

CHAPTER 3. Nosing Out the Facts: The Retrieval of Intuition as Initiation

About the realization that most things are not as they seem. As women we call upon our intuition and instincts in order to sniff things out. We use all our senses to wring the truth from things, to extract nourishment from our own ideas, to see what there is to see, to know what there is to know, to be the keepers of our own creative fires, and to have intimate knowing about the Life/Death/Life cycles of all nature—this is an initiated woman.

About allowing the good to die, exposing shadows, navigating in the dark, facing the wild, serving the non-rational, asking the mysteries, recasting the shadows.

The Doll in Her Pocket: Vasalisa the Wise

The old Russian tale “Vasalisa” is a woman’s initiation story with few essential bones astray. It is about the realization that most things are not as they seem. It is about infusing human women with Wild Woman's primary instinctual power, intuition.

“Once there was, and once there was not ...” This paradoxical phrase is meant to alert the soul of the listener that this story takes place in the world between worlds where nothing is as it first seems. So let us begin.

Vasalisa

Once there was, and once there was not, a young mother who lay on her deathbed, her face pale as the white wax roses in the sacristy of the churchbed and prayed that God would guide her safely into the next world.

The dying mother called to Vasalisa, and the little child in red boots and white apron knelt at her mother’s side. “Here is a doll for you, my love,” the mother whispered, and from the hairy coverlet she pulled a tiny doll which like Vasalisa herself was dressed in red boots, white apron, black skirt, and vest embroidered all over with colored thread.

“Here are my last words, Beloved,” said the mother. “Should you lose your way or be in need of help, ask this doll what to do. You will be assisted. Keep the doll with you always. Do not tell anyone about her. Feed her when she is hungry. This is my mother’s promise to you, my blessing on you, dear daughter.”

And with that, the mother’s breath fell into the depths of her body where it gathered up her soul and rushed out from between her lips, and the mother was dead.

The child and her father mourned for a very long time. But, like the field cruelly plowed under by war, the father's life rose green from the ditch again, and he married a widow with two daughters. Although the new stepmother and her daughters spoke in polite tones and always smiled like ladies, there was something hidden behind their smiles which Vasalisa's father did not perceive.

Sure enough, when the three women were alone with Vasalisa, they tormented her, forced her to wait on them, sent her to chop wood so her lovely skin would become blemished. They hated her because she had a sweetness about her that was otherworldly. She was also very beautiful. Her breasts were bounding while theirs dwindled from meanness. She was helpful and uncomplaining while the stepmother and stepsisters were, among themselves, like rats in the garbage pile at night.

One day the stepmother and stepsisters simply could not stand Vasalisa any longer. "Let... us ... conspire to make the fire go out, and then let us send Vasalisa into the forest to Baba Yaga, the witch, to beg fire for our hearth. And when she reaches Baba Yaga, well, old Baba Yaga will kill her and eat her." Oh, they all clapped and squeaked like things that live in the dark.

So that evening, when Vasalisa came home from gathering wood, the entire house was dark. She was very concerned and inquired of her stepmother, "What has happened; what will we have to cook with? What will we do to light the darkness?"

The stepmother admonished, "You stupid child. Obviously we have no fire. And I can't go out into the woods because I am old. My daughters can't go because they are afraid. So you are the only one who can go out into the forest to find Baba Yaga and get a coal to start our fire again."

Vasalisa replied innocently, "Well all right, yes, I'll do that," and so she set out. The woods became darker and darker, and sticks cracked under her feet, frightening her. She reached down in the long deep pocket of her apron and there was the doll her dying mother had given her. And Vasalisa patted the doll in her pocket and said, "Just touching this doll, yes, I feel better."

And at every fork in the road, Vasalisa reached into her pocket and consulted the doll. "Well, should I go to the left or should I go to the right?" The doll indicated "Yes," or "No," or "This way," or "That way." And Vasalisa fed the doll some of her bread as she walked and followed what she felt was emanating from the doll.

Suddenly a man in white on a white horse galloped by and it became daylight. Farther on, a man in red strolled by on a red horse, and the sun rose. Vasalisa walked and walked and just as she came to

the house of Baba Yaga, a rider dressed in black came trotting on a black horse, and rode right into Baba Yaga's hut. Swiftly it became night. The fence made of skulls and bones surrounding the hut began to blaze with an inner fire so the clearing there in the forest glowed with an eerie light.

Now the Baba Yaga was a very fearsome creature. She traveled, not in a chariot, not in a coach, but in a kettle shaped like a mortar which flew along all by itself. She rowed this vehicle with an oar shaped like a pestle, and all the while she swept out the tracks of where she'd been with a broom made from the hair of a person long dead.

And the kettle flew through the sky with Baba Yaga's own greasy hair flying behind. Her long chin curved up and her long nose curved down, and they met in the middle. She had a tiny white goatee and warts on her skin from her trade in frogs. Her brown-stained fingernails were thick and ridged like roofs, and so curled over she could not make a fist.

Even more strange was the Baba Yaga's house. It sat atop huge, scaly yellow chicken legs, and walked about all by itself and sometimes twirled around and around like an ecstatic dancer. The bolts on the doors and shutters were made of human fingers and toes and the lock on the front door was a snout with many pointed teeth.

Vasalisa consulted her doll and asked, "Is this the house we seek?" and the doll, in its own way, answered, "Yes, this is what you seek." And before she could take another step, Baba Yaga in her kettle descended on Vasalisa and shouted down at her, "What do you want?" And the girl trembled. "Grandmother» I come for fire. My house is cold ... my people will die... I need fire." Baba Yaga snapped, "Oh yesssss, I know you, and your people. Well, you useless child ... you let the fire go out. That's an ill-advised thing to do. And besides, what makes you think I should give you the flame?" Vasalisa consulted her doll and quickly replied, "Because I ask."

Baba Yaga purred, "You're lucky. That is the right answer." And Vasalisa felt very lucky she had given the right answer. Baba Yaga threatened, "I cannot possibly give you fire, until you've done work for me. If you perform these tasks for me, you shall have the fire. If not.. ." And here Vasalisa saw Baba Yaga's eyes turn suddenly to red cinders. "If not, my child, you shall die." So Baba Yaga rumbled into the hovel and laid down upon her bed and ordered Vasalisa to bring her what was cooking in the oven. In the oven was enough food for ten people and the Yaga ate it all, leaving just a tiny crust and a thimble of soup for Vasalisa.

“Wash my clothes, sweep the yard and clean my house, prepare my food, and separate the mildewed corn from the good corn and see that everything is in order. I will be back to inspect your work later. If it is not done, you will be my feast.” And with that Baba Yaga flew off in her kettle with her nose as the windsock and her hair as the sail. And it became night again.

Vasalisa turned to her doll as soon as the Yaga had gone. “What shall I do? Can I complete these tasks in time?’ The doll assured her she could, and to eat a little and go to sleep. Vasalisa fed the doll a little too, then she slept.

In the morning, the doll had done all the work and all that remained was the meal to be cooked. In the evening the Yaga returned and found nothing undone. Pleased, in a way, but not pleased because she could find no fault, Baba Yaga sneered, “You are a very lucky girl.” She then called on her faithful servants to grind the corn and three pairs of hands appeared in midair and began to rasp and crush the corn. The chaff flew in the house like a golden snow. Finally it was done and Baba Yaga sat down to eat. She ate for hours and ordered Vasalisa in the morning to again clean the house, sweep the yard, and launder her clothes.

The Yaga pointed to a great mound of dirt in the yard. “In that pile of dirt are many poppy seeds, millions of poppy seeds. And I want, in the morning, to have one pile of poppy seeds and one pile of dirt, all separated out from each other. Do you understand?” Vasalisa almost fainted. “Oh my, how am I going to do that?” She reached into her pocket and the doll whispered, “Don’t worry, I will take care of it.” That night Baba Yaga snored off to sleep and Vasalisa tried... to pick... the... poppy seeds... out... of... the ... dirt. After a time, the doll said to her, “Sleep now. All will be well.”

