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# The Death Mother as Nature's Shadow: Infanticide, Abandonment, and the Collective Unconscious

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The archetypal Death Mother symbolizes women whose behavior or feelings threaten the lives of their children. Western culture, however, believes that women evolved to love their children instinctively and selflessly, and that women who abandon, neglect, harm, or kill their children are unnatural. Thus the Death Mother has no place in our cultural consciousness. This can be problematic, because it means that the Death Mother is buried deep in the shadow and surrounded with shame.

In this article, I introduce Jungian and psychodynamic perspectives on the Death Mother archetype, and then focus on evolutionary and anthropological perspectives. My aim is to show that when the Death Mother is approached with compassionate curiosity, we can better help the mothers who are living this frightening energy, as well as those who grow up traumatized by her impact. In particular, I propose that when we bring the Death Mother into consciousness, learn about her evolutionary roots, and humanize her, we start to dismantle the self-perpetuating cycles of shame that constellate around her archetypal energy, thereby opening the doors to meaningful change.

The Death Mother archetype symbolizes a woman whose feelings or behavior threaten the life of her child. It is an alarming image. Indeed, we are so disturbed by the idea that a mother might be a threat to her child that Western culture has exiled the Death Mother to the shadows of consciousness. Visceral horror is warded off with idealization and denial. “Unconditional love” is seen as defining “natural motherhood.” Women who regret having had children, abandon them, neglect them, or are hostile to them are decried as unnatural. Women who kill their children are judged to be sub-human or severely mentally ill.

Viewing motherhood in this way is oversimplified and distorting. Worse still, it incarcerates women in shame. The relationship between mothers and children rests on a complex web of factors, and while it is true that most mothers are deeply committed to most of their offspring, there are circumstances in which a mother will feel genuinely ambivalent about nurturing a particular child. Furthermore, it has been this way throughout human evolutionary history. In short, denied or not, the Death Mother is part of our collective psychological and embodied heritage.

Understanding this reality can support a process of transformation among mothers who struggle with feelings of ambivalence or hostility towards a child; it can also support a process of healing among those who grow up as the children of such mothers.

For both of these groups (as well as for the therapists who accompany them), healing requires courage, perseverance, and tough emotional work. An understanding of the Death Mother is not a substitute for this work, but when we approach this archetypal energy with nonjudgmental curiosity, we build the kind of compassionate container that enables this work to be done.

## PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVES OF THE DEATH MOTHER

Dorothy Bloch (1978) was one of the first psychoanalysts to bring infanticide out of the shadows. Each chapter of her moving book, *So the Witch Won't Eat Me*, describes the inner (and outer) world of a patient whose childhood was circumscribed by the fear of being killed. In *Infanticide: Past and Present*, also published in 1978, Maria Piers (Piers, 1978) began to explore why contemporary mothers might be driven to infanticide. In *Mother Love/Mother Hate*, the psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker (1995) also focuses on modern mothers and explores the inner ambivalences that are most often hidden out of view. More recently, Brett Kahr has argued that being born to a parent who wishes you dead can contribute to the development of psychosis and schizophrenia (Kahr, 2007, 2011, 2016).

Within Jungian circles, the Death Mother was named by von Franz (1970/2000) to describe a possessively devouring Mother; however, it was Marion Woodman who brought this archetype to a wider consciousness (Woodman, 2000, 2005; Sieff & Woodman 2009). Early in her work, Woodman focused on the Negative Mother, who symbolizes the relentless criticism that distorts how we think and feel about ourselves. In time, Woodman came to recognize an even more destructive dynamic. She named this the “archetypal Death Mother” and experienced it as a force that not only disfigures how we think and feel about ourselves, but also changes our physical substance and biology:

The Death Mother wields a cold, fierce, violent and corrosive power. ... When Death Mother's gaze is directed at us, it penetrates both psyche and body, turning us into stone. It kills hope. It cuts us dead. We collapse. Our life-energy drains from us and we sink into chthonic darkness. In this state, we find ourselves yearning for the oblivion of death. Eventually this yearning for death permeates our cells, causing our body to turn against itself. We may become physically ill. (Sieff & Woodman, 2009, p.178)

Furthermore:

Death Mother's energy is most destructive when it comes from somebody we love and trust, and who is supposed to love us. This is what happened in the original trauma; we trusted our beloved mother, but suddenly realized that we were not acceptable to her. We realized that our mother wished that we, or some part of us, was dead. (Woodman & Sieff, 2015, p. 69)

A close reading of Woodman reveals that her “Death Mother” encompasses two phenomena: first, a mother's wish that her child did not exist, and second, wounding shame that implies there is something fundamentally inadequate about her child (Sieff, 2017). These phenomena lie on a single continuum; however, this article focuses on the infanticidal aspect of Death Mother.

Woodman offers a powerful exploration of the unconscious, embodied, and subjective experiences of women who are living the Death Mother energy. She also

investigates the psychological and embodied repercussions of growing up in the shadow of the Death Mother. However, Woodman, like other psychodynamic writers, explores this archetype in the context of contemporary Western culture; in this article I present a complementary perspective that locates the Death Mother in the context of anthropology and the evolutionary heritage of our species. But first, I briefly describe the commonest projections carried by mothers in our society.

## NATURAL/UNNATURAL MOTHER

Popular Western culture has idealized the role of mother. We have come to believe that it is natural for women to love all their children instinctively, selflessly, and unconditionally, and that it is unnatural for women to feel indifferent or hostile toward their children. To speak without judgment of women who regret having had their children (Orna, 2017), or of those who commit infanticide, is to break a taboo (Corti, 1998) and to be seen as unnatural as well.

