

Gender, Power, and the Rise of the Fierce Feminine

An Interview with Dr. Elizabeth Nelson, May 2nd, 2019

A few weeks before the May 2019 lecture and workshop hosted by the Atlanta Jung Society, Elizabeth sat down with a colleague to dialogue about the topic. What follows is a transcript of the conversation, a succinct and earthy way to introduce some large ideas.

SP: The Atlanta Jung Society is hosting a lecture and workshop on the rise of the fierce feminine and toxic masculinity. Can you introduce us to your key ideas?

Elizabeth Eowyn Nelson: Sure. Conventional wisdom tells us that there is one kind of power: power over, which is domination. To paraphrase James Hillman, *power as domination dominates our idea of power*. It dominates our idea of power so fully that we can become insensible to other forms of power such as influence, focus, flexibility, discipline, charisma—which I call *faces of power*. But, you know, conventional “wisdom” is often rather thoughtless and stupid. It reflects habits of mind and behavior that go unquestioned. At the least, conventional wisdom frequently lacks nuance. The whole point of the lecture—if I can reduce it that far—is to become much more nuanced in our thinking about power because once you enlarge thinking, or enlarge the imagination, a wider repertoire of actions can follow. That’s what I’m aiming for.

SP: The emphasis on action doesn’t sound very Jungian.

EEN: Such a misunderstanding! But yes, you’re right. We have this image of Jungians sitting around and reflecting a lot. Thinking. Ruminating. But in fact thinking is an action, so is reflecting. Sometimes the most difficult power we can exercise is restraint. Or patience. Restraint and patience are two of the many faces of power. Ask any parent, or any therapist, and they’ll tell you that patient attention takes a great deal of effort. What seems a scarce commodity these days is action that is full of thought—and deep thought that leads to purposive action.

SP: Do you think gender and power are especially relevant today?

EEN: Issues of gender and power have always been relevant as far as the historical record tells us. Considering how much debate is stirred by interpretation of ancient symbolic material which is pre-history—the work of Marija Gimbutas, for example—I expect the relevance of gender and power predates historical man. One of the reasons the Greek pantheon in particular fascinates Jungians is that the gods are continually contending with one another. As Heraclitus said, strife is the father of all. It is no different today.

Love and power are two central issues in human life—and they aren’t going away any time soon. And as learned through writing *Psyche’s Knife*, love and power are inextricably intertwined. Our souls seek profound love relationships. Yet issues of power rise quickly to the surface. We see this in the story of Psyche and Eros: In one decisive moment of conflict, the entire story shifts, but without the conflict, we would have no worthwhile story of the soul.

SP: Some people would say that love shouldn’t have anything to do with power.

EEN: Jung said something like that, too, though he was alluding to Nietzsche’s will to power. It’s a romantic notion. It’s not realistic. In fact, it’s fatally naïve to say that love and power have nothing to do with one another. And it touches on the issue of gender, too, because if conventional gender roles ascribe “loving behavior” to women, then we can’t be powerful, right?

SP: How do you solve that one?

EEN: Again, we begin by examining our ideas about power and our ideas about love. I begin by asking how they are deeply interconnected, not antithetical. I look at powerful figures on the world’s stage who are also loving

figures. How do they do it? I recognize that power is first and foremost an internal, embodied resource. Without it, we cannot stand up for ourselves and our values. And considering how desperately wounded the world is right now, how many individuals and communities need us to be thoughtful, effective advocates, a skillful blend of love and power is essential.

SP: What can Jungians contribute to the conversation on gender and power?

EEN: We have a lot to offer. Depth psychological thinking goes deeper than conventional thinking. It is ancient, edgy thinking because it evokes the oldest strata of the human imagination to discover ideas frequently found at the margins of mainstream thought. By going to this oldest stratum, which is a move into our polytheistic human past, depth psychology does not make Domination the one god. It asks: what other gods (archetypes) of Power are alive in this field and what do they have to teach us? That's when I came up with the phrase *faces of power*. Let's hope we can become wiser about power itself—as a subject of thought—and more skillful in the use of power individually, with others, and within our organizations, institutions and systems.

SP: Toxic masculinity confuses some people. Can you explain it, and its relevance to your theme?

EEN: Toxic masculinity is emphatically *not* the idea that masculinity is toxic. Rather, toxic masculinity is the narrow and loathsome idea that manhood is achieved through aggression and violence, which are acceptable behaviors to maintain status in a dominance hierarchy. A real man, according to the toxic credo, rejects anything remotely “feminine,” including emotionality, vulnerability, and tenderness—any of which undermines your status as man. Clearly, women suffer in a culture that promotes toxic masculinity, but so do caring, loving men. The game is rigged.

Today, the rise of toxic masculinity has increased attention to the way that sex, gender and power intersect. Individuation, the process of becoming oneself, is continually influenced by the social world, which includes powerful images from news media and popular culture. How such figures express their power—as both inspirational and aspirational symbols—gives us a language to explore love and power.

SP: I wonder why you're focusing on fictional characters. Wouldn't it be more effective to talk about gender and power in reality?

EEN: Certainly, paying attention to power in “real life” is important. And your question is one I've heard before, as in *Really, you're going to waste time talking about popular culture?* The answer is yes. We take our fictional worlds quite seriously. Even when we are presented with a fantasy situation, the issues raised are quite real and relatable. For example, the Executive Producer of *Victoria* said many women watch the series to understand how a powerful woman negotiates competing demands and moves gracefully among different roles—including the fact that as Queen of England she is far more powerful than the man she loves, Prince Albert. Experts in adolescent psychology, such as Richard Frankel, point out that young people feed their imagination on media. At a time of great role fluidity and experimentation, they are looking for what's possible.

I would argue that adolescence is not only a developmental phase; it is an archetypal pattern, a way of being. Maybe we are “archetypally adolescent” whenever we experiment with our identity. And as Jung said, individuation is a process than never ends. I'm also aligned with the archetypal school, which aims to move beyond the four walls of the therapy room and pay attention to all forms of culture and human activity. In fact, my recent writing and speaking has been almost entirely focused on psychological analysis of political and cultural events.

SP: When did you become interested in this topic?

EEN: Oh gosh. A long time ago. I was just one of those rebellious young women from a very early age and hated the very thought that my choices in life would be dictated by gender. In terms of my scholarly work, the first flowering was my doctoral dissertation on Psyche's knife, which I transformed into a book. And before you ask: Yes, Psyche had a knife. A razor-sharp double-edged dagger, to be precise.

SP: When you've lectured on this topic in the past, what kind of response did you get?

EEN: Certainly issues of gender and power are very activating, so some people are fascinated by the topic and others are fearful. One of the biggest misunderstandings is that power is somehow the same as aggression or violence, a thought that naturally arises from many of the media images I show during the lecture Friday evening. But to reiterate the central premise, power has many faces. It is more broadly an internal capacity or resource that funds our effectiveness in the social world. Even those of us who “wage peace” need the power to do so.

SP: *What do you hope to accomplish in Friday’s lecture and Saturday’s workshop?*

EEN: The workshop is experiential, a way for each participant to bring subtlety to their thinking about power so that they can imagine and exercise it differently. I would like everyone to walk away from it with one persistent question: *Which face of power am I wearing, or witnessing, right now?* Some of the other questions include *What gender assumptions do I have about this face of power?* and *Is this face of power in alignment with my values?* which might be another way of asking, *Does it express my soul?*

More broadly, I hope that the Atlanta Jung community is inspired by the fierce young women that dominate media today—and the fierce women of all ages who passionately occupy the center of their own life story. They use their powers on behalf of what they love. We can, too.