

On the Road

With

THIS VAST BEING

A Voyage through Grief and Exaltation

Ann Kreilkamp, Ph.D.



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Close to the Bone: Life-Threatening Illness and Soul

COVER ENDORSEMENT

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July 26 – September 29, 2007

“In 66 days I drove 8915.4 miles, slept in 33 beds, held 28 book events in seven states to ignite a deeper conversation around death, loss, grief, and their gifts, and sold (and usually signed) around 200 of my own books.”

“Mostly stayed with friends, and loved it. I am still surprised that I loved this aspect of the trip, because of my perennial hunger for solitude. . . After this odyssey, I realize that some of my need for aloneness is fueled by Fear, not Love, and now I gladly let it go.”

— Ann Kreilkamp

Wednesday, July 25, 2007

The Western Adventure Tour Begins

After six months of thinking about it, three months of planning it, six weeks of sweating it, and the last two weeks of feeling like I was in some kind of left-brained marathon to juggle details of places, people, events, times, publicity materials, and so on; after six months of thinking about it, two weeks of organizing it in my head, two days of frantically nailing down all the details of what I would take with me on the road . . . It all came together yesterday morning when I waltzed out of Bloomington at 7 AM (make that 7:15 AM) and forgot my jasmine tea. Three blocks later, remembered tea, turned around.

Imagine me in my new little (used) black Prius and new iphone recently loaded with all sorts of contact info, tootling down I-70 towards Kansas City for first night stop with old friend from Jackson Wyoming, Henry, and his new (that is, new to me; they've been together seven years) wife Jennifer. We looked at their astrology charts late afternoon and then out to dinner and walked on one of the trails that, they report, will be all hooked together for 80 miles of trails in the area in a few years!

Hopefully the kitties will be okay with friend Steve who is staying there while I'm gone on this journey that will not see me home until September 29. After which I turn around in six days and go again, this time to Peru for two weeks. Plus, Aggie next door says she's going to "let them inside" her house if need be, she so much fears they will also leave during my extended absence.

There are between 25 and 30 book events planned — in living rooms, libraries, new age centers, and a few independent bookstores — with more than that many people directly involved in working with me to manifest this dream of traveling around the country with *This Vast Being* and utilizing it to catalyze a deeper conversation on death, loss, grief, and its gifts.

I look to transit Pluto exactly covering my natal Sun this year (27° Sagittarius, conjunct the Galactic Center) for the incredibly strong WILL needed to pull this daunting adventure off.

Thursday, July 26, 2007

Near Grand Rapids

In a Day's Inn off I-80. Spent the afternoon — after cruising the streets of Lawrence — wanted to see what that college town looked like, and it looks like Bozeman! — headed west on I-70, listening to Eckhart Tolle talk about three ways to get into the here and now: 1) feel your way into sensing your “inner body,” the aliveness in it, 2) observe how all sound comes out of silence, and 3) non-resistance: e.g. so you're stuck in a traffic jam; so what!

I hadn't heard him speak before, and there's something about the way his voice sounds, the spaces between his words as he says them, that comes from the same place as the spaces between his words on the page. All of which make me tend to take him very very seriously as an author who does live his teachings. By practicing all three ways of moving into “the Presence,” as he calls it, simultaneously, I found that I did not get tired driving, and that the time “flew by” — or rather, that it just didn't matter anymore! I actually had to make myself stop when it got dark tonight. Very unlike me. Usually after four hours driving, I have to roll the window up and down over and over again to stay awake.

This morning, did a channeling session with Jennifer, at which of course, The Big Guy, Jeff, came in right away and told both of us that we were way too serious about “trying to get in touch” with him or anyone else that's supposedly “dead.” Says he's right here. That anytime he pops into my mind it's because he's getting in touch with me.

Told me that this organizational job I did to get this tour rolling was “the last time you'll have to do that.” That now I can just relax and allow whatever happens to happen! Which is what I planned on anyway, but sure didn't want to tell him that, or he'd just say there I was again, planning something rather than allowing . . .

