

“I Never Had Sex With That Woman” – The Story of Io

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According to FBI statistics, at least one woman is raped every six minutes in the United States. Including all forms of sexual assault, an estimated 24 to 54 percent of American women are attacked in their lifetime, with anywhere from a fourth to a third experiencing assaults that meet or closely resemble legal definitions of forcible rape. The myth of Io, a priestess who is raped by Zeus then turned into a cow, offers hope, not only for these victims, but for anyone undergoing severe stress. In the form of Prometheus, who helps Io save herself, the myth also provides guidance for those who want to help a troubled loved one, but don't know how.

In one version of the myth, Zeus summons a black cloud to hide his attack on Io. But when his wife Hera spots the cloud, she becomes suspicious and flies down from Mount Olympus to confront her wayward husband. To avoid being caught, Zeus turns Io into a cow.

“That’s no cow. That’s my priestess Io and you seduced her,” says Hera.

“I never had sex with that woman!” Zeus protests, ala Clinton. To prove his innocence Zeus gives the cow to Hera, who promptly imprisons Io in a pasture with Argus, a 100 eyed monster. While some of Argus’ eyes sleep, others stay awake. Hence he can watch Io’s every move.

Io is in shock. Once a beautiful priestess with status, now she’s a beast with no rights. When others come looking for her, they can’t recognize her, nor can she tell them who she is or what happened. All she can do is “moo.” While Argus’ eyes (symbolizing societal “blame the

victim” attitudes) constantly remind Io that everyone sees her as “damaged goods,” her inner critic (like that of most rape survivors I’ve counseled) continually upbraids her for somehow causing the assault. Depression takes over and Io begins mooing so pitifully that Zeus frees her from the pasture.

But Io is still a cow and Hera, still determined to punish her, sends a gadfly to sting Io into insanity and the Furies to circle around her buzzing, “You shameless ugly slut! You’ll never be human again, so just give up.”

Hoping to escape her tormentors, Io runs frantically across Greece and Asia, but the gadfly and Furies follow her everywhere. In one account, the exhausted Io collapses and the dragonfly stings her to death. In another, the Furies’ condemnations drive Io to suicide. But in the version studied by modern psychologists, Io keeps running until she meets Prometheus, chained to a rock centuries ago by Zeus in punishment for bringing fire to mankind.

Although Io looks like a cow, Prometheus recognizes her true self. He doesn’t address her as a mental case, a failure or a “drama queen.” Instead he affirms her former identity and her dignity as a person: “Priestess Io, respected daughter of Athenian nobility, why are you weeping?”

As Io “moos” out her story, Prometheus listens intently and empathically. He doesn’t accuse her of “wallowing in self-pity,” compare his suffering with hers or otherwise minimize her pain. Instead he asks Io how she’s managed to endure for so long.

Io believes that being turned into a cow is her punishment for causing the rape. If she’s innocent, then why would Hera, the goddess she worshiped, imprison her in a field with a monster and then send the gadfly and Furies to torture her?

“Like me, you are the blameless victim of unjust gods,” Prometheus replies. He then gives Io a vision of the future involving dignity, connection and purpose. “You may never be the same, Io, but you will love again, be loved and have a useful life. The abilities you had before aren’t lost forever. Once this crisis has past and you get help, you can reclaim some of them.

“Your situation is terrible, but it isn’t the end of your story. You think it’s hopeless, but you don’t know that yet. Nobody does. Look at me, sentenced forever to this rock. But I still hope to be free.”

Prometheus helps Io realize that her condition is temporary and not her fault and that her future can be meaningful. But there are no quick fixes. Much effort is required: Io must cross the sea and find Egypt where there are healers. She must also resist the poison plants Hera will put in her way. Psychologically, these plants symbolize various forms of self-medication (including alcohol, drug, food, spending, sex and gambling addictions) for the anxiety and depression common not only among trauma survivors, but others under extreme stress. (Post-rape, victims are three times more likely to be depressed; 13 times more likely to abuse alcohol, 26 times more likely to abuse drugs, 6 times more likely to acquire post-traumatic stress disorder and four times more likely to consider suicide than non-victims.)

“Your journey will be long, hard and lonely, but it will end,” Prometheus tells Io. “Take me there,” Io begs. But Prometheus is in chains. Like those who love someone who suffers, Prometheus can offer Io support, but he can’t save her. Besides, there is no map. Io must rely on her inner resources and find her own way to Egypt through trial and error.

As Io swims across the sea looking for Egypt, Hera orders the dragonfly and Furies to escalate their attacks. Once again, Io is tempted to give up. (Clients often become discouraged as

they find that healing is painful, requires considerable time and effort and doesn't run in a straightforward path.) Io's about to let herself drown, when she remembers that she didn't cause her misery – Zeus and Hera did. Io then begins mooing at the heavens with so much anguish and rage that Zeus and Hera (to avoid a public relations disaster perhaps?) restore Io to human form and direct her towards Egypt. (This suggests the importance of socio-political institutions in restoring victims to their former selves.)

In Egypt, Io is tended to by priests. She marries a prince and becomes a priestess again. Although Io's ordeals leave her with certain scars, they also increase her wisdom and compassion.

When we're overwhelmed by negative forces, we, like Io, may feel as if we've been enveloped by a black cloud where we can't see what's going on. Our resulting fears can cause an involuntary release of neurohormones that can impair our problem solving skills and other mental faculties, leaving us feeling helpless and terrified. Like Io, we may become so distraught, we can't even put words to what we're experiencing.

The black cloud prevented other people from seeing what happened to us. Now they may have trouble understanding our garbled utterances, our panic and our inner turmoil. Whether a vicious crime like rape or a major economic or personal loss, our life becomes, in the words of a popular Greek song, a "sinifiasmeni Kuriaki" (cloudy Sunday).

As the cloud lifts and we emerge from our initial disorientation, unlike Io, we may look the same. But as we realize, as Io did listening to Zeus and Hera decide her fate, that we've been harmed by forces who see us as sub-human, we may feel as dehumanized and exploited as Io did. Afterwards, all eyes, it seems, including our own, seem focused on our disgraceful condition,

rather than on our essential worth.

Even if we escape our particular Argus, we, like Io, may continue feeling disconnected from our former identity and relationships and not know how to find them. Our despair may be compounded by self-blame and critical others, as embodied in the gadfly and Furies. Like Io, we run frantically here and there to elude them, but we can't escape our own thoughts. Poison plants, like addiction and other forms of self-destructive relief, become increasingly tempting.

But hopefully somewhere within us there's a will to live. Like Io, we keep moving, searching for solutions; and we keep mooing, hoping that someone will hear the misery underlying our moos and offer some help.

If we're lucky, we run into a Prometheus who affirms our dignity and humanity and themselves as living proof that our dilemma is not all our fault and that there is hope. But like the legendary Titan, our Prometheus can't be with us always or give us specific directions or a checklist of six easy steps towards inner peace and personal power.

We'll have to find our own path in uncharted territory. As Io's myth teaches, this will require both the help of others (our personal Egyptian priests) and our own determination to take positive action on our own behalf.

Should black clouds come your way, think of the Ionian Sea, allegedly named in honor of Io's relentless efforts to find healing and rebuild her life. Remember also Prometheus, who, although destined to spend eternity in chains, never gave up hope of being free.

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