Again the doll accomplished these tasks, and when the old woman returned home, all was done. Baba Yaga spoke sarcastically through her nose. “Welllll! Lucky for you that you were able to do these things.” She called for her faithful servants to press the oil from the poppy seeds, and again three pairs of hands appeared, and did so.

While the Yaga was smearing her lips with grease from her stew, Vasalisa stood nearby. “What are you staring at?” barked Baba Yaga. “May I ask you some questions, Grandmother?” asked Vasalisa. “Ask,” ordered the Yaga, “but remember, too much knowledge can make a person old too soon.” Vasalisa asked about the white man on a white horse. “Aha,” said the Yaga fondly, “that first is my Day.” “And the red man on the red horse?” “Ah, that is my Rising Sun.” “And the black man on the black horse?” “Ah yes, that is the third and he is my Night.” “I see,” said

Vasalisa. "Come, come child. Wouldn't you like to ask more questions?" wheedled the Yaga. Vasalisa was about to ask about the pairs of hands that appeared and disappeared, but the doll began to jump up and down in her pocket, so instead Vasalisa said, "No, Grandmother. As you yourself say, to know too much can make one old too soon "

"Ah," said the Yaga, cocking her head like a child, "you are wiser than your years, my girl. And how did you come to be this way?" "By the blessing of my mother," smiled Vasalisa. "Blessing?!" screeched Baba Yaga. "Blessing?! We need no blessings around this house. You'd best be on your way, daughter." She pushed Vasalisa out into the night. "I'll tell you what, child. Here!" Baba Yaga took a skull with fiery eyes from her fence and put it on a stick. "Here! Take this skull on a stick home with you. There! There's your fire. Don't say another word. Just be on your way." Vasalisa began to thank the Yaga, but the little doll in her pocket began to jump up and down, and Vasalisa realized she must just take the fire and go. She ran for home through the dark forest, following the turns and twists in the road as the doll told her which way to go. Vasalisa came through the forest carrying the skull, with fire blazing from its ear, eye, nose, and mouth holes. Suddenly, she became frightened of its weight and its eerie light and thought to throw it away. But the skull spoke to her and urged her to calm herself and to continue toward the home of her stepmother and stepsisters. And this she did.

As Vasalisa came nearer and nearer to her house, her stepmother and stepsisters looked out the window and saw a strange glow dancing through the woods. Closer and closer it came. They could not imagine what it could be. They had decided that Vasalisa's long, absence meant she was dead by now and her bones dragged away by animals. Vasalisa advanced closer and closer to home. And as the stepmother and the stepsisters saw it was her, they ran to her, saying they had been without fire since she'd left, and no matter how hard they had tried to start one, it always went out.

Vasalisa entered the house feeling triumphant, for she had survived her dangerous journey and brought fire back to her home. But the skull on the stick watched the stepsisters' and the stepmother's every move and burnt into them, and by morning it had burnt the wicked trio to ashes.

And there we have it, an abrupt ending to kick people out of the fairy tale and back into reality again. Vasalisa is a story of handing down the blessing on women's power of intuition from mother to daughter, from one generation to the next.

To grasp the importance of such a tale, we understand that all its components represent characterizations of a single woman's psyche. So all aspects of the story belong to and elucidate an individual psyche undergoing an initiatory process. Initiation is enacted by completing certain tasks. In this tale there are nine tasks for the psyche to complete. They focus on learning something of the ways of the Old Wild Mother.

Through completion of these tasks, a woman's intuition is re-set into woman's psyche. The goal is a loving and trusting relationship with this being whom we have come to call "the knowing woman," the essence of the Wild Woman archetype.

(Who is who in this tale? Vasalisa? Stepmother? Stepsisters? mother? Father? baba yaga? skull?)

In the rite of the old wild female Goddess, Baba Yaga, these are the tasks of initiation:

The First Task—Allowing the Too-Good Mother to Die

In the opening of the tale, the mother is dying and leaves to her daughter an important legacy.

The psychic tasks of this stage in a woman's life are these:

Accepting that the ever-watchful, hovering, protective psychic mother is not adequate as a central guide for one's future instinctual life (the too-good mother dies). Taking on the task of being on one's own, developing one's own consciousness about danger, intrigue, politic. Becoming alert by oneself, for oneself. Letting die what must die. As the too-good mother dies, the new woman is born.

In the tale, the initiatory process begins when the dear and good mother dies. In all our lives as daughters, there is a time when **the good mother of the psyche**—the one which served us appropriately and well in earlier times—turns into a too-good mother, one which by virtue of her overly safeguarding values—begins to prevent us from responding to new challenges and thereby to deeper development.

In the natural process of our maturing, the too-good mother must become thinner and thinner until we are left to care for ourselves in a new way. While we always retain a core of her warmth, this natural psychic transition leaves us on our own in a world that is not motherly to us. But wait, under the blanket, she has a tiny doll to give her daughter. So even though this too-good mother cannot live and influence beyond a certain point in a girl's life, she blesses Vasalisa with the doll.

This dramatic psychological shrinking of the over-protecting mother occurs as a girl moves from the soft nest of preadolescence to the jungle of adolescence. For some girls, however, the process of developing a new inner mother—the mother called intuition—was only half completed then, and women initiated only half way have wandered for years wishing for and wanting the complete initiatory experience, and patching themselves up as best they could.

The stopping of a woman's initiation process occurs for various reasons, such as when there has been too much psychological hardship early in one's life—especially when there has been no consistent “good-enough” mother in the early years. The initiation may also be uncompleted because the too-good mother lives on, overprotecting her daughter even though the script says, “Exit stage left now” In this situation, women often feel too timid to proceed into the woods and resist it all they can. For these, whose complaint is often, “I am so tired of taking care of myself,” there is a good and wise remedy. A re-affirming of, a re-tracing or re-initiation will re-set the deep intuition, regardless of a woman's age.

Vasalisa's initiation begins with learning to let die what must die. Especially to be examined are those long-held beliefs which make life too safe, which overprotect. The time during which the childhood “positive mother” shrinks is always a time of great learning. Although there is a period in all our lives during which we rightfully remain close to the protective psychic mother (for instance, when we are actual children, or during recovery from an illness or psychological or spiritual trauma, or when our lives are in danger and being quiet will keep us safe), and even though we retain large stores of her help for life, there also comes a time to change mothers, so to speak.

If we stay overly long with the protective mother within our own psyches, we find ourselves slowing down all challenges to ourselves and therefore blocking further development. While I do not in any way advise that a woman ought to throw herself into torturous or abusive situations, I do mean she must set for herself a something in life that she is willing to reach for and therefore take risks for. It is through this process that she sharpens her intuitive powers. It is in order to pursue further development that we exchange the mother which was so fitted for us when we were young for another kind of mother, one who lives even deeper in the psychic wilderlands, one who is both protector and teacher. She is a loving mother, but also fierce and demanding.

Most of us will not let the too-good mother die just because it is time. It is so nice to be with her, so comfortable, why leave? Often we hear voices within our minds which encourage us to hold back, to stay safe. These voices say things like, “Oh, don't say that” or “You can't do that” or “Well

you're certainly not one of my children if you do that," or "It's dangerous out there," or "Who knows what will become of you if you insist on leaving this warm nest," or "You're just going to humiliate yourself you know," or even more insidious still, "Pretend you are taking risks, but secretly stay here with me."

These are all voices of the frightened and rather exasperated too-good mother within the psyche. If we merge with the too-good mother for too long, we become small instead of strong. And worse, what occurs when one compresses a vivid energy and allows it no life? Like the magic porridge pot in the wrong hands, it grows, and grows, and grrrrrows until it explodes! spilling all of its goodness onto the ground. So, we must be able to see that there is something waiting for us at the edge of the woods, and it is our fate to meet it.