So the Eckhart Tolle CD was perfect for the occasion of this day, through the green rolling hills of eastern Kansas, recently blessed with plenty of rain. Tonight, just about to

Ogalala, Nebraska where I turn off on Rte 28 and head northwest into Wyoming, first to Casper, where I stay the night with my dear friend George and his two young sons. He lost his wife and the sons' mother not even two years ago to cancer.

Heartache everywhere in this achingly beautiful land.

Friday, July 27, 2007

Of spiny plants and olives

I thought I had already posted this . . . oh well. And I can't ever repeat myself, so here's another post.

Tootling north from Cheyenne to Casper, I found myself "falling asleep at the wheel," great metaphor for what I DON'T want to do in life, and what I thought I was learning how not to do just yesterday listening to Eckhart Tolle. I'm afraid my ability to "practice presence" flickers in and out.

Stopped in Glendo State Park to walk and wake up and remembered why I love Wyoming so; not the Tetons so much, but the rest of the state — the harsh, spiny plants, the glorious multicolored rocks, the wind-scarred rock faces, what I call the "overthrust angle" of the hills, making some of them look like waves about to break, a vast ocean of earth forms frozen in time . . . If my soul belongs to Indiana (to my little house in Bloomington), then my spirit belongs here, with the wild and free.

Then on to my friend George in Casper, where we are to bottle olive oil tonight. His olive oil, produced from his trees in the village of Visari, Crete, where his ancestors lived for one thousand years. We used to fantasize repopulating that village with a bunch of old hippies who want to live out our sunset years around old walls and donkeys. Still do fantasize some, and actually know someone who is doing exactly that with friends in another Cretan village.

My iphone doesn't seem to be working. So if you can't call me, I can still be reached by email.

Sunday, July 29, 2007

Some Men in My Life

BTW: Got iphone working again, after a call for support. Turns out it can freeze up like a computer, and requires a simple fix.

Great fun bottling estate oil with George from old trees in a dry desert area on a Greek island that reminds me of much of Wyoming. Had trouble getting the oil to stop pouring before running over the bottle lip. Much cursing and swearing and approximately four dozen bottles later (most of them wiped off), we moved into the bar area (the kitchen he uses is rented from the Casper airport) and sat around with another old friend, Miles, whom I hadn't seen for 30 years. So interesting, the way we watch each other age at different rates, but all in the same direction. And these two, George and Miles, creative, maverick men, have decidedly opened to their connection with all suffering humans. The edge is still there, but now as a very small part of a sort of diffuse understanding of the folly and ignorance that still drives them. I've been "processing" stuff with women for all these decades, and of course, watching us change and grow and unfold our various natures. But it's only recently that I can say I have great hope for the men in my life, and can see that they too, have been opening to the same path of expansion into a more spiritual understanding of their own lives, the wondrous stories that keep us shaking our heads at the strangeness of it all. And laughing, laughing.

For example, after doing gold jewelry for many years in big cities, Miles established a coffee shop in a small town, then worked as a counselor with Native American kids who had been abused, then ran a group home for adolescents back east, then returned to Casper, adrift, "no direction known." Had been "walking the prairie" every weekend with his wife, his own sort of spiritual practice, for a few years when he began to "see" in the desert in a new way, due to an arrowhead made of jasper that, one day on top of a windy, see-forever hill, was lying at his feet. This led him in a whole new direction — mining claims!

And George, so protean and carefree when young, now at 62, the widowed father of two beautiful boys, 9 and 12, absorbed in keeping his kids safe, their bellies full, the house in order.

And me, on the road on what some might think a quixotic adventure, drinking a gin and tonic with the two of them, all of us now in our 60s, laughing and loving and so glad for the continued connection despite the long hiatus and the passing of years.

Which reminds me (and forgive me if I've already told this story; I would have gone back to look at other posts, but don't know how to save this and then return to it): my friend Steve, another marvelous man, who is staying with the kitties, wrote me this a few days ago, and warmed my heart all the way from Cheyenne to Casper: "I have found out what makes the cats really comfortable. I just have to read the New York Times on the porch, your favorite perch, they both came around and just started purring. I had a long talk with them and told them that I was going to be around for the next two months."

