

Modern Mysteries; on creating a contemporary Eleusinian Mysteries ritual
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For modern ritualists the Eleusinian Mysteries presents a tempting and tantalizing puzzle. Here is a ritual that worked so well that literally thousands of people experienced its power. For the people of ancient Greece and later Rome, its story had the power of life and death. It spoke to their deepest fears and greatest hopes and it did so in terms they understood implicitly. In the 21st Century, the myth of Demeter and Persephone, of winter and spring, of life and death, has become a story to tell children, and teach in Literature classes. We are told that science has taught us all about the rotation of the planet and the how's and why's of death and the changing seasons. That there is no longer any mystery to be learned; science has revealed it all to us. Yet we are not so different from our ancestors at Eleusis. We still wonder about the end of life, marvel at its beginnings, and we still need reassurance that we will find peace in the depth of the deepest darkness.

Over three thousand years ago in a land far away from the silicon dust and celluloid reels of California, there was a ritual that met the needs of a people who worked the land and honored their ancestors and a pantheon of Gods. This ritual brought together people from all parts of society to honor the Goddess of Life and Her daughter, the Maiden of Spring. At the heart of this ritual there was a special story, perhaps the greatest story of all, for it told about the strange and mysterious workings of life, death and renewal. So important did this story become that its heart became a Mystery: a secret that could not be told, but rather had to be experienced. For nearly two thousand years this ritual was practiced, and in all that time not one of the hundreds of thousands of people initiated into its deepest mystery ever revealed what lay at its heart.

So important were the Mysteries of Eleusis to the Greeks that to not participate in the ritual was tantamount to spiritual suicide. The Greeks came to believe that peace in the after life and a kind of immortality was possible – but only for those who had experienced the Mysteries.

Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiated and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom.ⁱ

Today, the remains of the Temple complex at Eleusis, some 14 kilometers from Athens on the coast of the Mediterranean sea, give us just enough information to see what the pattern of the mystery looked like, but not what it was in truth. There are some written records, not of the ritual specifically, but of the stories and experiences which surrounded it, giving us again a glimpse of the truth but not yet the full knowledge of the mystery. Between the archeological finds, the veiled writings of authors who had been through the mysteries, and those who had been near enough to see or overhear segments of the experience, we do know a great deal about what occurred around and just inside the temple grounds. Everything else about the actual mystery and its revelations is conjecture.

It is believed that in large part the point of the Mystery of Eleusis is “the death and mystical resurrection of the initiand.”ⁱⁱ To an agrarian culture like the Greeks of 3500 years agoⁱⁱⁱ death and the harsh cessation of what we understand ourselves to be, with no way to know what happens after the breath has left the body was a deeply troubling reality of life. And yet in the spring, flowers, which had faded with the cold, return with the warming air and bright sunshine. The land seems “reborn” awakened from a deep sleep or even a death. All around, animals and humans give birth to new life. The land becomes workable once more and hope for the future is an almost tangible commodity. This cycle of seasons is reflected in the myth of Demeter and her daughter Kore/Persephone, and forms the backdrop for the celebration at Eleusis.

In creating a contemporary version of the Eleusinian Mysteries I researched many of the details that are available about the ritual and its purposes. Two questions kept weaving through my thoughts as I worked: a –what was the secret at the heart of the ritual? And b- how do we create a ritual of import for today's community? I found that the answers are likely related.

It is the belief of famed Eleusinian scholar Carl Kerényi that Persephone herself was the secret. In his best known work *Eleusis; Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* he states that “[t]he actual secret, the *arrheton* of Eleusis,

was connected with the Goddess Persephone- indeed she, the *arrhetos koura*, the “ineffable maiden,” the only one of all the divine beings to be given this epithet in the tradition, *was the secret.*”^{iv} In *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* anthropologist Mircea Eliade does not delve as deeply as Kerényi into the Mysteries, as his focus is mainly on the structure of initiatory ritual but he does describe the most likely things to have occurred in the heart of the ritual. Eliade holds that “[s]ome form of initiatory death, that is, a symbolic descent to Hell, is not improbably, for the play on words between ‘initiation’ (*teleisthai*) and ‘dying’ (*teleutan*) was quite popular in Greece.”^v He goes on to point out that after being shown a sacred basket and “...after this mysterious handling of the sacred objects, the mystes was born anew.”^{vi}

Based on the work of these two authors we can formulate a possible answer to the secret within the ancient ritual: Kore the Maiden of Spring, is transformed by her descent into the underworld and becomes Persephone and in this form is the secret of the Eleusinian Mysteries. In addition a core part of the ritual is the initiation of individuals through death, and their rebirth through interaction with sacred objects. Extrapolating further we could suggest that Persephone initiates the mystes, the initiates, into the mysteries life and death.