This attitude is not new. The propensity to disown maternal hostility and project it onto a less-than-human other has a deep history in the West. The literary scholar Lillian Corti (1998) describes how the figure of the witch has long been a carrier for unconscious projections concerning women who kill or devour children. The historian Anne-Marie Kilday (2013) writes that in 17th-century Britain, “Women who committed newborn child murder were routinely condemned with abhorrence and regarded as despicable, malevolent, and monstrous. Indeed, in 1743, for instance, one Scottish commentator referred to infanticide as ‘an occult crime committed by the grotesque handmaidens of Satan’” (Kilday, 2013, p.41).

In Grimm’s original 1812 version of the fairytale “Hansel and Gretel,” the woodcutter lives in the forest with his wife and their two children, and, when the family runs out of food and faces starvation, it is the biological mother who proposes that the children be abandoned in the forest. However, the prospect of a natural mother abandoning her children was clearly unacceptable to readers because, in the fourth edition of the fairy tales (published in 1840), *mother* was reimagined as *stepmother*.

Jungians have generally followed Grimm’s reimagining, seeing the natural mother as synonymous with positive mother, and the stepmother as symbolizing the dark side of motherhood (e.g., Birkhäuser-Oeri, 1988). In *The Maiden King*, Woodman herself writes that “unconditional love” defines the good mother and then uses “good mother” and “natural mother” interchangeably (Bly & Woodman, 1998). Woodman’s implicit message is that a mother who does not love unconditionally is unnatural.

Neumann, in his encyclopedic survey of the Great Mother archetype, made this split explicit, writing that the archetypal image of the positive mother comes from lived experience with a flesh-and-blood mother, whereas the image of the negative mother comes only from inner experience:

... the positive elementary character of the Feminine ... springs from the most intimate personal experience, from an experience that is eternally human.... The negative elementary character [of the feminine], however, appears in a projective ring of symbols, which do not ... spring from the visible mother-child relationship. The negative side ... originates rather in inner experience, and the anguish, horror and fear of the danger that the Archetypal Feminine signifies *cannot be derived from any actual and evident attributes of women*. (Neumann, 1955, p. 147, emphasis added)

Presumably Neumann argued for this distinction because he could not conceive of a genuinely fearful and dangerous mother as being part of natural human behavior.

Bloch (1978) points out that Freud was equally blind to the reality and impact of infanticidal intent. The Oedipus myth played a seminal role in Freud's theory, but he paid no attention to the fact that the tragedy was instigated when Oedipus' parents abandoned their infant son to die. The Jungian analyst Marcus West (2016) offers similar criticism and reinterprets the myth in the context of trauma and abandonment. West argues that when Oedipus takes his mother as his wife, it "has more to do with taking up a position of power and control rather than love. . . . Oedipus would be taking control of the maternal provisioning over which he was previously powerless" (West, 2016, p. 94). Corti (1998) notes that although Freud was steeped in Greek drama, in the index of his collected works there is only one reference to Medea, who killed her children to wreak revenge on Jason, her husband, after he abandoned her. On the occasions when psychotherapists do recognize the impulses that constitute Death Mother energies, they tend to see these impulses as indicating that something has gone awry inside the psyche.

A woman who grew up with unloving and/or hostile parents might internalize that way of parenting and then repeat it with her own infants. Or a woman might be reminded of her own abusive parents, or a hated sibling, by some characteristic in her child. Alternatively, a woman might see her own vulnerability reflected in her baby—and, determined to kill the vulnerable part of herself, wish her baby dead. A woman might feel jealous and threatened by her child's exuberance, especially if she had shut down that exuberance in herself. A child conceived to replace a deceased older sibling might be deemed a failure because he or she is unable to heal the pain of the earlier loss. A child conceived through rape may trigger memories of the assault. In certain cultures or religions, to conceive a child out of wedlock is a source of profound dishonor and shame, and those feelings often affect attitudes towards that child.

Some women feel jealous of the love that their husband directs towards their child. Other women, who are in an unhappy marriage, feel trapped by their children. Infanticidal wishes can also be triggered when parents split up, and the one who feels the loss as unbearable follows the path of Medea and kills the couple's children to dole out the ultimate punishment on the "deserter."

In most of these situations, maternal hostility is portrayed as emanating from within a woman's personal psyche. This view is congruent with Western culture, which sees natural maternal behavior as arising from within a woman's instinctual body. The hormonal profile of pregnancy does indeed predispose a woman to bond with her infants (Bridges, 2008; Numan & Insel, 2006), and inner psychological factors are undeniably important in some cases of infanticide; however, the internal perspective is not the whole story.

Mothering does not occur in a vacuum, and the way a woman responds to her children is influenced not only by what is happening inside her psyche and body, but also by the external physical, relational, cultural, and economic environment in which she is embedded. Exploring these external influences helps foster a more compassionate and nuanced understanding of the Death Mother.

## EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES AND JUNG'S COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

One way to explore the effect of the external environment on mothering is to use an evolutionary lens. Modern Jungians tend not to think in evolutionary terms; however, Jung did consider evolutionary perspectives in relation to the collective unconscious:

Man “possesses” many things which he has never acquired but has inherited from his ancestors. He is not born as a *tabula rasa*, he is merely born unconscious. But he brings with him systems that are organised and ready to function in a specifically human way, and these he owes to millions of years of human development. . . . These inherited systems correspond to the human situations that have existed since primeval times: youth and old age, birth and death, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, mating, and so on. Only the individual consciousness experiences these things for the first time, but not the bodily systems and the unconscious. For them they are only the habitual functioning of instincts that were performed long ago. (Jung, 1961, par. 728)

Jung also recognized that anciently evolved dynamics are especially potent in the mother–child relationship and in the archetypal images that speak to this relationship:

The mother–child relationship is certainly the deepest and most poignant one we know. . . . This is true not only for the individual, but still more in a historical sense. *It is the absolute experience of our species, an organic truth.* . . . Thus there is inherent in the archetype, in the collectively inherited mother-image, the same extraordinary intensity of relationship which instinctively impels the child to cling to its mother. (Jung, 1960, par. 723, emphasis added)

Jung did not develop the evolutionary dimension of his thoughts, primarily because his focus was on archetypal images and subjective experience. However, even if Jung had wanted to pursue evolutionary perspectives, the biological study of behavior was in its infancy and could have made only a very limited contribution to his work. This has changed: During the last 40 years, evolutionary research has become much more sophisticated. As a result, an evolutionary consciousness can now bring new layers of understanding to archetypal phenomena such as the Death Mother. This new consciousness does not compete with the old; rather it offers an additional way to connect to our shared humanity, unconscious dynamics, embodied fears, and deepest wounds.

## EVOLUTIONARY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE DEATH MOTHER

There was a paradigm shift in the evolutionary understanding of mothering when Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, a primatologist, anthropologist, and feminist, published *Mother Nature: Natural Selection and the Female of the Species* in 1999, followed a decade later by *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* in 2009. Hrdy interwove research from zoology, primatology, anthropology, history, and developmental psychology to illuminate the nuanced and layered forces that have been acting on mothers throughout the deep history of our species. (An introduction to Sarah Blaffer Hrdy’s work can be found in Hrdy & Sieff, 2015.)

One of Hrdy’s revelatory insights was that being a natural mother is not synonymous with unconditional love; rather, evolution has built flexibility into the way that mothers respond to their infants. Depending on circumstances, a mother may be fully committed to her infant, she may feel somewhat ambivalent, or she may abandon her infant to die. And all these emotional responses lie within our species’ natural repertoire of behaviors.

It is easy to understand why evolutionary processes would have forged an emotional system in which mothers are fully committed to their infants. But why would

such processes have forged an emotional system in which women sometimes feel ambivalent, or even hostile, towards their offspring? The answer resides in the fact that we are the descendants of individuals who managed to raise at least one child to the age where that individual could have a child of his or her own. To achieve that, our ancestors sometimes had to make difficult choices.

Child mortality in contemporary Western societies is negligible: In the United States, for example, fewer than 1 per cent of those born die before their fifteenth birthday. But this low death rate is extremely recent, and our collective unconscious was forged under very different circumstances. In today's traditional subsistence societies, between 30 and 60 per cent of those born do not survive to the age of fifteen (Gurven & Kaplan, 2007), and child mortality was likely as high, if not higher, during our evolutionary history (Volk & Atkinson, 2013). Under such difficult conditions, if a mother was to have any chance of raising surviving offspring, then she could not commit to her infants indiscriminately; rather she (and her family) had to take account of her own circumstances and the characteristics of the child when deciding whether to nurture a particular child or not.

### Mother's Circumstances I: Ability to Provide for Children

Gestating and raising human children requires physical energy, emotional commitment, nutritional calories, and practical care. Focusing on calories alone, the nine months of pregnancy require, on average, a little over 300 extra calories per day (Brown, 2011). Around 500 extra calories per day are required for two to three years of breastfeeding (WHO, FAO, & UNU, 2001). In addition, human parents generally need to provide food for their children for another twelve to eighteen years after weaning. In the West obtaining these extra calories is all too easy; in traditional subsistence societies, it is much harder. Thus, when deciding whether to care for an infant, a mother needs to consider whether she can secure enough calories to give the child a good chance of surviving, and whether giving calories to this child will jeopardize the lives of existing children, or indeed her own life. This fundamental and ancient maternal conundrum is most easily grasped when we consider spacing between pregnancies.

The !Kung San (popularly known as the Bushmen) are a contemporary people who, until recently, lived by hunting and gathering in the arid Kalahari Desert of Botswana and Namibia. Men did most of the hunting and women gathered berries, nuts, tubers, and other plant foods. Gathering trips often lasted five or six hours, and women carried their breastfeeding children while foraging. The lack of suitable weaning foods in the Kalahari meant that women breastfed their children until they were about four-and-a-half years old. Imagine a !Kung mother who is still nursing a two-year-old and has just given birth. Calories are hard to come by, and if she tries to breastfeed both children, she is likely to end up so depleted that she will put her own life at risk (Blurton Jones & Sibley, 1978). In addition, carrying two children on a six-hour gathering trek would demand so much energy that it, too, would reduce her chance of surviving (Wall-Scheffler, Geiger, & Steudel-Numbers, 2007). So, does this mother wean the two-year-old, whom she has already spent two years nurturing, knowing that this toddler is too young to survive without breast milk, or does she abandon the newborn?