Tonight, first book event of trip, outside Jackson, at the yurts in Kelly, where I'm staying: to gather with a grieving community of climbers who lost two of their own, both young, roped together, hurtled 3000 feet, from a high traverse in the Tetons early this summer. One of them lived in the yurt that was mine up until five years ago. We will meet at the fire pit there, under the full moon.

Monday, July 30, 2007

Extremes, as viewed through two scenarios

First scenario:

Imagine me, sitting around a fire circle (no fire, because of extreme fire danger due to drought so dry the planks crackle underfoot) in front of the yurt that I used to live in with Jeff, a yurt that has been turned into a shrine for a young climber who lived in it and died with another young climber from the yurt community, falling thousands of feet while roped together in the Tetons. Twenty people with me, all from a community of grieving souls who have been immersed in the aftermath of a number of recent deaths, some natural, others by suicide. A circle of Love wrapping us around on this full moon night as we spoke of grief and its gifts of tears and awareness and hearts opening to the whole world. Equal numbers of men and women willing to allow their vulnerability to show as they honored both their own inner processes and the beings who have preceded us into the spirit world. Could feel Jeff and these others around us, holding space for us, helping us diffuse the boundaries between worlds and open to interdimensionality and interconnectedness. An extraordinary evening.

Second Scenario:

Then today, after a wonderful morning walking in the dry mountains with my friend Chris and a fresh salad lunch together, I open my iphone and find the battery dead. Dead! Dead battery in one week old \$500 iphone! Immediate clenching tightness in my whole body, plus intense obsessive focus on how to fix this phone when I am nowhere near an Apple store and won't be for weeks. All awareness practices, of which I am so proud, OUT THE WINDOW as I worked for over an hour with Apple support to figure out where to send replacement phone, where to send my iphone once it's been fixed, and how to stop being bitchy to the man on the other end of the line. Given the nature of this trip, staying only a short while wherever I go, it's crucial that the phones arrive when they say they will arrive . . .

(So very fortunate that I backed up all contact and schedule info on paper before I left town.)

So yes, extremes.

Tonight, a potluck event with old friends and the book, and the catalytic action invoked by an evening devoted to the sharing of grief. In my mind's eye, a mountain of grief, now beginning to spout like a volcano, or boil, from the collective body. I see hundreds, thousands of circles of grief, gathering to remember who we really are as persons longing for love, as souls pouring out love. There is no end to what might be created when we allow ourselves to dive into our deepest fears, our deepest denial.

Tuesday, July 31, 2007

Astrology, TVB, and cultural transformation

Been in the Tetons for only three days and already my skin dries out in high, hot, dry climate. Sore throat also. Huge adjustment, on all levels. Did more tai chi than usual to try to counteract.

Last night's evening a potluck gathering of old friends, mostly female, and I found myself in more of "speaker" mode than expected. It felt as if the group wanted that, probably because I used to work as an astrologer here, and would sometimes give talks on coming astrological transits. So I did that, and tied it in to the book, and the use of the book as a tool for helping people get in touch with unresolved grief that does seem to inhabit everyone. I have yet to meet anyone who disagreed with this premise: that grief may be at the bottom of all that keeps us from exploring our connection to the universe beyond the momentum that still drives this culture — the fear of lack and the hunger for status and physical goods in lieu of real meaning.

The astrology of current times is consistent with Mayan and other prophecies of a coming "end-times" in which those who can evolve rapidly enough to withstand the stresses of increasing acceleration of the pace of events will be called upon to provide leadership and refuge for others less fortunate. These aware souls will need to be able to work with grief on a massive scale, given that humanity will suffer increasing losses of all kinds. To my mind, the most important preparatory work we can do is to give ourselves time to slow down to stillness, and to allow whatever unprocessed grief that we ourselves are still holding to surface. As grief surfaces, and expresses — through tears, howling, dreams, art work, dancing, whatever! — it transforms, quiets down; miraculously, we find that our awareness can then spread into a spaciousness that naturally includes others. In this way grief becomes the gateway to love.

In this way we can move beyond the “me first” territorial attitudes that breed hostility and war and keep us from finding solace in each other’s company, keep us from sharing what we do and are and have with gratitude and trust.

