

From Midlife Crisis to Sacred Initiation: On Turning 40 and the Venus Return —by Tami Brunk

Robert's steady, powerful drum beat fills the room, invoking Pele. I am on the Big Island, learning the language of dreams and of the Underworld Goddess. I settle in on my blanket, eyes closed, as my inner vision is pulled to the energy field surrounding my belly. This is a group shamanic journeying exercise where we visit each of our chakras in order to "see" their current state.



When I try to see into my 2nd Chakra I am met by a blinding light. I can't find a way in—until I receive a directive to "reach for the doorknob." And I see a door beyond the blinding light, which I open into a dark, cave-like room with a deep pool of water and a small island at the center. I am startled to see my inner Creatrix, a beautiful mermaid perched upon the island weeping.

I realize later that the blinding light is literally the Sun, which is the doorway into my Venus Underworld initiation, and the feeling of overwhelm and blindness is also part of the experience of entry!

Floating in the dark waters are pale forms which I recognize, with a shudder, as corpses. Six of them, to be exact. In a flash I know what they are—the lifeless remains of my unrealized dreams, untapped potential which had been miscarried—or never made it into full form, but which I had continued to "hold" in my energetic body. There is no room for new life here.



I am 40 years old. I am about to enter the "Underworld" as part of my closest-ever Venus Return.

As a Shamanic Astrologer, I have been trained specifically to work with this cycle—and to see within it an opportunity for both men and women to claim and empower their inner Goddess. This is why I am on the Big Island in a 5-day immersive workshop called the "Temple of Shamanic Healing" with master dream teacher Robert Moss.



Prior to the current 1 ½ year Venus Cycle in the sign of Gemini, I had been facilitating workshops to help women claim their inner Goddess, as described by the sign of Venus on their natal chart, and to work ceremonially with the Venus Cycle. Some of the women in my circles were experiencing the cycle intensely as a personal Venus Return, which we all go through every 8 years—with the 40 year return as the closest until our 80th.

The rest of us, who were not experiencing a personal return, were learning to work with the Venus cycle in a fashion similar to the way many women (and some men) work with the phases of the Moon: as a way to align our personal rhythms in harmony with the greater cycles of the Cosmos.

Approaching the Big 4-0

When I first turned 39 it was no big deal. I'd seen myself coming more into my own skin through my thirties and thought 40 would be cake. Yet in the months following my 39th birthday a strange feeling of dread, of heaviness, began to set in. I sensed in my core that I needed change, radical change, at the foundations of my life.

Which makes sense, because the Venus Cycle is a Death and Rebirth initiation. It clears the way and prepares us for the Uranus Opposition, Neptune Square, and Saturn Opposition, all of which follow collectively to create the “midlife crisis.” What most don't realize is that this period between about 38 and 43 can be a time for spiritual alchemy—a moment where we can surrender our lives and identities to our soul's larger work—to shift into a more empowered and spiritually-oriented period of our lives.

So for the past eight months I have awoken before dawn to greet Morning Star Venus on her monthly approach to the crescent Moon. I have seen her, high and bright in the sky, and imagine that this is what women have done for centuries, to invoke the Goddess, within and without.



Inanna's Descent as Guide for the Venus Return

The way I have learned to work most powerfully with the Venus cycle is through the guidance of the Sumerian Inanna Descent story. Like the better-known Greek Goddess Persephone, Inanna, Sumerian Goddess of Heaven and Earth, is drawn to the Underworld. The difference is that Inanna is no helpless maiden—she is a grown Goddess, and chooses to go of her own accord.



When Inanna seeks entrance to the Underworld to visit her sister Ereshkegal, Goddess of the Underworld, the Gatekeeper relays a clear message to her through her sister—she will be granted no favors. Like anyone else she must follow the rules, which means passing through seven gates and at each gate removing a “vestment”—or article of clothing. She is to enter humble, naked, without the trappings of her upper world power and privilege.

Her obedience does not save her from her fate—upon entrance, she is murdered by her jealous sister. However, all is not lost. Thanks to her faithful maidservant Ninshubar, who enlists the help of Enki, ingenious God of Water and Wisdom, Inanna is restored to life. She ascends through the seven gates, reclaiming all her vestments along the way and emerging as a fully initiated Queen.

