new clarity is born: this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating. In this there is no measuring with time, a year doesn’t matter, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn’t force its sap, and stand confidently in the storms of the spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient.*²⁴

In my own life, it seemed as if the symbols were aligning me with unexpected encounters, where I would meet the right people who could help me or I would be at the right place at the right time. These situations seemed to support and develop my hidden gifts. Carl Jung defined this phenomenon as synchronicity, a meaningful coincidence.²⁵ In synchronistic events, the Unconscious mind guides the conscious mind in directions that will help actualize the individual's potential. In retrospect, I have come to believe that some sort of Self-directing Principle has been orchestrating my life toward attaining higher states of Self-actualization and wholeness.²⁶