Tonight, another event, this one a combination of the Jewish friends of Jeff and the drumming group that he belonged to. Another evening, no doubt another brand new situation that hopefully, I will be able to resonate with at whatever level the occasion calls for.

Today at 11 AM, I meet with the Hospice Director here, at her request.

Wednesday, August 1, 2007

Early morning: Coyote, Raven

5:00 A.M., jerked awake. Overwhelming urge to get up, right now! and walk north two miles to the Warm Springs from Kelly Wyoming where I'm staying in a yurt. Surprised. Not only do I not feel any trace of the sore throat and lethargy that threatened to undo me yesterday, I am bursting with energy.

Quickly dress, start walking, an eye out for bison which have proliferated this year like rabbits. First light, yes. As in years past while on this early walk, I will get to see dawn's rosy hue brush the top of the Grand Teton and move on down to the valley floor way before the Sun itself rises over the eastern hills.

Winding my way on a horse-path through three-feet high sagebrush, picking sage leaves and rubbing them in my fingers, bringing up to my nose, inhaling, swooning with intoxication, just like when it rains. When will it rain? The dry underbrush crackles, crunches underfoot. Reminded of how, as a kid growing up on the Idaho sagebrush desert, each rare hard rain's release of sage aroma would throw me into this same swoon.

Somehow, that brief brush with infection yesterday, countered with a well-timed acupuncture appointment in Jackson with Carol (I had been prescient enough to schedule it in advance, knowing I would probably need a tune-up, given the switch into high, dry climate) grounded me here, landed me back into the magic of this place.

Kelly Warm Springs: site of countless inner journeys over the years, sitting on its banks watching both white mist hover over winter-cooled water and the soft clumps of summer's algae green. That day, for example, in 1991, when I sat there perplexed after two years of doing the magazine *Crone Chronicles*, wondering whether to continue. I asked Raven sitting on a post nearby for a sign; then crestfallen when he immediately

flew off in the other direction. The very next day, on another walk, Raven swooshed over my head with inches to spare from behind, then turned, and flew back, again low, directly over my head, giving me the precise signal I needed to go on. (The magazine had begun in response to a dream in which Raven was clawing into my shoulders from behind, cawing, “WAKE UP! WAKE UP! IT’S TIME! IT’S TIME!” and I *knew* that this symbol, for me, was that of the Crone.)

This morning I climb the little hill directly north of the springs and just as I arrive on top, Coyote streaks out from under a bush and runs down the hill, not thirty feet from me. In all my 18 years in Jackson, I never encountered Coyote at such close range, and so of course, take it as a sign.

On way back, there sits Raven, on a downed post. He lets me walk up to within ten feet of him, and we stand together and watch the sun’s gleam burst across the top of the eastern hills.

Last night’s event had a bit of Trickster Coyote energy, interesting, and moving at times, however with a distinctly disjointed feeling. From the beginning I’ve known that in order to do this trip I need to release all expectations and move into the present moment. As these book events unfold, three so far, I find myself comparing the relative lightness of the second two to the terrific intensity of the first. “Comparing” has to do with expectations. Reminds me of “compare and contrast” essay questions in tests throughout my school years, including comprehensive exams for the Ph.D. I’ve been so long conditioned that expectations-based-upon-analysis feels natural. But does Coyote or Raven compare and contrast, judge, see right and wrong, good, better, best?

Friday, August 3, 2007

Limbic and other fundamentalisms

Bozeman, 6:00 A.M. Hint of rain in the smoky air. Respiratory system compromised. I keep thinking I have a cold, then allergies, then I realize once again that it's the fires north and west of here, which obscure the mountains in a haze so that the deeper the breath, the more smoke I breathe in. How I feel for those who must live here! So much easier to just be traveling through. Reminds me of 1988, the Yellowstone fires year, when a feeling of claustrophobic dread set in and caught us day and night, for months on end.

