



The Myth of Demeter and Persephone

A retelling by Marilyn Power Scott

The mysteries of Demeter and Persephone were venerated and celebrated for 4,000 years. In patriarchal times, their story was changed, as so many were. It was told that Hades abducted Persephone, held her against her will in the underworld, and drugged her to ensure her return.

This is how I think it really happened:

When the world was young, the lovely and generous Demeter, whose name means Goddess Mother, held sway over the earth and all its being. It was always summer then. Among her many gifts, Demeter gave earth the wonderful life-giving wheat so that beasts, birds, and people could be plentifully fed and could thrive and be joyful.

Although she never mentioned who the father might be, Demeter gave birth to an exquisite baby girl, the fullest expression of her mother nature. She named the baby Persephone. She was a bright and happy child, curious and thoughtful. Demeter delighted in every moment of her growing. She found nothing more beautiful than the small, firm, round limbs and exquisite face, glowing with health and love of life. The two were happy and content through the years of Persephone's girlhood. And as she grew, Demeter taught her the ways of nurturing and abundance.

Time came when Persephone moved through the invisible doorway into maidenhood. She lengthened and slimmed; she moved with unconscious grace. She shone with a luster that caught Demeter's breath. And she was visited by vague and troubling longing. She became aware of her body as if it were a new limb.

Her mother loved her with a new fierceness, marveling at this exquisite creature she had birthed and raised. Demeter now called her Kore, the ineffable one, as befitted her—glorious and mysterious and full of promise.

Kore took to spending long hours in a flower-filled meadow, restless to do she knew not what, longing for she knew not what. One day, her thoughts and eyes drifting aimlessly, she became aware of someone watching her from the shelter of the surrounding woods. She was startled and alarmed—and more than a little curious. She stood quite still, looking, until she glimpsed a tall presence standing quietly, half hidden in the shadows. For the tiniest of moments, her searching gaze met dark, admiring eyes.

She turned abruptly and ran home, troubled and excited, and in the timeless way of maidens, said not a word to her mother.

She meant, of course, to stay away from that particular meadow. But she found herself pulled there by her curiosity and by the way her heart beat remembering that glance. And yes, there was that presence again and those eyes, watching from the shadows. She came just a little closer and couldn't mistake the tenderness in the eyes that eagerly sought hers and the small breath-held smile.

On the third day, she walked very close to the edge of the wood, and the figure stepped into a clear space, dark and full of splendor, lithe and strong, and simply and richly dressed.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I am Hades. My land is the Underworld.”

“Why do you watch me?”

Hades laughed self-consciously and said, “I never knew anyone could be so beautiful as you. I have been restless in my own land; I came walking through these woods and saw you there. I've had to keep coming back. My eyes never get full of you.”

She blushed but was very pleased. She turned and went home, holding this secret to herself.

They met daily then, Hades more comfortable in the shade, Kore at home in the sunlit meadow, both willing to meet at the edge. They talked. They told each other of their worlds, their thoughts, their amusements. They grew to know each other—and to love each other, though Kore didn't recognize this.

Inevitably, one day, Hades leaned close, eyes full of love and longing, and Kore leaned forward, too, to meet her first kiss. And now you will understand that kissing and hugging and holding each other tenderly became part of their daily meetings. The hunger and longing grew the more kisses they were fed, until Hades asked her to come rule equally in the Underworld. Kore had been told of it many times by then, of its vast riches and of the souls of the dead who arrived there, lost and terrified. Hades did what was possible to comfort them but hadn't the skill to do it well.

Kore pondered what to do, knowing that her heart and body and being longed to be with Hades and to share that life yet also loving her mother and her life as she knew it. She saw also that her mother administered her earthly affairs perfectly well without any help. And so she agreed to be Hades's queen, and the day was set. Hades left to prepare for her coming.

Persephone struggled with how to tell her mother, especially with things this far advanced. Demeter, after all, was busy and happy in her work. Although Demeter had recognized a new quality to Kore's quietness, she respected and trusted her to share her thoughts when she was ready, as she always had.

But Kore never did find the right time or way to tell her mother. When the day came, she put on her favorite dress and most comfortable shoes, just kissed her mother as she always had, and left. She ran and walked to the edge of the woods, bringing only her shining self, complete as she was. Hades was there waiting, heart leaping at the sight of her.

