

THE MYTH of PERSEPHONE

Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture and a descendent of Gaia, the ancient earth mother. The story of Persephone is the story of the seasons. There are at least two distinct versions of her story. The ancient Greek culture that we are most familiar with portrays Persephone as a victim who is forcefully carried away to the underworld by Hades. But an earlier version of the myth does not speak of Hades, and brings Persephone to the land of the dead by choice:

Before there were seasons, life on earth flourished year round, knowing no winter. Together, Demeter and Persephone taught agriculture to the mortals and rejoiced in the life that they nurtured. But Persephone wondered about the ghostly spirits of the dead whom she frequently saw wandering aimlessly about the earth. The pain and confusion she saw on their faces drew her sympathy. Much to Demeter's dismay, Persephone decided to descend into the underworld to help the lost souls by initiating them into their world. In her absence, her mother grew despondent, and withdrew her powers from the life aboveground. As the months passed, the planet grew barren and mortals starved while Demeter pined for her daughter. Then, one morning while Demeter was lost in her despair, she was surprised to see a ring of crocuses pushing up through the soil. When she leaned closer, she heard the plants whisper, "Persephone returns." She ran to the entrance of the underworld and met Persephone as she ascended. The joy of their meeting spread over the planet where the mortals saw life being brought forth everywhere with the renewal of Spring.

Every fall, those of us who work on the farm watch Persephone's departure in the turning leaves and chill air as we harvest winter squash. We welcome the winter as a chance to slow down and rest so that our energy and spirit is renewed when Persephone returns again in the Spring. And while the Spring brings hard work and long days to our winter-soft bodies, we greet it with as much joy as Demeter greeting her daughter.

The myth told above is paraphrased from Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ. A later version of the story, including the abduction by Hades, can be found in Mythology, by Edith Hamilton.