Today we know all about the myth of Persephone. We know that spring and winter are effects of the Earth’s rotation and that crops and people die, not because the Gods say they shall, but because all life is finite and imperfect. We, who live and create in the sprawl of urban American life, live divorced from the cycles of life and death. With our ability to control the weather in our homes and offices, we do not fear winter or cheer spring with the same desperate need that our ancestors must have felt. There are still problems and complications of a delayed spring or a short winter or an unrelenting blizzard, we just don’t tend to notice them the same way. For the most part we are inured to such climactic fluctuations because Safeway is open 24 hours and Whole Foods can get strawberries from Mexico even if the Bay Area strawberry crop has been washed out to sea with the spring floods. And many of our life threatening catastrophes are man made- rolling blackouts, airplane crashes and polluted water tables. Maybe because we have helped to create so many of our own nightmares, we still fear the dark and wonder what will become of us after death. Even if we are very ecologically minded and actively, year after year, plant and harvest our own foods we do not have the nearly innate knowledge of the cycles of agricultural life that the Greeks had. We do not have time to stop and notice the mystery of life renewing itself. We seal our dead into cement lined boxes or pour them into jars and tell ourselves that we believe in an after life, because the alternative is too painful to bear. For those lucky few who have broken with custom and looked beyond health laws to return their loved ones physical remains to the cycle, there is some peace. A peace that the Greeks knew, a peace hard won by descending into the land of the dead and learning the Mysteries of the Lord and Lady of the Underworld. And those who plant their roses in the ashes of their dead know a modern secret – that at our core we are not so different from our ancestors.

To create a contemporary Eleusinian Mysteries, with the power to affect modern celebrants as deeply as the original did, we must look to our hopes and our fears, and to what we share with our Greek Ancestors. By understanding this, it becomes clear that the two questions in fact have one answer: the secret at the heart of the ritual is that which will be the most effecting and transformative for the community in which the ritual is performed. No matter what age we live in or what level of “civilization” we have around us the act of walking the sacred road tread by so many for so long is still the best way to address our deepest fears. By descending into the presence of Kore, who is transformed by death into Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld, daughter of Demeter and partner to Hades, we cross the boundary between life and death. In allowing ourselves to be initiated by Persephone into Her secrets and the secrets of Her mother, we allow for the possibility of peace and a kind of immortality.

Hermes:
Keep solemn silence! Keep solemn silence!
We sing, to Demeter and Kore, to Her who bears fair offspring, to the nourisher of youth, to the wealthy one, and to the threefold Graces.
If your tongue is comprehensible, and no blood is on your soul, attend! Attend!
For here we begin the mysteries of the Twofold Goddess, and of Her gift to mankind,
that death is no longer our evil.
To all who do this with us, abundant good shall come.
Io! Evohe!^{vii}

Because we know the myth so well today, and live a different, Internet/urban life, we need to be brought into the story of Demeter and Kore, or Persephone and Hades more deeply and more immediately than the Greeks would

have been. We have one day to understand the material where the Greeks had weeks and life times. One way to speed the process of inclusion within the story is to actively participate in its workings. And so I have given the initiates the power of choice. For this year's NROOGD Eleusinian, each of us will choose how Kore descends into Hades- either as an unwilling victim, seduced lover, or experienced priestess. In choosing Kore's fate we will effect our own. For Kore's method of descent will in turn effect how She receives us in Her land, and how she chooses to initiate each of us into Her mysteries.

White Kore

I have been torn, abducted, raped from all I knew, all I thought I was. Torn in body and mind. Never asked if I wanted to change. Never consulted about my fate...

Red Kore

I was picking flowers, the sun was shining, the day glorious... I remember that I saw a flower – the most beautiful, strange, wonderful flower I had ever seen. I reached out to touch it, to smell its fragrance... and then.... Then ... I lost my self in the most beautiful eyes.

Black Kore

Once I looked upon a flower as a child, unaware of the secrets that lay in its heart. Once I touched your heart and learned what paradise lies in the soul of another person. Now I offer my life, my heart and my essence to the mysteries, that I may touch the universe.^{viii}

We are, in truth, not so different from our ancestors and because of this the Eleusinian Mysteries continue to intrigue and tempt here in the present, so far removed from Mythical Greece. We too have a need to believe that death does not end everything that we are or think ourselves to be. That in some way we can leave our bodies behind and not be forgotten or lost to those we love. That Persephone can initiate us into the Mysteries of the underworld and that we too may find happiness when we leave the land of seasons and mortality. For us, the children of the Greeks, either in thought or body, the Mystery still offers hope and peace. By going through it we experience all this. We will not be forgotten because we too have been touched by the Gods and in them we will live forever.

ⁱ Hugh G. Evelyn-White, ed., *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* [online]. Medford: Tufts University, The Perseus Digital Library [Sited June 1, 2001] Available from World Wide Web: (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=HH+2+449>)

ⁱⁱ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation – The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Woodstock: Spring Publications, 1958): 112

ⁱⁱⁱ Kerényi places the beginnings of the Eleusinian Mysteries to the “middle of the second millennium B.C.” Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis; Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967): 21

^{iv} Kerényi, 26

^v Eliade, 110

^{vi} Eliade, 110

^{vii} This introductory line of Hermes' is often used as part of the “traditional” version of the NROOGD Eleusinian Mysteries and is included in the 2001 version by C. Pennington. Adian Kelly, *The Eleusinian ritual for the Mabon Sabbat*, (1970's? No date is listed in his BOS for this ritual).

^{viii} White, Red and black represent the three versions of Kore and of what is spoken by Her in the Underworld depending upon how She becomes bride to Hades. Catherine Pennington, *NROOGD Eleusinian 2001*.