In the early 1970s, the anthropologist Marjorie Shostak worked with a !Kung woman, Nisa, to record her life story. One of Nisa's earliest memories is of being on a gathering trip when her mother gave birth to an infant boy. This is how Nisa described the experience:

“After he was born, he lay there crying. I greeted him, ‘Ho, ho my baby brother! Ho, ho, I have a little brother! Some day we’ll play together.’ But my mother said, ‘What do you think this thing is? Why are you talking to it like that? Now, get up and go back to the village and bring me my digging stick.’ I said, ‘What are you going to dig?’ She said, ‘A hole. I’m going to dig a hole so I can bury the baby. Then you, Nisa, will be able to nurse again. . . . You’re much too thin.’ (Shostak, 1981, p. 54)

Nisa recalls begging her mother not to kill the infant, and the baby was allowed to live. Other infants were not so lucky. The demographer Nancy Howell, who worked with the !Kung in the late 1960s, recorded that around one in a hundred babies had been abandoned at birth and left to die (Howell, 1979).

The fact that infanticide was an accepted part of !Kung life does not mean that the decision was made lightly or without regret (Shostak, 1981). However, in !Kung culture, human life was considered to begin not at the moment of birth, but only when a newborn was brought back to the village and accepted as a social person.

Abandoning a newborn because it arrived too soon after a still-nursing sibling occurred in many hunter-gatherer societies (Hrdy, 1999; Yengoyan, 1981). The anthropologists Kim Hill and Magdalena Hurtado worked with the Ache of Paraguay. Kuchingi, a hunter they interviewed, told them what had happened to the infant born after him: “The one who followed me [in birth order] was killed. It was a short birth spacing. My mother killed him because I was [still] small. ‘You won’t have enough milk for the older one,’ she was told. ‘You must feed the older one!’” (Hill & Hurtado, 1996, p. 375).

Over a century earlier, an anthropologist working with a group of indigenous Australian hunter-gatherers wrote, “Every child which was born before the one which preceded it could walk was destroyed because the mother was incapable of carrying two” (Taplin, 1874, cited in Yengoyan, 1981, pp. 13–14). The challenge of caring for two nursing children simultaneously contributes to the fact that in some subsistence societies, twins are seen as a bad omen. A second reason is that twins are often born prematurely, are weaker, and are therefore less likely to survive and thrive (Ball & Hill, 1996). Typically, either one or both infants are abandoned (Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett 2002; Gabler & Volland, 1994).

In pre-modern Europe, it was not just the challenge of breastfeeding that prompted infanticide, but a lack of resources more generally. Kilday (2013) writes that in England, during the 17th to 19th centuries, poverty was rife, and killing a baby (or allowing it to die of neglect) was a way to protect existing children from the likelihood of starvation and death.

One alternative to infanticide during these centuries was to leave infants at foundling homes. Although mothers probably deposited their infants with hope that they would survive, the quality of care was so appalling in such homes that doing so was effectively a death sentence. Kilday (2013) writes, “For many Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, abandonment and infanticide were indistinguishable and interchangeable” (p. 89). In Europe, thousands upon thousands of abandoned infants and young children died in foundling homes (Hrdy, 1999; Panter-Brick & Smith, 2000).

Infanticide was common in eastern Japan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where it was popularly referred to as *mabiki*—an agricultural term that means to thin out densely planted seedlings, so that remaining plants have enough light and space to thrive (Drixler, 2013). Again, this culture did not think of newborns as fully human; rather, children were seen to acquire full humanity gradually over time.

It is not only infants who are at risk from this aspect of maternal behavior; older children can also be vulnerable. Imagine a woman with four children of various ages who is living in a hunter-gatherer community, or indeed in any society where food is periodically hard to come by. During times of extreme scarcity, what does this mother do with her limited food? Does she divide it equally between all her children, or does she favor a couple of children? If she allocates food fairly between all her children, none is likely to survive. But if she favors a couple of children, she increases the odds that some of her children will remain well nourished enough to survive the difficult time. In this example the mother has no wish to kill any of her children, but all the same, the children to whom she gives less food would have a significantly increased risk of dying.

A different manifestation of this dynamic was described in a recent newspaper article (Chamberlain, 2017). In several sub-Saharan African countries, food shortages have resulted in young girls being abandoned to early marriage: “For the good of the rest of the family, a daughter had to be sacrificed. She would be taken out of school and found a husband, one less mouth to feed.”

A mother’s decisions are not necessarily the products of rational calculations, nor are they even conscious; more often than not, they will be influenced by cultural belief systems and unconscious factors, as well as by changes in the hormonal systems that are mediated by stress. However, the fact remains that we are the descendants of mothers who did whatever was necessary to keep some children alive. Those mothers who shunned favoritism and lost all their children as a consequence did not leave descendants.

How does this aspect of our human heritage relate to life today?

Because middle-class Westerners have easy access to calories, we struggle to envision how the prospect of food shortages might hold sway in the collective unconscious. However, many families in the poorest sectors of Western society struggle to procure sufficient food—indeed U.S. figures from 2016 showed around 13 million children live in households that suffer from food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2018), and British figures from 2014 estimated that half a million children are living in households that do not have enough food (Cooper, Purcell, & Jackson, 2014). Although being a less-favored child in these food-impooverished households is unlikely to result in death, it does compromise long-term growth, health, and well-being.

Even in households where food is not an issue, children are likely to be sensitive to how parents think about them. For most of humanity’s existence, being a disfavored child would have been life-threatening if tough times materialized. This, perhaps, helps to explain why children will do their best to suppress or dissociate the aspects of themselves that create parental disapproval. In addition, being excluded from the social group was a death sentence for our ancestors (Bowlby, 1973/1998; Boehm, 2012). Thus, even within wealthy families, to be a less-favored sibling and denied opportunities equal to one’s sibling(s) to secure one’s place in the family’s social world might be unconsciously perceived as life-threatening.