The Sumerians told this tale as a literal re-enactment of the 584- day Venus Cycle. Inanna, literally, translates to Venus. At the beginning of the cycle Venus (Inanna) rises as Morning Star.

Then she is conjunct the crescent Moon about seven times (Seven Gates or Chakras). Next, Venus disappears, as she is within 10 degrees of the blinding Sun.

To the ancients planets were considered to have been “in the Underworld” when they were no longer visible to the human eye because of her proximity to the Sun—so it was that Venus (Inanna) enters the Underworld. Once Venus has passed behind the Sun and beyond 10 degrees of its glare, she re-emerges as Evening Star. Over the next eight months there are about seven more Venus Moon conjunctions, completing Inanna’s “ascent” from the Underworld.

In my workshops I have been blown away to see the synchronous patterns that emerge with the activation of each “Chakra Gate” over the course of the cycle, as well as during the Underworld journey, especially for those women experiencing a personal Venus Return. It seems clear that the completion of the cycle, or activation of the final 7th Gate, where Inanna would have reclaimed her crown, is a moment of powerful new beginnings for women experiencing the cycle.

One woman got pregnant in the Underworld and had her baby days from the Seventh Gate. My sister, who had divorced and lost her home during the Underworld cycle, bought a new home the week of the Seventh Gate and met her true love near the same time. Another woman in her Return, by pure chance, publically launched her new massage business on the day of the Seventh Gate.

And now it is my turn, to experience the cycle from the inside out. The Gemini Venus cycle, which is my closest personal Venus Return, began June 12, 2012 when Venus rose as Morning Star in the East. I have already passed through all of the seven gates and like Inanna, I feel I have been stripped bare of my security, my old identity, the old layers that have protected me and held me together. Here’s what has happened up to now.

Descent through the 7 Gates

The First Venus Moon conjunction occurred in July of 2012. This corresponded to a release at the Seventh Gate, or Chakra, the moment where Inanna removes her crown. I visited my parents during this period. My Dad had been diagnosed with mesothelioma a year earlier, and was becoming very weak. As my parents found solace through daily readings of the Bible and prayer, I felt a deep longing to connect through my own language of the sacred, and an inability to do so. It felt as though my connection with Spirit had been severed.

After the Second Gate (6th Chakra) in August, I was stung by my bees in my “third eye” and was rear-ended while driving by a post office employee, forcing me to slow down and look at my life from a new perspective. After the Third Gate (throat or 5th Chakra) in September, I began experiencing increased neck pain from the accident.

After the Fourth Gate (Heart) in October, it became clear that my heart was no longer in the nonprofit I had been struggling to build, and I stepped out. It also became clear to me that my father, who with the courageous support of my mother had been valiantly trying every alternative method to fight his mesothelioma, was fighting a losing battle.

After the fifth gate (3rd Chakra, or Solar Plexus) in November, I bought a new car and drove to Missouri for a last visit with my still-lucid father. I felt my powerlessness to ease his suffering and that of my mother, as they continued to fight to keep him alive. One night I heard a Barred Owl call right outside my bedroom window at my parent's house, and knew the time was soon.



The next day, driving from my sister's house, I pulled over along the highway to discover a Barred Owl that had just been hit and killed by a car. It was still warm, and beautiful. It felt to me as though the owl had given me its life, and I brought it home for burial and ceremony along the Rio Grande. I preserved its wings and tail in cornmeal for my circles with women.

The Barred Owl has a rich and diverse language—and helps all who work with it to find their true voice. I felt resonance with the Gemini Goddess who was awakening in me, and in our world. Now when I use the beautiful wings or tail I feel as though I, and the private groups I share it with, are blessed with clearer navigation in the dark places, and a stronger connection our true voices.

The Sixth Gate or 2nd Chakra is the most significant for me because I was born right after Morning Star Venus had activated the 2nd Chakra for release, not long before she entered the Underworld. Four days after my 40th birthday, two days after the 2012 Winter Solstice, and in the window of the 2nd Chakra release gate, my father died.

