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A Journey to the Goddess Hel

**A story incorporating authentic elements of Germanic mythology,
suitable for trance work in ritual**



Vanadis Texte

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by Donate Pahnke McIntosh

The first night

Once upon a time there was a woman called Hildegard who had the most lovely, silver laughter. All the people in the village loved and cherished her, for she always had time to listen to their stories, and her laughter was so silver and light and true that it touched the hearts of those who heard it and it cheered up the sad and brought a smile to the faces of the grieving. And the woman had many friends and was very happy. But then many hard and bad things took place and a great sadness sank upon her heart. She became heavy with sorrow and realized that her lovely, silver laughter was gone. "It must have died" she thought to herself, "Hel must have taken it into her realm of darkness." Lonely and lost she felt without her laughter and, although she knew that the sacred cauldron of Hel was a wonderful resting place for everything in the world that had died, she also knew that she would not be able to live without her laughter. So, she decided to go into the Otherworld and request her laughter back from Hel. She would rather die herself and stay in the shades of Hel than live with only the half of her soul.

And she said good-bye to all her friends and went to the tree Yggdrasil, which connects the three worlds. And Yggdrasil asked her: "Are you really sure that you want to go to the realm of Hel, Goddess of Life and Death? Know that no-one who ever entered this realm was allowed to return to the living ones." But Hildegard said: "Without my laughter, I'm next to die anyway. So please, let me enter and follow my path to my fortune." And Yggdrasil showed her a secret opening in her trunk and let the woman climb in. Inside of Yggdrasil, there were narrow, winding stairs, leading down into the dark. And she went down and down and the further she went down, the darker it got, until she finally saw a dim light at the end of the stairs.

The second night

And she stepped out of the tree and found herself in the land of the Norns who live at the roots of Yggdrasil. The three Norns were sitting at the side of the

Holy Well of Destiny, spinning, weaving and cutting off the threads of life of all beings. And she asked them "How do I get to the realm of Hel, Goddess of Life and Death, for my lovely, silver laughter has died and I don't want to live without it?"

"You will have to cross the bridge over the river Gjoell", the Norns said. "You are very brave to go into her realm, for you are still alive. You will have to get past Garm, the hell- hound who guards the gate of Hel, making sure none of your kind enters her realm before you have died. Are you sure you want to go?"

"If I can't get my laughter back, I might as well die right now and stay in Hel's realm forever," she replied and walked off to find the river Gjoell and the bridge leading into Hel's realm.

When she was halfway across the bridge, an exceedingly beautiful woman appeared in front of her and reached out to touch her. "My name is Gudmodr," she said, "I am here to help you on your pathway." And Gudmodr looked deeply into her eyes and Hildegard thought it felt as though Gudmodr was looking straight into her heart, and Gudmodr smiled warmly at her and opened her hand. And Hildegard felt all the warm love welling up in her heart that she had felt when she was little, and she reached out and touched Gudmodr's hand. "You must go now, my daughter," Gudmodr said and pressed her hand. "Know that you will have to withstand a great test when you reach the gate of Hel. The gate is guarded by Garm, the hell- hound, who knows all about your deepest dreads and fears. He will fight to death to deny you access to the land of death and rebirth, because this transition is not for living beings but only for those who are going to be transformed forever, in body, mind, and soul. There is only one way to calm down Garm: You have to sing, sing the song of your living, loving heart!" And with these words she accompanied Hildegard to the end of the bridge and kissed her good-bye.

The third night

Hildegard followed her pathway until she reached the gate of Hel. Suddenly a huge, horrid black hound blocked her way. He growled ferociously and snapped at her, and his teeth were as sharp as knives and longer than swords, and Hildegard shrieked in horror and turned around to run back. But then she remembered why she was there and turned again to face the terrible hound. And she felt her heart beat faster than a horse could run, and the hound came closer so she could smell the vile stench of his breath. And in her fear she called upon Gudmodr and somewhere deep inside of her she felt the faint echo of the love well

up in her again. And then she remembered the melody of a song from far, far back when she was little, a motherly song of love and care and comfort. And with trembling lips she began to sing that song, and the more she sang, the more her throat opened, her heart opened, her hands opened, and the ugly heads of fear and despair moved back into the dark. The hound stopped growling and became calmer and calmer until he eventually laid down and went to sleep.

Amazed and still singing, the woman entered the realm of Hel, Goddess of Life and Death. And before too long, she saw a remote, golden shimmer. She walked straight towards it until she finally stood before a huge cauldron in which Hel stirs the energy of all the experiences that humans gather on their journey through life, and makes them into a soup to nourish the souls of the unborn.

"Who are you, living soul, and what do you want here in the deep of the underworld?" an imperious voice said to her.

"I came to get my laughter back for I can't live without it," Hildegard said, and as she looked up she saw it was Hel herself she was speaking to.

"You cannot simply walk in here being still alive and demand to get anything at all! Your kind are to wait until you die before you can enter this place!" Hel's voice was deeper than rolling thunder and her eyes were sparkling with authority. "But since you are here already, I might as well grant you your wish if you give me something in return. I demand you to give me the most valuable experience of your whole life for this cauldron, because this cauldron collects the wisdom of all humankind to nourish and teach those who are bound to be reborn."

Hildegard did not have to think long - the most valuable experience she had ever known was meeting Gudmodr and being imbued with a deep feeling of love. "I will give you the feeling of being loved unconditionally," she said, trembling and shaking in her whole body, for how could she ever go on living without this precious good she had only just become aware of?

"A good choice," said Hel, and she reached into the woman's heart, took the feeling, thrust it into her big cauldron and stirred it right into the soup.

Emptiness flooded through Hildegard, and she felt her heartbeat fade away like the breath of the evening wind. "This is death," she thought, before she breathed out and surrendered to the wisdom of the Goddess.

The fourth night

There was a long, silent pause, when nothing could be heard but the bubbling of the cauldron. And then, amazingly, Hildegard realized that she was breathing again. "Is this not death?" she asked.

"It is", said Hel "and it is not. Know that it is the rule of transformation that everything you give will come back to you threefold." And she reached into the steam and placed her warm hand on Hildegard's breast, and all the fullness of unconditional love and trust spread in the space of her breast three times as strong as before. And again Hel reached into the cauldron and held her open hand out to Hildegard. As she opened her hand, the lovely, silver laughter flew out, and it was even more silvery and sparkling and lovely than ever before, and it circled the woman's head and flew right into her mouth and settled back into her throat and heart again.

Laughing and crying at the same time Hildegard said: "Blessed be you, Goddess of transformation! Thank you so much, Hel!" "Get going now, dear!" answered Hel, "because your time in the world of darkness has run out." And the woman turned on her heels, left Hel's realm, crossed the bridge, went back through the land of the Norns and up the stairs in Yggdrasil's trunk and wandered out into the realm of people.

The end

As fast as her feet would carry her she went back home, and she was filled with joy and laughed the whole way. And as she arrived back in her village, she laughed so freely that all her friends came out of their houses. And when they saw that Hildegard had found her lovely, silver laughter again, they started to sing and to dance and they hugged each other and had a great feast to welcome her and her newly found laughter back into the village. Hildegard, though, became a profound healer, and many a person in sorrow and despair heard her loving laughter when the night was darkest.

Translated from German by Christopher McIntosh