These anciently primed fears will be triggered not only when a child knows that his or her sibling is favored, but they may also be triggered when parents allow one sibling to bully another, because the implicit message is that the bullied child is not worth protecting and is expendable.

## **Mother’s Circumstances II: Availability of Social Support**

Another of Sarah Blaffer Hrdy’s major insights is that ancestral human mothers needed help if they were to keep their children alive (Hrdy, 1999, 2009). In other

species of primates, once an infant is weaned, it feeds itself; our species is different in that children do not become self-sufficient until more than a decade after weaning. As a result, human mothers typically have several dependent children at any one time, and this unusual situation means mothers require assistance.

Hrdy (2009) goes as far as to call us “communal breeders,” describing how aid would have come from husbands, teenage children, aunts, and especially from grandmothers. She then argues that because help was so crucial, a mother’s feelings for her child would have been subtly affected by the strength of her network. A woman with meager support would probably have felt ambivalent toward her child, because there was a high risk that her solo-nurturing would come to nothing (Hrdy, 1999, 2009).

Hrdy’s argument is supported by several lines of evidence. In some of today’s traditional societies, if women lose their husbands before their infants are born, or just after their birth, the children have a greater risk of being abandoned to die (Hill & Hurtado, 1996, Schiefenhövel, 1989). A similar dynamic was at play in Britain during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, where it was impoverished single women without family support who were most likely to commit infanticide (Kilday, 2013). In present-day Western societies, on the rare occasions when mothers kill their babies, the women are typically young, unemployed, lacking support, and no longer involved with the father of the child (Porter & Gavin, 2010).

Conversely, studies show that a strong support network makes a positive difference to both mothers and their children. In many of today’s subsistence societies, children of women whose own mothers are still alive are far more likely to survive than children who do not have a living maternal grandmother (Hawkes, O’Connell, & Blurton Jones, 1989; Beise, 2005; Sear, Mace, & McGregor, 2000; Sear & Mace, 2008). Among women living in the West today, mothers who have emotional support (either from their own mothers and family, or from social workers and nurses) are more nurturing, attentive, and committed to their children than mothers lacking such help (Crockerberg, 1981; Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007; Spieker & Bensley, 1994). Similarly, women with emotional support develop significantly stronger bonds with their infants than women without such support (Myers & Johns, 2017).

In addition to socioeconomic factors, projection can play a part here: A woman who grew up unable to trust her family members may end up in a situation where support is available, but she is prevented from seeing that reality by her internal template. In short, although contemporary mothers can keep their children alive without a support network, they carry our ancestors’ need for help deep inside their minds and bodies, and our societies continue to see its influence today.

### Child’s Characteristics I: Robustness and Health

During our species’ evolutionary history, when resources were limited, and it was difficult to keep children alive, it made little sense to commit time, calories, and love to a child who was unlikely to make it. In societies around the world, infants who were premature, small, weak, sickly, or who had congenital issues were allowed to die and sometimes even helped on their way (Hill & Ball, 1996; Lancy, 2015). For example, among the !Kung (Bushmen), the process of giving birth was considered to include not only the actual birth, but also examining the newborn baby for congenital issues, and mothers were seen as having a duty to smother any infants who had problems. It was simply impossible to care for such a child when living a highly mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Howell, 1979). Similar practices have been recorded in many nomadic societies.

The social anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes worked in a profoundly poor Brazilian shantytown, where people were born into historically entrenched inequality, racism, and poverty. As a result, levels of malnutrition, illness, and death were terrible. In her classic ethnography, *Death without Weeping*, Scheper-Hughes (1992) describes how these mothers nurtured active babies who were thought to be fighters and survivors, while detaching from quiet babies who were passive, sickly, disabled, or developmentally delayed. Outright infanticide was met with horror; however, women believed it was best if quiet infants died quickly. To facilitate this process mothers failed to offer enough food, water, and care (engaging in what researchers sometimes call “delayed infanticide”). These mothers were not conscious of their actions; rather they experienced their underweight and ailing infants as wanting to die. As one mother explained, “Julieta ... herself never took hold [of life itself]. If she died it was because she herself, on seeing what was ahead, what was in store for her, she decided to die” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 369).

What is more, although there is profound grief when older children die, there are few tears for the infants who do not make it. One woman, talking about the death of young infants, put it thus: “There is little grief ... because the infant is without a history. ... The infant’s story is not yet made up; it has no shape to it. And so the loss is not a big one; it is not heavy. The death passes over one lightly, and it is soon and easily forgotten” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 437).

Scheper-Hughes’ research led her to conclude that emotional scarcity can follow from material scarcity, and she warns against sentimentalizing “Mother.” She writes that the image of all-nurturing, selfless mother is a modern artifact that has emerged only because we live in a sufficiently benevolent environment for mothers to trust that pretty much every child will survive. Women living in environments where mortality is high cannot afford this emotional luxury.

Aaron Denham, a medical anthropologist, worked with the Nankani subsistence farmers of Northern Ghana. In this community, diseases and poverty are also responsible for the majority of child deaths. However, some disabled or ailing infants and children are deemed to be “spirit children,” and some spirit children are given fatal poison. Spirit children are seen not as human children who have been possessed by spirits, but as malevolent spirits who masquerade as humans in order to infiltrate a family and cause harm (Denham, 2017). And, although people express pain and distress that their child turned out to be a spirit child, in most cases the child’s death is not grieved; rather there is relief that a source of misfortune has been removed. Denham argues that one way to understand this cultural system is to realize that a child with chronic illness or special needs will place terrible pressure on a struggling family. “When families say that a spirit child is destined to kill family members or destroy the house, this reality is not so farfetched. For a vulnerable family, a child with excessive needs can deplete limited resources, prevent the mother from working, [and] render the family more vulnerable to collapse ...” (Denham, 2017, p.184).