So it is that I find myself on Pele's Island in late January, in the window of the seventh and final gate. We are just two weeks from the moment where Morning Star Venus will disappear in the glare of the Underworld Sun, and the moment in the story where Inanna removes her robe so that she can crawl, naked, into the Underworld. I have lost my father, and my old orientation in the world.

This is where I enter, through my inner vision, my 2nd Chakra, and where I discover the corpses. It won't occur to me until later that the blinding light is literally the Sun, affirming that it is exactly these corpses that I will encounter while in the Underworld (i.e. while Venus is blinded and obscured by the Sun, mirroring the process of my own inner Goddess).

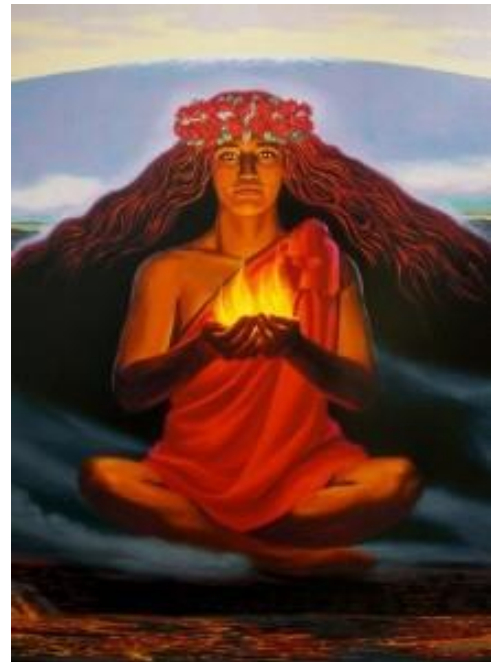
Over the course of that preparatory 5-day workshop, I will encounter two other visionary images that will support me in better understanding my core nature, and my soul's deepest longings. One is of my actual Sagittarius Goddess (with Gemini Overtone) conjunct Neptune.



She is radiant, and regal. She holds her hands over planet Earth, finding areas of green, regenerative growth and healing. She pulls these areas out, expanding, and magnifying them. Then she quickly and easily connects them with others, forming vibrant networks. I ask her if she is me from another life. She says no, I am your future self. She puts a ruby crown on my head and says—claim your domain.

She will become for me a symbol of the marriage between the part of me that is visionary astrologer, and the part that has identified through my adult life as an advocate for the Earth and a regenerative human culture.

The other is Pele herself or her likeness, encountered through re-entry into a powerful dream from years past where a Goddess with flaming hair and fire in her eyes confronts me and tells me to meet my anger. This time, in Hawaii, she places a finger on my third eye and pushes me to the ground where my head cracks open and my old mask falls away, revealing my true face. It is not unlike her.



She tells me she is my wild soul. She tells me to break out of my mind and step into the Big World with courage and wonder. She places a flaming flower in my third eye, before folding up into a flame and disappearing. I know she will be my ally as I enter the Underworld, and that she is the flame within me, determined to live life in full color, and intensity.

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And now, as I write I am in the midst of my Underworld journey, with ten days remaining before Venus appears as Evening Star. I have been in a deep exploration of what those six corpses represent to me, and before the New Moon I will name them, create talismans to hold their energy, and bury them with blessings in my garden to create fertile compost for flowers I will plant in their stead.

Tomorrow I will buy acrylic paints and begin to paint an image of my Goddess, who is an adult version of the inner Magical Child I used to paint and name “Mirabella”—she who sees beauty. I still feel the heaviness of someone who is in the last stages of ceremonial death, and I am allowing what needs to fall away to die within and without in my life.



Yet I feel the stirring of new life, of possibility within, which I know will grow stronger with Venus’s Evening Star appearance and her passage through each of the chakra gates over the next eight months. When I claim my Queen’s crown in December, after Venus has passed through the 7th Gate, I know that my soul will be shining through more powerfully than ever before. Stay tuned, and may we all be blessed through the rise and re-emergence of the Divine Feminine, within and without.