

An Open letter to the Handless Maiden

Recovering from our Wounds, Reclaiming Our Wholeness

Some time ago I read, "The Handless Maiden," an old folktale in which the hands of a young girl are chopped off in order to fulfill a bargain with the devil that her father made to attain material wealth. The girl is devastated by the loss of her hands, and is immediately reassured by her parents that she will be fine, that she doesn't need her hands because the family is now wealthy and can provide servants to take care of her needs. She doesn't need to 'do' anything at all because the hands of others will 'do' her bidding.

One day, in despair, the young girl wanders into the forest and decides to live there. While she attains a degree of peace in the wilderness, she soon discovers that she is at risk of starving, as without hands, it's difficult to feed oneself. Eventually she discovers a pear tree and is able to sustain herself by biting off the pears within her reach. The king who owns the pear tree discovers her one morning and captivated by her beauty, decides to take her home with him to his palace and marry her. The maiden (now queen) lives in the lap of luxury, loved and pampered. She and the king have a child, and life appears to be as perfect as it possibly can be for a woman with no hands. Still, as hard as she tries to count her many blessings, the maiden still feels empty and dissatisfied, and so risking the dangers of the wilderness once again, she takes her child and disappears into the forest.

Without giving the ending away completely, suffice it to say that eventually she regains her hands after a difficult and courageous journey that ultimately leads her to wholeness.

As I thought about the tale of the handless maiden, it occurred to me that her story was a metaphor for the struggles of so many wounded women whom I'd encountered during my years as a therapist, women who in spite of their limitations, had embarked upon their own courageous journeys in order to reclaim their sense of power and wholeness. The following is an open letter to this mythic woman, and to every woman who has struggled with loss and limitations and eventually triumphed.

Dear Handless Maiden,

I've been thinking about you a great deal recently, admiring your strength, your resilience, your courage, and your triumphs.

Over the years, you have bravely traveled a tremendous distance. You were an innocent child once, one who seldom complained, accepting the mandates and the stories of your elders, and all too often sacrificing your needs, your power, your perceptions, and your wholeness. Today, you have moved beyond being a vulnerable and dependent daughter, and have grown into a strong and independent woman.

You've bravely moved forward, beyond the comfort and security of both your parents' home and your husband's palace, and entered the dark forest, following an unmarked and

solitary path that eventually led you back to yourself. In order to embark upon this journey you were required to let go of the guide wires that both protected and yet imprisoned you, and in taking this risk, you have saved yourself. How did you muster the courage?

Your wound did not render you permanently helpless, although it easily could have, more than once those whom you loved and trusted gave you permission and encouragement to allow it to do so. And yet, you refused to allow your wound to become that which most defined you, did not accept that it would lead to a lifetime of suffering, or require that you must become dependant on others for your well-being and safety. You recognized that a life spent being 'taken care of' would ultimately become a life of surrender, and would render an incalculable price.

You didn't settle for creature comforts, safety, and predictability. Instead you journeyed from unconsciousness into deeper knowing, from innocence to wisdom, from victim to savior, and from vulnerable child to capable woman; one who is ready to take full responsibility for her own life and well being.

I'm wondering what it is that lives within you that enabled you to overcome your suffering, your limitations, and your fears? What sustained you as you faced the loss of a fundamental part of yourself, and then empowered you to reclaim it?

And now as this portion of your journey has reached its conclusion, I'm wondering how your incredible resilience and strength will continue to serve you? What do you see your life purpose to be? What next courageous steps will you take to realize this purpose? What lessons will you bring with you to assist you in taking these steps? What wisdom will you offer others as you move bravely forward?

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