In Mali, similar beliefs were brought to bear on toddlers who suffered severe developmental delays. The nutritional anthropologist Katherine Dettwyler recorded a village chief speaking about what happens to these children:

“Well, if they don’t get better after a couple of years, then you know that they are evil spirits, and you give up. ... You take them out into the bush and you just leave them ... they turn into snakes and slither away. ... You go back the next day and they aren’t there. Then you know for sure that they weren’t

really children at all, but evil spirits. When you see a snake, you wonder if this used to be your child.” (Dettwyler, 1994, pp. 85–86)

European beliefs and practices concerning “changelings” bear a striking similarity to those described in Mali (Hrdy, 1999; Lancy, 2015; Denham, 2017). Beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing for several centuries, sickly, disabled, or otherwise challenging children were at risk of being seen as the offspring of fairies, elves, or goblins. A changeling child was akin to a cuckoo—an imposter who infiltrated the nest to steal resources from genuine children. Infants deemed to be changelings were left in a forest, so they could return to their magical realm. The reality was that the abandoned child was likely to succumb to hypothermia or to be eaten by a wild animal.

It is not only visibly disabled or sick children who have been at risk in Europe and other parts of the world; rather, several cultures developed viability tests to determine whether a newborn infant was worth nurturing. Hrdy (1999) quotes Soranus (second century CE), who describes how infants in ancient Europe were subjected to ice-cold baths “in order to let die, as not worth rearing, one that cannot bear the chilling.” Some believe this practice was the source for the ritual of baptism. Similar practices of exposing infants to the elements arose in many other parts of the world (Hrdy, 1999).

A study by psychologist Janet Mann suggested that a mother’s preference for strong children is subtly present in contemporary Western society and continues to affect maternal behavior. Mann (1992) studied mothers of preterm twins, interested in whether they treated their fragile babies equally. Her sample was small (seven mothers), but her findings were telling: Every mother gave more attention to the healthier twin, but was unaware of doing so. In tougher times, the less healthy twin would likely have died from neglect.

Being complex creatures, maternal behavior is not only influenced by an infant’s actual health, but also by a mother’s unconscious projections. A decades-long research project found that infants whose mothers believed them to be below average, grew up to be emotionally insecure adults (as measured by the Adult Attachment Interview). In contrast, infants whose mothers believed them to be above average, grew up to be emotionally secure (Broussard and Cassidy 2010). The researchers argue that the difference in emotional security was due to how mothers nurtured their children, with mothers who saw their children positively being more nurturing than those who viewed their children negatively. In this study, maternal beliefs did not correlate with the actual health of the infant. All the same, the projections appeared to have tapped into our evolutionary heritage to influence maternal behavior.

## Child’s Characteristics II: Disposition

Children are not the passive recipients of maternal care; rather, a child’s disposition—an interweaving of genetic influence, early experiences, and cultural norms (Stevenson-Hinde, 2011)—plays a significant role. The founder of attachment theory, John Bowlby, was one of the first to highlight this factor, noting that when infants of the same age and sex were placed in the same foster home together, an active infant typically received more attention than a passive one. Bowlby (1969/1997) suggested that the more active infant demanded more from the adults, and also offered the adults more rewards when those demands were met.

A study of Kenyan Maasai by medic and anthropologist Marten de Vries (1987) showed that an infant’s disposition can sometimes make the difference between life

and death. During the 1973–1974 drought, Maasai infants who were classified as having a difficult temperament were more likely to survive than those with an easy temperament. De Vries suggests several reasons for this, and the one of particular interest here is that almost all crying and fussing were met with an offer of the breast. Thus, “difficult infants” were fed more often and were better nourished. Nutritional status has a significant impact on child survival in traditional societies at the best of times, and that impact is intensified in times of famine.

### Child’s Characteristics III: Sex

Sometimes an infant is rejected because of his or her sex (Hrdy, 1999; Sieff et al., 1990). Jungian analyst Marion Woodman formed her ideas about the archetypal Death Mother when reflecting on how she had not been welcomed into her family because she was a girl (Sieff & Woodman, 2009). Many share Woodman’s experience. The rejection of a child because of his or her sex can result from cultural or personal preferences that are not directly related to evolutionary dynamics; however, there are circumstances when evolutionary factors may play a role.

For example, Mildredd Dickemann (1979) used an evolutionary lens to explore the historical prevalence of female infanticide among members in the highest caste of Indian society. Dickemann’s logic was as follows: In historical Indian society women generally married up, but because there was no “up” for women of the highest caste, these women often remained unmarried and childless. By contrast, high caste men could always find wives; indeed, they often attracted more than one wife as well as several concubines, and as a result they fathered many children. This inequality meant that families ended up with more grandchildren if they focused their care on their sons and rejected their daughters.

Among the Mukogodo of Kenya, the reverse pattern was recorded. The Mukogodo were poorer than the neighboring group and, because women preferred to marry wealthier men, a significant proportion of Mukogodo men remained unmarried and childless (Cronk, 1989, 1991). This inequality influenced parental behavior. Although Mukogodo parents said they preferred sons over daughters, their behavior suggested otherwise: Daughters were given more food than sons and taken more frequently to local clinics when they got ill (Cronk, 2000). As a result, girls were more likely to survive: Among 0- to 4-year-olds, there were around 30 per cent more girls than boys.