Sometimes a woman must just simply dive in, not knowing what will happen next. It is the only thing which will retrieve her intuitive nature. Sometimes a woman is so bound up in being the too-good mother to other adults that they have attached themselves onto her nipples and are not about to let her leave them. In this case a woman has to kick them off and go on anyway.

And since the dreaming psyche compensates for, among other things, that which the ego will not or cannot acknowledge, a woman's dreams during such a struggle will be filled with chases, dead ends, cars that will not start, incomplete pregnancies, and other symbols which image life not going forward. In her guts a woman knows there is a deadliness in being the too-sweet self for too long. So we let go of the nipple and learn to hunt. There is a wild mother waiting to teach us. But in the meantime the second task is to hold on to the doll while we learn its uses.

The Second Task—Exposing the Crude Shadow

In this part of the tale, the "bad-rotten" stepfamily marches into Vasalisa's world and begins to make her life miserable. The tasks of this time are:

Learning even more mindfully to let go of the overly positive mother. Finding that being good, being sweet, being nice will not cause life to sing. (Vasalisa becomes a slave, but it does not help.)
Experiencing directly one's own shadow nature, particularly the exclusionary, jealous, and exploitative aspects of self (the stepmother and stepsisters). Acknowledging these unequivocally.
Making the best relationship one can with the worst parts of oneself. Letting the pressure build between who one is taught to be and who one really is. Ultimately working toward letting the old self die and the new intuitive self be born.

The stepmother and stepsisters represent the undeveloped but provocatively cruel elements of the psyche. They are **shadow elements**, meaning aspects of oneself which are considered by the ego to be undesirable or not useful and are therefore relegated to the dark. On one hand, shadow material can be quite positive, for often a woman's gifts are pushed into the dark, hidden there and waiting to be discovered. On the other hand, negative shadow material can also be turned to one's use, as we shall see. When it erupts, and we finally identify its aspects and sources, we are made all the stronger and wiser. In this stage of initiation, a woman is harassed by the demands of her psyche which advises her to comply with whatever anyone wishes. To be ourselves causes us to be exiled by many others, and yet to comply with what others want causes us to be exiled from ourselves. It is a tormenting tension and it must be borne, but the choice is clear. As far as her new family is concerned, Vasalisa is unnecessary. They hate and scold her. They treat her as The Stranger, the untrustworthy one. In fairy tales, the role of the stranger or the outcast is usually played by the one who is most deeply connected to the knowing nature.

The stepmother and stepsisters can be understood as creatures set into a woman's psyche by the culture to which a woman belongs. The stepfamily in the psyche is different from the "soul family," for it is of the superego, that aspect of psyche which is structured according to each particular society's expectations—healthy or not—for women. They are experienced by women as coming from "out there," from some other source which is not part of their soul-selves. The cultural/superego overlays can be very positive or they can be very harmful.

Vasalisa's stepfamily is saying, "You can't do it. You're not good enough. You're not bold enough. You're stupid, insipid, vacant. You don't have time. You're only good for simple things. You're only allowed to do this much and no more. Give up while you're ahead." As Vasalisa is not yet fully conscious of her powers, she allows this evil trap in her lifeline. In order for her to regain her life, something different, something life-giving must occur.

The same is true for us. We can see in the story that Vasalisa's intuition into what is happening around her is quite weak, and that the father of the psyche doesn't notice the hostile environment either, he is also too-good and has no intuitive development himself. It is interesting to note that daughters who have naive fathers often take far longer to awaken.

Like Vasalisa we may have been taught to set aside acute insight in order to get along. However, the reward for simply being nice in oppressive circumstances is to be mistreated all the more. Although a woman feels that if she is herself she will alienate others, it is just this psychic tension that is

needed in order to make soul and to create change. So the stepmother and stepsisters scheme to send Vasalisa away. They secretly plot, “Go into the forest, Vasalisa, go to Baba Yaga, and if you survive, ha ha—which you won’t—then we might accept you ” This is a very critical idea because many women are stuck halfway through this initiation process—sort of hanging half in and half out of the hoop. Although there is a natural predator in the psyche, one who says, “Die!” and “Bah!” and “Why don’t you give up?” on a rather automatic basis, the culture in which a woman lives, and the family in which she was raised, can painfully worsen that natural aspect in the psyche.

For instance, women who are raised in families that are not accepting of their gifts often set off on tremendously big quests— over and over, and they do not know why. They feel they must have three Ph.D.s or that they have to hang upside down from Mount Everest, or that they must execute all manner of dangerous, time-consuming, and money-eating endeavors to try to prove to their families that they have worth. “Now will you accept me? No? Okay (sigh), watch this.” This problem of course belongs to us by whichever means we received it, and it is our work to deal with it in an empowered manner. However, we can see that for the deep work to continue, trying to prove one’s worth to jealous stepsisters is pointless, and as we shall see, in fact slows down the initiation.

Vasalisa does the everyday chores without complaint. To submit without complaint is heroic-seeming, but in fact causes more and more pressure and conflict between the two oppositional natures, one too-good and the other too-demanding. A woman who is torn between these two is on a good way, but she must take the next steps.

In the story, the stepwomen squeeze the fire out of Vasalisa. At this point a woman may feel cold, alone, and willing to do anything to bring back the light again. This is just the jolt the too-nice woman needs in order to continue her induction into her own power. One might say that Vasalisa has to meet the Great Wild Hag because she needs a good scare. We have to leave the chorus of detractors and plunge into the woods. There is no way to both stay and go. Vasalisa, like us, needs some guiding light that will differentiate for her what is good for her and what is not. She cannot develop by standing around being everyone’s bootjack. Women who try to make their deeper feelings invisible are deadening themselves. The fire goes out. When the fire is put out, it causes her to die to an old way of life and to step with shivers into a new life, one which is based on an older, wiser kind of inner knowing.

The Third Task—Navigating in the Dark

In this part of the tale, the dead mother's legacy—the doll—guides Vasalisa through the dark to the house of Baba Yaga. These are the psychic tasks of this time:

Consenting to venture into the site of deep initiation (entering the forest), and beginning to experience the new and dangerous-feeling force of being in one's intuitive power. Learning to develop sensitivity as regards direction to the mysterious unconscious and relying solely on one's inner senses. Learning the way back home to the Wild Mother (following the doll's directions). Learning to feed intuition (feeding the doll). Letting the frail know-nothing maiden die even more. Shifting power to the doll, i.e., intuition.

Vasalisa's doll comes from the collection of the Old Wild Mother. Dolls are one of the symbolic treasures of the instinctual nature. In Vasalisa's case, the doll represents the **little instinctual life force** that is both fierce and enduring. No matter what mess we are in, it lives out a life hidden within us.

For centuries humans have felt that dolls emanate both a holiness and an a compelling presence which acts upon persons, changing them spiritually. Dolls are believed to be infused with life by their makers. Some are used in rites, ritual, hoodoo, love spells, and general mischief.

The doll is the symbol of what lies buried in humans that is supernatural. It is a small and glowing copy of the original Self. Superficially, it is just a doll. But inversely, it represents a little piece of soul that carries all the knowledge of the larger soul-Self. In the doll is the voice of old La Que Sabe, The One Who Knows.

The doll is related to the symbols of elf, pixie, fairy, and dwarf. In fairy tales these represent a deep vibration of wisdom within the culture of the psyche. They are those creatures which go on with the inner work, they are tireless. The psyche works even when we sleep, most especially when we sleep, even when we are not fully conscious of what we are enacting. In this way **the doll represents the inner spirit of us as women**; the voice of inner reason, inner knowing, and inner consciousness. The doll is like the little bird in fairy tales who appears and whispers in the heroine's ear, the one who reveals the hidden enemy and what to do about it all. This is the wisdom of the small being within. It is our helper which is not seeable, per se, but which is always accessible.