Last night's book event another totally new experience. My hostess, Helen, decided to hold it in the place she works as a nurse, in the conference room of a long-term care facility. So in order to reach the room where we were to talk of loss and grief and their gifts, we had to run the gauntlet of ghosts — thin, emaciated, hospital-gown-white clad men and women, sitting still and quiet here and there, in no seeming communication with each other or the world outside their own interiors. What are they thinking? Are they thinking? Are they afraid to die? Do they want to die?

Seven of us gathered under harsh fluorescent lights, pulling cloth-upholstered armchairs into a circle aside from the conference table. From talking with her beforehand, I discover that one of the participants is VERY experienced in the varieties of experience encountered as humans lay dying and their families, she tells me, are 98% of the time, not on the same page with them. This reminded me of what the hospice director in Jackson told me, that often families will try to keep their loved ones alive as long as possible, despite their own wishes, because to them, this is how they show their love.

Love, in other words, as attachment, and, if the Buddha is right, guaranteed to cause suffering.

The experienced woman from last night took care of her own parents as they were dying, and works with elderly now, both in hospice and otherwise. Her mentor, she tossed as an aside as she left (she had to go early), was Elizabeth Kubler Ross.

Decades ago, this woman had a near-death experience on the operating table, and ever since then she has been in an altered state, with a number of extrasensory capabilities. I urged her to tell us her story, but (and I am grateful now), she insisted that I talk about the book first. So I did, but I must say, I kept feeling myself under her watchful eye. As if she was assessing me, somehow.

In any case, once she started to tell her near-death story, which was amazingly detailed and descriptive, the evening took off in another direction.

To summarize: she spoke of being above the operating table, watching the doctors frantically trying to revive her while a translucent being of light showed her a big book, and kept turning the pages on the future — up to 2011.

Somewhere in her tale I began to feel uncomfortable. She began to speak of “God,” and God’s plans for the human race, and a war between angels and fallen angels, and the Rosicrutians and the great plan that is unfolding now, since 7/07/07, where people chose which side to be on, and cannot go back . . .

As she went on, bolstered, and in part contradicted, by another woman in the room who also has a sort of black-and-white, fundamentalist, born-again, absolutist view of the world, I felt my stomach turn, clench, tie in knots as some of the people in the group (six women, one man) started accosting, in a gentle way, but firmly and with certainty, each other with their beliefs.

How many times have I been privy to such conversations, which lead nowhere, and seem to cause only separation? The one new element last night, at least for me, was the man, who, despite being a conservative Christian, had an amazingly light and attentive attitude towards others and their beliefs. To my belief that “we need to get below our beliefs to what we all have in common, our experience of loss, and grief, which, if fully processed, releases into love,” he asked, kindly, softly, wondering, as a real question, “But then how do we make sure that people do the right thing?” (I paraphrase.) In other words, he was concerned that without some kind of guiding principles (beliefs), chaos might ensue. I imagine that this IS the usual fear of those who feel that society needs rules to stave off a Hobbesian war of all against all.

Helen and I then expressed our common view, that people, when given enough love and left to their own devices, will naturally develop and express their own unique natures and harmonize with others. Our generation speaking. Or at least our generation as we were in our heyday, the ‘60s. This man too, Helen told me later, had done his share of acid, and had participated just as we had in that storied time, and she has long been impressed with his open-hearted approach to conversations about ultimate beliefs, despite his own conservative cast.

I contrast his soft, gentle, untroubled way with my own emotional embroilment as I detect even a whiff of fundamentalism. Much like the Dalai Lama, whom we all admire for his obvious compassion and light-hearted acceptance of even the greatest suffering and injustice, this man apparently does not attach himself to his beliefs, at least not to the extent that he becomes emotionally upset when others contradict him.

So I’m still a fundamentalist. A limbic fundamentalist. Attached to getting rid of fundamentalism. My instinctive revulsion for black and white thinking is itself a polarized reaction to it, and I thank both the woman who started the conversation, and the man who showed me that one could be in it and yet not of it, for their gifts.

This journey is such a teacher! Over and over again, I discover another part of myself that feels rough, hard-edged, in need of gentle care. And it feels that this journey is guiding me to understand, little by little, more and more of why I have undertaken it.