When assistance is crucial to raising offspring, and children of one sex provide their family with significantly more help than children of the other sex, parents favor the more helpful sex. This is particularly true with first-born children who will help with raising younger siblings (Berezkei & Dunbar, 2002; Turke, 1988).

## INTEGRATING THE EVOLUTIONARY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

Exploring the evolutionary and anthropological counterparts to the archetypal Death Mother has offered several insights.

First, the belief that biology has programmed mothers to love and nurture every child they give birth to is a fantasy. Ancestral women mothered their children across a range of environments and circumstances. As a result, a range of maternal emotions and feelings came to be part of our collective human heritage. The Death Mother lies at one end of that range, representing a medley of conscious and unconscious feelings and behaviors, which wax and wane depending on circumstances. A mother can

lovingly nurture a child who appears strong and healthy, but fatally neglect one who is weak and ill. She can be fiercely committed to an infant born after an older sibling is weaned, but kill one whose birth would risk the life of a still-nursing toddler. In good times, when material resources are abundant and women have plentiful support, the Death Mother has little place in the lives of women. However, in times of scarcity and/or when women are unsupported, these fearsome feelings can emerge to color the emotional palette of motherhood.

Second, a woman's external environment has a crucially important influence on how she relates to her children. Psychodynamic psychotherapy has focused on the internal world of the psyche, but the psyche does not exist in a vacuum, and when we ignore the external situation, it becomes all too easy to judge and demonize individual women for being inadequate mothers. Ginette Paris phrased this in Jungian terms, arguing that when we focus on the personal mother, we fail to rally against the distorted collective mother that is embedded in our organization, businesses, laws, politics, schools, and welfare state (Paris, 2016). Focusing on the failings of individual women, in order to divert attention away from the failings of society, has deep roots. In Victorian Britain, although some recognized the socioeconomic factors that fostered infanticide, opinion settled on the idea that women who killed their children were suffering from an extreme form of madness ("puerperal insanity"), which was supposedly catalyzed by giving birth (Kilday, 2013).

Third, infanticide is thankfully rare in most modern societies—in the U.S. for example, an average of 1,000 cases are recorded each year (Porter & Gavin, 2010). However, infanticide lies on a continuum with abuse and neglect, and many of the factors that in the past could have contributed to infanticide might well be contributing to abuse and neglect today.

Fourth, the structures and expectations of contemporary society bring additional pressures, challenges, and anxieties to mothering; however, these new stresses are often layered over more ancient patterns.

Fifth, throughout most of humanity's existence, any baby born to an ambivalent or hostile mother faced a life-threatening situation. Today this is rarely the case. Nevertheless, infants have no way of knowing that they have been born into a world that is vastly different from that of their ancestors. Thus, at an unconscious and embodied level, children are likely to experience any hint of maternal hostility as a direct threat to their lives (Hrdy, 2009; Hrdy & Sieff, 2015).

It is difficult for many of us to take these insights on board, in part due to the fear that the Death Mother constellates, in part due to our own cultural conditioning, and to a large extent because we live in industrialized, developed, and wealthy countries during unprecedented times. We have an almost unlimited supply of food and clean water, as well as antibiotics, vaccinations, and a richness of other medical resources. Mercifully few of us have experienced the death of a child. It was different for our ancestors: Nearly every parent will have lost one or more children to illness, and practically every child will have experienced the death of siblings, cousins, and friends while growing up. For most of humanity's existence, the death of children (due to one cause or another) has been part of life. This painful reality undoubtedly lives on in the collective unconscious.

An important clarification of this evolutionary perspective is needed. The fact that maternal ambivalence/hostility is a facet of mothering does not mean it is desirable, or that we are destined to live it. To leap from "It *was* this way during our deep past" to "It *ought* to be this way in the present" is called the "naturalistic fallacy." When looking

to the past, discretion is vital: Adopting some aspects of ancestral life might increase well-being, but other aspects would bring suffering. Nobody would argue that we should live with the child mortality rates that characterized 99% of our evolutionary existence, or that we are destined to do so. However, just as we needed to understand disease vectors, hygiene, and sanitation to reduce child mortality, we need to understand what influences the Death Mother dynamic to better address it.

## HOW CAN EVOLUTIONARY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES CONTRIBUTE TO TRANSFORMATION?

On its own, knowledge about humanity's heritage cannot bring about personal healing. Transformation is a challenging process, and there are no shortcuts. We have to enter our emotional minds and bodies and develop an embodied consciousness of what we carry from inside our individual realities. As importantly, we need new experiences: Real change happens in the present moment through lived experiences. Knowledge about humanity's heritage can, however, support personal healing by helping to create the compassionate container that holds these transformative processes. In the specific case of the archetypal Death Mother, knowledge can help both women who struggle with feelings of ambivalence and/or hostility towards a child, and also men and women who grew up under the cloud of such a mother.

### Women Who Live Out Aspects of the Death Mother

An idealized and romantic image of “mother” means that women who are struggling with motherhood or who experience periodic hatred for their child typically feel they are deficient and bad, possibly even monstrous (Myers, 2017; Baraitser & Noack, 2007). After all, if mothers have evolved to love and nurture all their children instinctively, any woman who feels differently has no choice but to believe that there must be something fundamentally wrong with her. Such a belief constitutes shame—a deep, visceral, and insidious conviction in being essentially flawed and inadequate.