There is no greater blessing a mother can give her daughter than a reliable sense of the power of her own intuition to know the truth. Intuition is handed from parent to child in the simplest ways: “You have good judgment. What do you think lies hidden behind all this?” Rather than defining intuition as some unreasoned faulty quirk, it is defined as truly the soul-voice speaking. Intuition senses the directions to go in for most benefit. It is self-preserving, has a grasp of underlying motive and intention, and it chooses what will cause the least amount of fragmenting in the psyche. The process is similar in the fairy tale. Vasalisa’s mother has given an enormous gift to her daughter by binding the doll and Vasalisa to one another. Being bound to one’s intuition promotes a confident reliance on it, no matter what. It changes a woman’s guiding attitude from “what will be, will be” to “let me see all there is to see.”

What does this wildish intuition do for women? Like the wolf, intuition has claws that pry things open and pin things down, it has eyes that can see through the shields of persona, it has ears that hear beyond the range of mundane human hearing. These formidable psychic tools deepen her femininity and sharpen her ability to move confidently in the outer world.

So now Vasalisa is on her way to gain a coal to rekindle the fire. She is in the dark, in the wilds, and can do nothing but listen to the inner voice coming from the doll. She is learning to rely on that relationship, and she is learning yet one more thing—she learns to feed the doll.

What does one feed intuition so that it is consistently nourished and responsive to our requests to scan our environs? **One feeds it life by listening to it.** I’ve heard women say it, if not a hundred times, then a thousand times: “I knew I should have listened to my intuition. I sensed that I should/should not have done such and such, but I didn’t listen.” We feed the deep intuitive self by listening to it and acting upon its advice. It is like the muscles in the body. If a muscle is not used, eventually it withers, without food, without employment, it dies out. The feeding of the doll is an essential cycle of the Wild Woman archetype—she who is the keeper of hidden treasures. Vasalisa feeds the doll in two ways, first with a bit of bread—a bit of life for this new psychic venture, and secondly by finding her way to the Old Wild Mother, the Baba Yaga. By listening to the doll—at every turn and every fork in the road—the doll indicates which way is “home/

The relationship between the doll and Vasalisa symbolizes a form of empathic magic between a woman and her intuition. This is the thing that must be handed down from woman to woman, this blessed binding, testing, and feeding of intuition. We, like Vasalisa, strengthen our bond with our intuitive nature by listening inwardly at every turn in the road. “Should I go this way, or this way?”

Should I stay or go? Should I resist or be flexible? Should I run away or toward? Is this person, event, venture true or false?" The breaking of the bond between a woman and her wildish intuition is often misunderstood as the intuition itself being broken. This is not the fact. It is not intuition which is broken, but rather the handing down of intuitive reliance between a woman and all females of her lines who have gone before her—it is that long river of women that has been dammed. A woman's grasp of her intuitive wisdom may be weak as a result, but with exercise it will come back and become fully manifested. The dolls serve as talismans. Talismans are reminders of what is felt but not seen, what is so, but is not immediately obvious. The talismanic force of the image of the doll reminds us, tells us, sees ahead for us. This intuitive function belongs to all women. It is a massive and fundamental receptivity possessing immediate access to a profound wisdom that reaches down into women's very bones.

The Fourth Task—Facing the Wild Hag

In this part of the tale, Vasalisa meets the Wild Hag face-to-face. The tasks of this meeting are these:

Being able to stand the face of the fearsome Wild Goddess without wavering; that is, facing the imago of the fierce mother (meeting up with the Baba Yaga). Familiarizing oneself with the mysterious, the odd, the "otherness" of the wild (residing at Baba Yaga's house for a while).

Bringing some of her values into our lives, thereby becoming ourselves a little wild in a goodly way (eating her food). Learning to face great power—in others, and subsequently one's own power.

Letting the frail and too-sweet child die back even further .

Baba Yaga lives in a house squatting on chicken legs. It whirls and spins when it has a mind to. In dreams, the symbol of house comments on the organization of the psychic space a person inhabits, both consciously and unconsciously. Ironically, if this story were a compensatory dream, the eccentric house would infer that the subject, in this case Vasalisa, is too unremarkable, too middle-of-the-road, and needs to twirl and whirl in order to find out what it's like to dance like a crazy chicken once in a while.

Now we can see that the Yaga's house is of the instinctual world and that Vasalisa needs more of this element in her personality. This chicken-legged house walks about, twirls even, in some hippity-hop dance. This house is alive, bursting with enthusiasm, with joyous life. These attributes are the main fundamentals of the archetypal psyche of Wild Woman; a joyous and wild life force, where houses dance, where inanimates such as mortars fly like birds, where the old woman can

make magic, where nothing is what it seems, but for the most part, is far better than it seemed to begin with.

Vasalisa began with what we might call a flattened-out mundane personality. It is just this “hyper-normality” that creeps up on us when we have a routine life, and a lifeless life without our really meaning to. This encourages the neglect of intuition which in turn produces lack of light in the psyche. We must do something then, we must set out into the woods, go find the scary woman, or else one day as we are nodding down the street a manhole cover will snap open and whoosh we will be snatched by some unconscious thing that will throw us about like a rag—joyously or otherwise, mostly otherwise, but for good outcome.

The giving of the intuitive doll by the original sweet mother is incomplete without the task-giving and testing done by the Old Wild One. Baba Yaga is the core of the instinctive and integrated psyche. We know this from her knowledge of all that has gone before. “Oh yes,” she says when Vasalisa arrives, “I know of you and your people.” Old Baba Yaga is the keeper of the sky and earth beings: Day, Rising Sun, and Night. She calls them “my Day, my Night”

Baba Yaga is fearsome, for she represents **the power of destruction and the power of the life force** at the same time. To gaze into her face is to see eyes of blood, the perfect newborn child and the wings of angels all at once. And Vasalisa stands there and accepts this wild Mother divinity, wisdom, warts, and all. One of the most remarkable facets of the Yaga portrayed in this tale is that though she threatens, she is just. She does not hurt Vasalisa as long as Vasalisa affords her respect. Respect in the face of great power is a crucial lesson. A woman must be able to stand in the face of power, because ultimately some part of that power will become hers. Vasalisa presents herself honestly to Baba Yaga, and just as herself.

Many women are in recovery from their “Nice-Nice” complexes, wherein, no matter how they felt, no matter who assailed them, they responded so sweetly as to be practically fattening. Though they might have smiled kindly during the day, at night they gnashed their teeth like brutes—the Yaga in their psyches was fighting for expression.

In this initiation drama Baba Yaga is instinctive nature in the guise of the witch. Long ago the word witch was given to both old and young women healers, deriving from the word wit, meaning wise. The witch, the wild nature, and whatever other integral aspects the culture finds awful in the psyches of women are the very blessed things which women often need most to retrieve and bring

to the surface. A good deal of literature on the subject of women's power states that men are afraid of women's power. I always want to exclaim, "Mother of God! So many women themselves are afraid of women's power." For the old feminine attributes and forces are vast, and they are formidable. If men are going to ever learn to stand it, then without a doubt women have to learn to stand it. If men are ever going to understand women, women are going to have to teach the configurations of the wild feminine to them.

To this end, the dream-making function of the psyche carries the Yaga and all her cohorts right into women's bedrooms at night, if we are late to our initiations, she wonders why we do not come to visit her, and comes to visit us in night dreams instead, reminding the woman dreamer of her elemental self: the Yaga Self, the enigmatic and intense power of the Life/Death/Life Mother. Yes, we are saying that to be Yaga-ish is good, and that we must be able to stand it. To be strong does not mean to sprout muscles and flex. It means meeting one's own divinity without fleeing, actively living with the wild nature in one's own way. It means to be able to learn, to be able to stand what we know. It means to stand and live.

The Fifth Task—Serving the Non-Rational

In this part of the tale, Vasalisa has asked Baba Yaga for fire, and the Yaga agrees— but only if Vasalisa will do some household chores for her in exchange. The psychic tasks of this time of learning are these:

Staying with the Hag; adjusting to the great wildish powers of the feminine psyche. Coming to recognize her (your) power and the powers of inner purifications; unsoiling, sorting, nourishing, building energy and ideas (washing the Yaga's clothes, cooking for her, cleaning her house, and sorting out the elements).