After long kisses and in a daze of joy, they walked together to the secret entrance to the passageway that led to the Underworld. They had been there before—she had asked—but now she set her foot on this path for the first time. No one enters the Underworld just to sightsee. Hades wrapped her in a gorgeous warm cloak and put on a matching one. They walked hand in hand down the long, dim passageway lit by glimmering crystals set in a subtle pattern in the walls. Persephone breathed deeply of the rich, clean perfume of the fertile earth as they descended.

When they came to the portal—an arch of ancient, gnarled, polished, and living roots of the rowan tree—all the citizens of the Underworld were there, gathered in hushed excitement. Hades paused and turned to Persephone. Kissing her once again, Hades said so all could hear, “My Queen, enter your domain.” And turning to the waiting throng said, “Behold and greet Her Majesty, Queen Persephone, Queen of the Underworld.” There was much cheering and hubbub, and later, feasting and toasting. And later still, exploration of this vast and absorbing domain. Later still and best of all, the joy of the marriage bed, the deep sense of completion each brought to the other.

Hades's heart was full seeing their domain made even more wonderful by Persephone's grace and compassion, her nurturing skills turned to succor the souls of the fearful dead. She so gently calmed and comforted them, telling them who they were and where and what would happen next. Persephone loved her new life and grew in maturity and compassion through the living of it.

Absorbed in her new life, Persephone had no idea of the commotion caused by her disappearance. Demeter was wild with grief and inconsolable. Her treasure, her heart's joy, the living expression of her inmost nature was gone, disappeared without a trace. This most precious, most beloved of all her creations, her source of delight and balance, her daughter, her companion—gone. Her grief spawned horrific visions of what might have happened, and fear became her dreaded companion. Demeter wept. She tore her clothes and her hair. She wandered the land, looking and calling for Kore. So deeply was she sunk in her grief that she could give no thought to the quickening of the seed, to the pushing up of the first sturdy shoots, to the swelling of the grains fattening with goodness and life—all the details she had always tended to so lovingly and thoroughly.

Winter descended with Demeter's tears. The ground grew cold and bare. As she wailed and wandered and called, the creatures of the earth shivered and grew hungry, and the land was empty of joy. Her grief could not be shaken and would not lift.

The God Hermes, whose realm is connections and communications, movement and transformation, found Demeter sitting by a well, submerged in her grief, her grain basket overturned and forgotten. He listened to her story through her tears and wondered to himself where Kore might have gotten to. When Demeter had soaked his shoulder and her sobs had quieted, he thought to tell her a gentle and amusing anecdote he'd recently heard. She gave a little "hmf" and a querulous smile. Encouraged, he told more stories, choosing carefully, getting more and more ribald, until she was giggling freely. He ended with the funniest and bawdiest of Aphrodite's latest adventures. At this, they both threw back their heads and shouted with laughter, wiping their eyes of these more welcome tears. When they finally caught their breaths, Demeter turned to Hermes and embraced him.

"Thank you. You've reminded me I'm alive. I can feel my juices running again," and she smiled with loving appreciation.

"Hermes, you can go anywhere. Find her for me. Or at least word of her fate. I'll be able to go on if only I know."

"Of course, beloved Goddess, gladly."

And so with urgency and purpose, Hermes began his rounds of all the other Goddesses and Gods. It wasn't long until he descended to the Underworld to confer with Hades and found them there, Persephone queenly and fulfilled. As soon as the greetings were complete, Hermes told them of Demeter's plight.

Persephone and Hades were stricken that they had been so engrossed with each other and their life together they hadn't given a thought to anyone or anything outside their boundaries. Kore wept for her mother's grief and for love of her.

She went off by herself to consider what to do. Soon she came to Hades and as they embraced, she told of her decision. Hades held her quietly for awhile, then nodded, drawing back to look into her eyes. She then sent for Hermes to join them and asked for a pomegranate as well. When both had arrived, she said, "Hermes, I will return with you to my mother, for I love her and would help her with her life-giving work." Then, splitting the fruit, keeping one half for herself and handing the other to Hades, she said, "And in six months' time, I will return to you, beloved, because I love you and to continue my work with you here. Let us eat the glistening seeds of this fruit together as our promise that we will not forget each other. I will return."

And so, as Persephone returned to her mother's amazed and forgiving embrace, she brought with her the first day of the first spring, the same way she now brings the first day of every spring. And the first day of every fall is the day she enters the passageway back to her beloved Hades. And Demeter mourns her absence yet again each winter.

This, I believe, is the true story of how Persephone's love turns the wheel of the year.

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