Living with shame is intolerable and, in an attempt to escape from it, people risk being drawn into addictions (Lloyd & Sieff, 2015) and other forms of harmful behavior. They also feel compelled to try and rid themselves of whatever is activating their shame: In the case of mothering, that can mean ridding themselves of the child. In the following account, an American woman describes how her need to escape her shame drove her to act out infanticidal impulses.

“I can remember hurling the baby down on the pillows once, and just screaming and not caring. I wanted to kill him really. I think it was to do with being so tormented, worried and guilty. You know, the anxiety and guilt at feeling I was getting it all wrong, and that I was bad and useless. I just wanted to get away from the situation. I felt unable to tolerate it.” (Parker, 1995, p. 19)

Thousands of miles away, mothers living in a semi-rural, low-income community in South Africa were entrapped in a similar shame-fueled vicious spiral (Kruger & Lourens, 2016). These women had also bought into the belief that good mothers are all-providing, ever-giving, and self-sacrificing, and when economic circumstances made it

impossible for them to achieve this ideal, they felt shame and guilt. These emotions often found expression in feelings of frustration and anger with their hungry children. On occasions, mothers responded to their children's request for food with violence; other times women forcefully told their children that they wished they had never been born.

Maternal shame leaves women isolated in an emotional wasteland. Terrified to expose their supposedly inhuman inadequacy to both themselves and others, mothers strive to deny and dissociate their feelings, thus becoming alienated from themselves (and, of course, from their children). In this place, there can be no transformation or healing. As Jung (1958) famously said, "We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses" (par. 519).

Baraitser and Noack (2007), exploring the concept of "maternal resilience," argue that it is comprised of two components: first, a mother's ability to acknowledge and accept her feelings of both love and ambivalence for her baby (Parker, 1995; Winnicott 1949); and second and equally important, a mother's ability to acknowledge and accept her feelings about herself as a mother—which means accepting the shame, despair, guilt, and rage that result from her ambivalence. They write, "a resilient mother is one *who is able to bear herself as a mother as well as bear the guilt stemming from her ambivalent feelings towards her child*" (Baraitser & Noack, 2007, p. 180, original italics).

An evolutionary consciousness, as part of a psychoeducation process, can contribute to building this resilience. Challenging the sentimental idealism that surrounds "mother" can help women to understand their ambivalence in a more human context. Maybe this mother already has a young child whom she is struggling to look after; maybe her child is weak or disabled; maybe an economic downturn means that resources are scarce; maybe she is without support. Although in today's world, in many countries, her children will survive, they would not have done so throughout most of our evolutionary history, and the mother's ambivalence may, in part, reflect this deeper history. Once a woman begins to understand this broader reality, she can start to deconstruct and integrate the shameful feelings of indifference or hostility that she sometimes feels for her infant, while fostering the kind of self-compassion that sets the stage for genuine change in both her internal and external worlds.

### Those Who Have Grown Up with the Archetypal Death Mother

An evolutionary consciousness also has much to offer those whose childhood was marred by the archetypal Death Mother. Growing up with an indifferent, ambivalent, or hostile mother is likely to compromise emotional development (Schore & Sieff, 2015) and trigger the formation of a "trauma-world" (Sieff, 2017, 2018). Most of the clinical community is now aware of this dynamic; however, because popular discourse has focused on the harm caused by explicit sexual and physical abuse, many people who have grown up feeling "merely" unloved find it difficult to understand their own feelings and behavior. This leaves them little choice but to mistakenly deduce that their suffering is rooted in some kind of intrinsic inadequacy of their own. Once such a conviction forms, shame takes hold, whereupon these individuals tend to become imprisoned by the belief that they are victims to their own supposed inadequacy. Incarcerated in this distorted belief system, there can be no genuine healing.

Again, an evolutionary consciousness can help to instigate change. Understanding that the Death Mother was all too real during our species' evolutionary

history, and that human infants and children have evolved to feel the emotional ambivalence of caregivers as a concrete threat to survival, frees people to change the context in which they experience themselves. Instead of believing that their feelings and behavior result from their own inadequacy, they can begin to understand them as a response to what, for most of our evolutionary history, would have meant actual death. Such a shift in perspective can help people develop a more compassionate and accepting relationship with *themselves*, and, as already emphasized, compassionate self-acceptance is a vital step in the process of change.

## CONCLUSION

Marion Woodman describes the journey of growth as a spiral: We circle back to the same issues time and again, she says, and on each turn of the spiral we develop an expanded consciousness of what we carry in both our minds and bodies. As I approach the end of this article, I will spiral back to the words of Woodman, viewing them in an expanded light:

If this child knew in the womb that it was not the gender the parents longed for, or there was no money for another child, or timing in the marriage was bad, or it barely escaped abortion, this child knows it is not welcomed into life.... *Not Wanted*. Is there anything worse for a helpless infant to experience in its bones? (Woodman, 2005, p. 38, original emphasis)

An evolutionary consciousness would answer: No! There is nothing worse for a helpless infant to experience in its bones than being unwanted. That is because we carry in our collectively embodied unconscious a knowledge of how incredibly precarious life was for young humans during the deep past, as well as an understanding of how difficult it was for ancestral mothers. And however much we might want to deny this unpalatable aspect of humanity, it is this unconscious knowledge which gives the psyche's archetypal images of the Death Mother such a powerful and disturbing charge, and which makes growing up in the shadow of the Death Mother so wounding.

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