Not so long ago, women were deeply involved in the rhythms of life and death. They inhaled the pungent odor of iron from the fresh blood of childbirth. They washed the cooling bodies of the dead as well. The psyches of modern women, especially those from industrial and technological cultures, are often deprived of these close-up and hands-on blessed and basic experiences. But there is a way for the novice to fully participate in the sensitive aspects of the life and death cycles.

Baba Yaga, the Wild Mother, is the teacher whom we can consult in these matters. She instructs the ordering of the house of the soul. She teaches both death and renewal. In the tale, she teaches Vasalisa how to care for the psychic house of the wild feminine. Laundering the Baba Yaga's

clothes is a fabulous symbol. In the old countries, and still today, in order to launder one's clothes one descends to the river, and there makes the ritualistic ablutions that people have made since the beginning of time in order to renew the cloth. **To wash something is a timeless purification ritual.** It not only means to purify, it also means—like baptism from the Latin baptiza—to drench, to permeate with a spiritual numen and mystery. In the tale the washing is the first task. It means **to make strong again** that which has become slackened from the wearing. The clothes are like us, worn and worn until our ideas and values are slackened by the passing of time. The renewal, the revivifying, takes place in the water, in the re-discovering of what we really hold to be true, what we really hold sacred.

In archetypal symbolism, **clothing represents persona**, the first view the public gains of us. Persona is a kind of camouflage which lets others know only what we wish them to know about us, and nothing more. But there is an older meaning to persona, one well known to healers. The persona is not simply a mask to hide behind, but rather a presence which eclipses the mundane personality. In this sense, persona or mask is a signal of rank, virtue, character, and authority. It is **the outward signifier**, the outward display of mastery. By washing the Yaga's clothes, the initiate herself will see how the seams of persona are sewn, what patterns the gowns take. Soon she herself will have some measure of these personae to place in her closet amidst others she has fashioned throughout her life.

Vasalisa's next task is to sweep the hut and the yard. In Eastern European fairy tales, brooms are often made of sticks from trees and bushes, and sometimes the roots of wiry plants. Vasalisa's work is to sweep this object made of plant matter over the floors and the yard to keep the place clear of debris. A wise woman keeps her psychic environ uncluttered. She accomplishes such by keeping a clear head, keeping a clear place for her work, working at completing her ideas and projects.

For many women, this task requires that they **clear a time each day for contemplation**, for a space to live in that is clearly their own with paper, pens, paints, tools, conversations, time, freedoms that are for this work only. For many, psychoanalysis, contemplation, mediation, the taking of solitude, and other experiences of descent and transformation provide this special time and place for the work. Because it is Baba Yaga's hut that Vasalisa sweeps, because it is Baba Yaga's yard, we are also speaking of keeping unusual ideas clear and ordered. These ideas include those which are uncommon, mystical, soulful, and uncanny. To sweep the premises means not only to begin to **value**

the nonsuperficial life but to care for its orderliness. When women have cleared space, the wild nature will better thrive.

To cook for Baba Yaga, we ask literally, how does one feed the Baba Yaga of the psyche, what does one feed so wild a Goddess? Firstly, to cook for the Yaga, one lays a fire—**a woman must be willing to burn** hot, burn with passion, burn with words, with ideas, with desire for whatever it is that she truly loves. **It is actually this passion which causes the cooking, and a woman's original ideas of substance are what is cooked.** To cook for the Yaga, one must arrange that one's creative life has a consistent fire under it.

Most of us would do better if we became more adept at watching the fire under our work, if we watched more closely the cooking process for nourishing the wild Self. Too often we turn away from the pot, from the oven. We forget to watch, forget to add fuel, forget to stir. We mistakenly think the fire and the cooking are like one of those feisty houseplants that can go without water for eight months before the poor thing keels over. It is not so. The fire bears, requires watching, for it is easy to let the flame go out. The Yaga must be fed. There's hell to pay if she goes hungry. So, it is the cooking up of new and completely original things, of new directions, of commitments to one's art and work that continuously nourishes the wild soul. These same things nourish the Old Wild Mother and give her sustenance in our psyches. Without the fire, our great ideas, our original thoughts, our yearnings and longings remain uncooked, and everyone is unfulfilled. On the other hand, anything we do which has fire will please her and nourish us all.

In the development of women, all these motions of “**homekeeping**,” the cooking, the washing, the sweeping, quantify something beyond the ordinary. All these metaphors offer ways to think about, to measure, feed, nourish, straighten, cleanse, order the soullife.

In all these things Vasalisa is initiated, and her intuition helps her accomplish the tasks. The intuitive nature carries the ability to measure things at a glance, to weigh in an instant, to clear off the debris around an idea, and to name the essence of the thing, to fire it with vitality, to cook raw ideas, to make food for the psyche. Vasalisa, through the doll of intuition, is learning to sort, understand, keep in order, and clear and clean the psychic premises. Additionally, she learns that the Wild Mother requires much nourishment in order to do her work. **Women's cycles according to Vasalisa's tasks are these:** To cleanse one's thinking, renewing one's values, on a regular basis. To clear one's psyche of trivia, sweep one's self, clean up one's thinking and feeling states on a regular basis. To build an enduring fire beneath the creative life, and cook up ideas on a systematic basis,

means especially to cook, and with originality, a lot of unprecedented life in order to feed the relationship between oneself and the wildish nature.

In the story, the Yaga finds Vasalisa has completed all the tasks set before her and the Yaga is pleased, but also a little disappointed that she cannot rail against the girl. And so, just to make sure Vasalisa doesn't take anything for granted, Baba Yaga lets her know: "Though you managed to do my work once doesn't mean you can do it again. So here, here's another day of tasks. Let's see how you do, dearie... or else."

Vasalisa again, via the protection of intuitive guidance, accomplishes the work, and the Yaga gives her the grumpy and begrudging stamp of approval ... the kind that always comes from old women who have lived a long time and who have seen much, and somewhat wish they hadn't, and are rather proud they have.

The Sixth Task—Separating This from That

In this part of the tale, Baba Yaga requires two very demanding tasks of Vasalisa. A woman's psychic tasks are these:

Learning fine discrimination, separating one thing from the other with finest discernment, learning to make fine distinctions in judgment (sorting the mildewed corn from the good corn, and sorting the poppy seeds from a pile of dirt). Observing the power of the unconscious and how it works even when the ego is not aware (the pairs of hands which appear in the air). More learning about life (corn) and death (poppy seeds).

Vasalisa is asked to separate four substances, mildewed corn from whole corn, and poppy seed from dirt. The intuitive doll completes the sorting of one from the other. Sometimes this sorting process occurs at such a deep level it is barely conscious to us, until one day... The sorting spoken of in the tale is the kind which occurs when we face **a dilemma or question, but not much is forthcoming to help us solve it**. But leave it alone and come back to it later and there may be a good answer

waiting for us where there was nothing before. Or "go to sleep, see what you dream," perhaps the two-million-year-old woman will come visit you from the night land. Perhaps she will be bearing the solution, or will show you that the answer is under your bed, or in your pocket, in a book, or behind your ear. It is an observable phenomenon that a question asked before bedtime, with practice, often elicits an answer upon awakening. There is something in the psyche, something of

the intuitive doll, something under, over, or in the collective unconscious which sorts the materials while we sleep and dream. And reliance on this attribute is also part of the wild nature.

The fresh corn, mildewed corn, poppy seed, and dirt are all remnants of an ancient healing apothecary. These substances are used as balms, salves and infusions to hold other medicines on the body. As metaphors, they are also medicines for the mind; some nourish, others put to rest, some cause languor, others, stimulation. They are facets of the Life/Death/Life cycles. Baba Yaga is not only asking Vasalisa to separate this from that, to determine the difference between things of like kind—such as real love from false love, or nourishing life from spoiled life—but she is also asking her to distinguish one medicine from another.

Like dreams, which can be understood on the objective level but still retain a subjective reality, these elements of food/medicines also have symbolic guidance for us. Like Vasalisa, we have to sort out our psychic healing agents, to sort and sort and sort to understand that food for the psyche is also medicine for the psyche, and to wring the truth, the essence, out of these elements for our own nourishment.

The Seventh Task—Asking the Mysteries

After the successful completion of her tasks, Vasalisa asks the Yaga some good questions. The tasks of this time are these:

Questioning and trying to learn more about the Life/Death/Life nature and how it functions (Vasalisa asks about the horsemen). Learning the truth about being able to understand all the elements of the wild nature (“to know too much can make one old too soon”).

Vasalisa asks about the men on horseback she has seen while finding her way to Baba Yaga’s hut;; the white man on the white horse, the red man on the red horse, the black man on the black horse. The Yaga is an old horse-mother Goddess, her hut is a stable for the many colored horses and their riders. These pairs pull the sun up and across the sky by day, and pull the cover of darkness over the sky at night. But there is more.

The black, red, and white horsemen symbolize the ancient colors connoting birth, life, and death. These colors also represent old ideas of descent, death, and rebirth—the black for dissolving of one's old values, the red for the sacrifice of one's precious held illusions, and the white as the new light, the new knowing that comes from having experienced the first two.

The colors in the tale are extremely precious, for each has its death nature and its life nature. **Black** is the color of mud, the fertile, the basic stuff into which ideas are sown. Yet black is the color also of death, the blackening of the light. And black has even a third aspect. It is also the color associated with that world between the worlds which La Loba stands upon—for black is the color of descent. Black is a promise that you will soon know something you did not know before.

Red is the color of sacrifice, of rage, of murder, of being tormented and killed. Yet red is also the color of vibrant life, dynamic emotion, arousal, eros, and desire. It is a color that is considered strong medicine for psychic malaise, a color which rouses appetite. There is throughout the world a figure known as the red mother. She is not as well known as the black mother or black madonna but she is the watcher of “things coming through.” She is especially propitiated by those who are about to give birth, for whosoever leaves this world or comes into this world has to pass through her red river. Red is a promise that a rising up or a homing is soon to come.

White is the color of the new, the pure, the pristine. It is also the color of soul of spirit unencumbered by the physical. It is the color of the essential nourishment, mother’s milk. Conversely, it is the color of the dead, of things which have lost their rosiness, their flush of vitality. When there is white, everything is, for the moment, *tabula rasa*, unwritten upon. White is a promise that there is nourishment enough for things to begin anew, that the emptiness or the void would be filled.

Besides the horsemen, both Vasalisa and her doll are dressed in red, white, and black as well. Together they cause Vasalisa to be a little Life/Death/Life Mother in-the-becoming. There are two epiphanies or life- givings in the story. Vasalisa’s life is revived by the doll and by her meeting with Baba Yaga, and thereby through all the tasks she masters. There are also two deaths in the story: that of the original too-good mother and also that of the stepfamily. Yet we see easily that the deaths are proper, and that they ultimately cause the young psyche a much fuller life:

So this **letting live, letting die**, is very important. It is the basic and natural rhythm which women are meant to understand... and live. Grasping this rhythm lessens fear, for we anticipate the future, and the ground swells and the emptyings out it will hold. The doll and the Yaga are the wild mothers of all women; they provide the penetrating intuitive gifts from the personal level as well as the divine. This is the extreme paradox and teaching of the instinctual nature. It is a sort of Wolf Buddhism. What is one, is both. What is two, makes three. What lives shall die. What dies shall live.

This is what Baba Yaga means when she says, “to know too much can make one old too soon.”

There is a certain amount we all should know at each age and each stage of our lives. In the tale, to know the meaning of the hands that appear and wring out the oil from the corn and the poppy seed, both life-giving and deathdealing medicines in and of themselves, is to ask to know too much.

Vasalisa asks about the horses, but not about the hands. It is another set of cycles the Yaga alludes to here, cycles of a woman’s life. As a woman lives them, she will understand more and more of these interior feminine rhythms, among them the rhythms of creativity, of birthing psychic babies and perhaps also human ones, the rhythms of solitude, of play, of rest, of sexuality, and of the hunt. One need not push it, the understanding will come. Some things must be accepted as being out of our reach, even though they act upon us, and we are enriched by them. There is a saying in my family: “Some things are God’s business.”

So, by the end of these tasks, “the legacy of the wild mothers” is deepened and intuitive powers emanate from both the human and soulful sides of the psyche. Now we have the doll as teacher on one side, and the Baba Yaga on the other.

The Eighth Task—Standing on All Fours

Baba Yaga is repelled by Vasalisa’s blessing from her deceased mother, and gives Vasalisa light—a fiery skull on a stick—and tells her to go. The tasks of this part of the tale are these:

Taking on immense power to see and affect others (receiving the skull). Looking at one’s life situations in this new light (finding the way back to the old stepfamily).

The issue of the mother’s blessing can be interpreted this way: The Yaga is not repelled by the fact of the blessing, but is rather put off by the fact that the blessing is from the too-good mother; the nice, the sweet, the darling of the psyche. Her land is the underworld of the psyche. The too-good mother’s land is that of the topside world. Although sweetness can fit into the wild, the wild cannot long fit into sweetness. Some women are afraid this deep knowing via instinct and intuition will cause them to be reckless or thoughtless, but this is an unfounded fear. Quite the contrary; lack of intuition, lack of sensitivity to cycles, or not following one’s knowing, causes choices which turn out poorly, even disastrously. More often this Yagaian kind of knowledge moves women by small increments, and most often gives direction by conveying clear pictures of “what lies beneath or behind” the motives, ideas, actions, and words of others.

If the instinctive psyche warns “Beware!” then the woman must pay attention. If the deep intuition says “Do this, do that, go this way, stop here, go forward,” the woman must make corrections to her plan as needed. Intuition is not to be consulted once and then forgotten. It is not disposable. It is to be consulted at all steps along the way. Before all else, every action begins with strengthening the spirit.

Now let us consider the skull with fiery light. It is a symbol associated with what some old-style archeologists called “ancestral worship.” In later archeo-religious versions of the story, the skulls on sticks are said to be those of humans whom the Yaga has killed and eaten. But in the older religious rites which practiced ancestral kinship, bones were recognized as the agents for calling the spirits, the skulls being the most salient part. In ancestral kinship, it is believed that the special and timeless knowledge of the old ones of the community lives on in their very bones after death. The skull is thought to house a powerful remnant of the departed soul... one which, if asked, can call the entire spirit of the dead person back for a time in order to be consulted. It is easy to imagine that the soul-Self lives right in the bony cathedral of the forehead, with the eyes as windows, mouth as door, and ears as the winds. So when the Yaga gives Vasalisa a lighted skull, she is giving her an old-woman icon, an “ancestral knower,” to carry with her for life. She is initiating her into a matrilineal legacy of knowing, one which, in the caves and canyons of the psyche, remains whole and thriving.

So, off goes Vasalisa into the dark forest with the fiery skull. She wandered about to find the Yaga, now she returns to home more sure, more certain, hips aimed straight ahead. Intuition has been set into Vasalisa like a center jewel in a crown. When a woman has come this far, she has managed to leave the protection of her own inner too-good mother, learned to expect and deal with adversity in the outer world in a powerful rather than complicit manner. She has become aware of her own shadowy and inhibitory stepmother and stepsisters and the destruction they mean to do to her. She has negotiated through the dark while listening to her inner voice, and has been able to stand the face of the Hag, which is a side of her own nature, but also the powerful wild nature. Thus she is enabled to understand awesome and conscious power, her own and that of others. No more “But I’m afraid.”

She has served the Hag Goddess of the psyche, fed the relationship, purified the personae, kept clear thinking. She has gotten to know this wild feminine force and its habits. She has learned to differentiate, to separate thought from feelings. She has learned to recognize the great wild power in her own psyche. She has learned about Life/Death/Life, and women’s gift about it all. With these

newly acquired Yaga skills, she need not lack in confidence or potency anymore. Having been given the legacy of the mothers—intuition from the human side of her nature, and a wild knowing from the La Que Sabe side of the psyche—she is well enabled. She goes forward in life, feet placed surely, one after the other, womanly. Let us see what happens when a woman behaves in this new way.

The Ninth Task—Recasting the Shadow

Vasalisa journeys toward home with the fiery skull on the stick. She almost throws it away but the skull reassures her. Once back home, the skull watches the stepsisters and stepmother, and burns them to ashes. Vasalisa lives well and for a long time afterward. These are the psychic tasks of this time:

Using one's acute vision (fiery eyes) to recognize and react to the negative shadow of one's own psyche and/or negative aspects of persons and events in the outer world. Recasting the negative shadows in one's psyche with hag-fire (the wicked stepfamily which formerly tortured Vasalisa is turned to ashes).

Vasalisa has the fiery skull held before her as she walks through the forest, and her doll indicates the way back. “Go this way, now this way.” Vasalisa, who used to be a blueberry-eyed sweet-muffin, is now a woman walking with her power proceeding her.

A fiery light emanates from the eyes, ears and nose, and mouth of the skull. The skull is another representation of intuition. Vasalisa now carries the blaze of knowing; she has those fierce senses. She can hear, see, smell, and taste things out, and she has her Self. She has the doll, she has Yaga sensibilities, now she has the fiery skull as well.

Momentarily Vasalisa becomes afraid of the power she carries, and she thinks to throw the fiery skull away. With this formidable power at her behest, it is no wonder the ego thinks perhaps it would be better, easier, safer, to discard this burning light, for it is so much, and through it Vasalisa has become so much. But a supernatural voice from the skull instructs her to stay calm and to proceed. And this she is able to do. Each woman who retrieves her intuition and Yaga-like powers reaches a point where she is tempted to throw them away, for what is the use of seeing and knowing all these things? Skull-light sees what it sees; it is an eternal light, and right out front, shining ahead of a woman, like a presence which goes a little bit before her and reports back to her what it has found ahead. Yet, when one sees and senses thusly, then one has to work to do something about

what one sees. To possess good intuition, goodly power, causes work. It causes work firstly in the watching and comprehending of negative forces and imbalances both inward and outward. It is true, I will not lie to you; it is easier to throw away the light and go back to sleep. It is true, it is hard to hold the skull-light out before us sometimes. For with it, we clearly see all sides of ourselves and others, both the disfigured and the divine and all conditions in between.

Yet, with this light the miracles of deep beauty in the world and in humans come to consciousness. With this penetrating light one can see past the bad action to the good heart, one can espy the sweet spirit crushed beneath hatred, one can understand much instead of being perplexed only. This light can differentiate layers of personality, intention, and motives in others. It can determine consciousness and unconsciousness in self and others. It is the wand of knowing. It is the mirror in which all things are sensed and seen. It is the deep wild nature. Yet, there are times when its reports are painful and almost too much to bear, for also the fiery skull points out where there are betrayals brewing, where there is faintness of courage in those who speak otherwise. It points out envy lying like cold grease behind a warm smile; it points out the looks which are mere masks for dislike.

It is these knowings which are the most difficult to face. It is at this point that we always want to throw away all this damnable shrewd knowing of ours. It is here that we feel, if we will not ignore it, a strong force from the Self saying, "Do not throw me away. Keep me. You'll see." As Vasalisa weaves through the forest, she no doubt is thinking too about the stepfamily which had maliciously sent her off to die, and though she herself is sweet of heart, the skull is not sweet; its work is to be sight-full. So when she wishes to toss it away, we know that she is thinking of the pain it causes to know some things and certain things about self, about others, about the nature of the world.

She arrives home and the stepmother and stepsisters tell her they had no fire, no energy while she was away, that no matter what they did, they could not make light. The fiery skull begins to peer at the stepsisters and stepmother, watching and watching them intently. Can a negative aspect of psyche be reduced to cinder by being watched and watched? Yes, indeed it can. Holding it in consistent consciousness can cause the thing to dehydrate. In one version of the tale, the errant family members are burnt to a crisp, in another version, to three small black cinders. They are reduced down almost to nothing in the psyche. They are deprived of libido. Now something new can occur. In most cases when we consciously deprive a psychic thing of juice, it shrivels, and its energy is released or reconfigured.

There is another side to this draining of the destructive step- family. One cannot keep the consciousness one has earned by meeting the Hag Goddess and carrying the fiery light, and so forth, if one lives with cruel people outwardly or inwardly. If you are surrounded by people who cross their eyes and look with disgust up at the ceiling when you are in the room, when you speak, when you act and react, then you are with the people who douse passions—yours and probably their own as well. These are not the people who care about you, your work, your life.

A woman must choose her friends and lovers wisely, for both can become like a bad stepmother and rotten stepsisters. In the case of our lovers, we often invest them with the power of a great magician. A lover can engender and/or destroy even our most durable connections to our own cycles and ideas. The destructive lover must be avoided. A better sort of lover is one finely wrought of strong psychic muscle and tender flesh. For Wild Woman it also helps if the lover is just a little bit “psychic” too, a person who can “see into” her heart. When the wildish woman has an idea, the friend or lover will never say “Well, I don’t know... sounds really dumb [grandiose, undoable, expensive, etc.] to me.” A right friend will never say that. They might say instead... “I don’t know if I understand. Tell me how you see it. Tell me how it will work.” Mindful choosing of friends and lovers, not to mention teachers, is critical to remaining conscious, remaining intuitive, remaining in charge of the fiery light that sees and knows.

The way to maintain one’s connection to the wild is to ask yourself what it is that you want. This is the sorting of the seed from the dirt. One of the most important discriminations we can make in this matter is the difference between things that beckon to us and things that call from our souls. This is how it works: Imagine a buffet laid out with whipped cream and salmon and bagels and roast beef, and fruit salad, and green enchiladas and rice and curry and yogurt and many, many things for table after table after table. Imagine that you survey it all and that you see certain things that appeal to you. You remark to yourself, “Oh! I would really like to have one of those, and one of that, and some of this other thing.” Some women and men make all their life decisions in this way. There is around and about us a constant beckoning world, one which insinuates itself into our lives, arousing and creating appetite where there was little or none before. In this sort of choice, we choose a thing because it just happened to be beneath our noses at that moment in time. It is not necessarily what we want, but it is interesting, and the longer we gaze at it, the more compelling it becomes.

When we are connected to the instinctual self, to the soul of the feminine which is natural and wild, then instead of looking over whatever happens to be on display, we say to ourselves, “What am I

hungry for?” Without looking at anything outwardly, we venture inward, and ask, “What do I long for ? What do I wish for now?” Alternate phrases are “What do I crave? What do I desire? For what do I yearn?” And the answer usually arrives rapidly: “Oh, I think I want... you know what would be really good, is some this or that... ah yes, that's what I really want.”

Is that on the table? Maybe yes and maybe no. In most cases, probably not. We will have to quest for it a little bit—sometimes for a considerable time. But in the end we shall find it, and be glad we took soundings about our deeper longings.

This discrimination which Vasalisa learns as she separates poppy seeds from dirt and mildewed corn from fresh corn, is one of the most difficult things to learn, for it takes spirit, will, and soulfulness and it often means holding out for what one wants. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the choice of mates and lovers. A lover cannot be chosen à la buffet. A lover has to be chosen from soul-craving. To choose just because something mouth-watering stands before you will never satisfy the hunger of the soul-Self. And that is what intuition is for; it is a direct messenger of the soul.

To amplify further, if you are presented with an opportunity to buy a bicycle, or an opportunity to travel to Egypt and see the Pyramids, you have to set the opportunity aside for the moment, enter into yourself, and ask, “What am I hungry for? What do I long for? Maybe I’m hungry for a motorcycle instead of a bicycle. Maybe I’m hungry for a trip to see my grandmother, who's coming up in years.” The decisions do not have to be so large. Sometimes the matter to be weighed is taking a walk versus making a poem. Momentous or mundane, the idea is to have consulted the instinctual self through one or several aspects available to you; these symbolized by the doll, the old Baba Yaga, and the fiery skull.

Another way to strengthen connection to intuition is to refuse to allow anyone to repress your vivid energies ... that means your opinions, your thoughts, your ideas, your values, your morals, your ideals. There is very little right/wrong or good/bad in this world. There is, however, useful and not useful. There are also things that are sometimes destructive, as well as things which are engendering. There are actions that are properly integrated and intentioned and those that are not. But as you well know, a garden has to be turned in the fall in order to prepare it for the spring. It cannot bloom all the time. But let your own innate cycles dictate the upsurges and the downward cycles of your life, not other forces or persons outside yourself, nor negative complexes from within. Liken it to jump rope. The rhythm already exists; you sway back and forth until you are copying the rhythm. Then, you jump in. That’s how it is done. It is no more fancy than that.

Further, intuition provides options. When you are connected to the instinctual self, you always have at least four choices ... the two opposites and then the middle ground, and “taken under further contemplation.” If you’re not vested in the intuitive, you may think you only have one choice, and that it seems an undesirable one. And perhaps you feel that you ought to suffer about it. And submit and force yourself to do it. No, there’s a better way. Listen to the inner hearing, the inner seeing, the inner being. Follow it. It knows what to do next.

In the consensual reality, we all have access to little wild mothers in the flesh. These are women who, as soon as you see them, something in you leaps, and something in you thinks, “MaMa.” You take one look and think, “I am her progeny, I am her child, she is my mother, my grandmother.” In the case of *un hombre con pechos*—figuratively, a man with breasts—you might think, “Oh grandfather” or “Oh my brother, my friend.” You just know that this man is nurturing.

(Paradoxically they are strongly masculine and strongly feminine at the same time. They are like fairy godmother, like mentor, like the mother you never had, or did not have long enough) All these human beings could be called little wild mothers. Usually everyone has at least one. If we are lucky, throughout a lifetime we will have several. You are usually grown or at least in your late adolescence by the time you meet them. They are vastly different from the too-good mother. The little wild mothers guide you, burst with pride over your accomplishments. They are critical of blockages and mistaken notions in and around your creative, sensual, spiritual, and intellectual life. Their purpose is to help you, to care about your art, and to reattach you to the wildish instincts, and to elicit your original best. They guide the restoration of the intuitive life. And they are thrilled when you make contact with the doll, proud when you find the Baba Yaga, and rejoicing when they see you coming back with the fiery skull held out before you.

We have seen that to remain a dummling and too-sweet is dangerous. But perhaps you still are not convinced;; perhaps you're thinking, “Oh lordy, who wants to be like Vasalisa?” And I'm telling you, you do. You want to be like her, accomplish what she has accomplished, and follow the trail she has left behind, for it is the way of retaining and developing your soul. The Wild Woman is the one who dares, who creates, and who destroys. She is the primitive and inventing soul that makes all creative acts and arts possible. She creates a forest around us and we begin to deal with life from that fresh and original perspective. Perhaps recognizing intuition is the easier of the tasks, but holding it in consciousness and letting live what can live, and letting die what must die, is by far the more strenuous, yet so satisfying aim.

A Life/Death/Life Goddess is always also a creator Goddess. She makes, fashions, breathes life into, she is there to receive the soul when the breath has run out. Following her footprints, we endeavor to learn to let be born what must be born, whether all the right people are there or not. Nature does not ask permission. Blossom and birth whenever you feel like it. As adults we need little permission but rather more engendering, much more encouraging of the wild cycles, much more original vision.

To let things die is the theme at the end of the tale. Vasalisa has learned well. Does she collapse into a fit of high-pitched shrieking as the skull burns into the malicious ones? No. What must die, dies.

How does one make such a decision? One knows. La Que Sabe knows. Ask within for her advice. She is the Mother of the Ages. Nothing surprises her. She has seen it all. For most women, to let die is not against their natures, it is only against their training. This can be reversed. We all know in los ovarios when it is time for life, when it is time for death. We might try to fool ourselves for various reasons, but we know.

By the light of the fiery skull, we know.

****Reminder****

The psychic tasks in a woman's life are these:

(learning something of the ways of the Old Wild Mother)

The First Task—Allowing the Too-Good Mother to Die

Accepting that the ever-watchful, hovering, protective psychic mother is not adequate as a central guide for one's future instinctual life (the too-good mother dies). Taking on the task of being on one's own, developing one's own consciousness about danger, intrigue, politic. Becoming alert by oneself, for oneself. Letting die what must die. As the too-good mother dies, the new woman is born.

The Second Task—Exposing the Crude Shadow

Learning even more mindfully to let go of the overly positive mother. Finding that being good, being sweet, being nice will not cause life to sing. (Vasalisa becomes a slave, but it does not help.) Experiencing directly one's own shadow nature, particularly the exclusionary, jealous, and exploitative aspects of self (the stepmother and stepsisters). Acknowledging these unequivocally. Making the best relationship one can with the worst parts of oneself. Letting the pressure build between who one is taught to be and who one really is. Ultimately working toward letting the old self die and the new intuitive self be born.

The Third Task—Navigating in the Dark

Consenting to venture into the site of deep initiation (entering the forest), and beginning to experience the new and dangerous-feeling force of being in one's intuitive power. Learning to develop sensitivity as regards direction to the mysterious unconscious and relying solely on one's inner senses. Learning the way back home to the Wild Mother (following the doll's directions). Learning to feed intuition (feeding the doll). Letting the frail know-nothing maiden die even more. Shifting power to the doll, i.e., intuition.

The Fourth Task—Facing the Wild Hag

Being able to stand the face of the fearsome Wild Goddess without wavering; that is, facing the imago of the fierce mother (meeting up with the Baba Yaga). Familiarizing oneself with the mysterious, the odd, the "otherness" of the wild (residing at Baba Yaga's house for a while). Bringing some of her values into our lives, thereby becoming ourselves a little wild in a goodly way

(eating her food). Learning to face great power—in others, and subsequently one's own power. Letting the frail and too-sweet child die back even further .

The Fifth Task—Serving the Non-Rational

Staying with the Hag; adjusting to the great wildish powers of the feminine psyche. Coming to recognize her (your) power and the powers of inner purifications; unsoiling, sorting, nourishing, building energy and ideas (washing the Yaga's clothes, cooking for her, cleaning her house, and sorting out the elements).

The Sixth Task—Separating This from That

Learning fine discrimination, separating one thing from the other with finest discernment, learning to make fine distinctions in judgment (sorting the mildewed corn from the good corn, and sorting the poppy seeds from a pile of dirt). Observing the power of the unconscious and how it works even when the ego is not aware (the pairs of hands which appear in the air). More learning about life (corn) and death (poppy seeds).

The Seventh Task—Asking the Mysteries

Questioning and trying to learn more about the Life/Death/Life nature and how it functions (Vasalisa asks about the horsemen). Learning the truth about being able to understand all the elements of the wild nature (“to know too much can make one old too soon).

The Eighth Task—Standing on All Fours

Taking on immense power to see and affect others (receiving the skull). Looking at one's life situations in this new light (finding the way back to the old stepfamily).

The Ninth Task—Recasting the Shadow

Using one's acute vision (fiery eyes) to recognize and react to the negative shadow of one's own psyche and/or negative aspects of persons and events in the outer world. Recasting the negative shadows in one's psyche with hag-fire (the wicked stepfamily which formerly tortured Vasalisa is turned to ashes).