My focus on grief and loss does lie beneath beliefs, and my way of working with these experiences and the feelings that they engender is not theoretical, not based on belief, but on an attunement with the body and its natural wisdom. If fundamentalism is the problem, then re-mem-bering our connection with our bodies and through them, the earth of which they are made, is the solution. I aim for the spirit, by working with the flesh.

Monday, August 6, 2007

Smoke, howling, and a sea of beautiful faces

Missoula Public Library, Monday afternoon. The fires in Montana create conditions so smoky that I can only barely discern the mountains that ring Missoula. The local newspaper's front page daily fire log details conditions for many many fires, not just the one or two that I grew to expect while living through hot Teton summers. Now I know where the phrase "cast a pall over" comes from. Downtown, a few people drag themselves along the street. It must be hard NOT to allow depression to take one over during such a long-term, relentless emergency.

But I am just a relatively carefree visitor, privileged to drive in and then, drive out. I so feel for those who do not enjoy my freedom to choose.

Today I enjoy the first fully free day since I started holding book events in Jackson, on July 29th. The event in Stevensville was cancelled, giving me "breathing time." Too bad the actual breath is compromised . . .

This morning I walked along the Clark Fork downtown river walk, and did tai chi and chi kung in a secluded, shady, grassy spot. Really wonderful to feel myself fully centered in that moment, the obsessive worries that dogged me during the two months planning for this trip blessedly gone. Poof!

The psychic in Kansas City told me that Jeff was saying that all I needed to do was flow with the current that I had created, that I didn't have to even think about it much, just move from place to place with no worries! And that is largely how I'm experiencing this

journey — although I do have to be very aware of observing boundaries with others so as to have enough energy for evening book events.

The two events just past, one in Helena and the other in Missoula, were both, again, very very different from any of the others. In each case in these two towns, about a dozen people assembled in someone's home, and both times we entered into a sharing together that felt very coherent at the time, a strong, vibrant, allowing energy field that suddenly jelled around us, and then as suddenly dispersed as the event wound down.

Helena's event followed a day spent in the company of my dear friend Joan and her husband Max. Joan and I walked up Mount Saint Helena with her little Pomeranian on a rare morning when smoke wasn't so bad it would compromise breathing to inhale deeply on the ascent. That afternoon, the wind picked up, and thick smoke blew in carrying the odor of burning wood. Dread sets in at moments like these, an instinctive desire to flee. Reminded me very much of the Tetons during the '88 fires. With our rational minds we calmed ourselves, realizing that the fires near Helena were more than 15 miles away, and the wind and odor did die down later.

Meanwhile, that evening, we were inside enjoying a potluck, and stories, and my astonished recognition that this group converses on multidimensional levels as a matter of course — due in part, I'm sure, to Joan and Max's long slow introduction to the Helena community of many people and subjects that bring in "messages from the beyond" of all kinds, including ETs and UFOs, just as a matter of course!

So, when we got down to work with the book, sitting in a circle on the floor to talk about our experiences of grief, and how it can be a gateway to Love, we were fully primed. As usual, there were several people there who have also been through deaths of spouses, and of course, many other types of losses — and it's wonderful to compare notes, and to recognize the parallel courses that our emotional and spiritual journeys run in.

In Missoula, for the very first time, inside my dear friend Zamilla's home, the whole group of, I discovered, very powerful women, the youngest of whom was probably 55,

listened with great intent, as, one by one in order going around the circle, the women told some facet of their life that gleamed with loss and grief. Towards the end, one woman gave a longer discourse on how she had tried to avoid getting in touch with grief, always running away into more and more activity — at one point even riding her bicycle clear across the country, dragging her shadow behind her every inch of the way — which then, would slam her once more into some powerful loss that she again tried to dismiss. Constant escape, until one day, out of the blue, she started screaming and howling and crying and couldn't stop — while on a ski vacation with friends in a rented condo!

The next morning, no one would look at her. The group carried on as if nothing had happened. Later, one of these friends told her that they wanted to hold an intervention, because they had decided she had behaved that way to manipulate them!

As she told this story, each time punctuating the end of its various chapters with the phrase, “And still I did not know of my grief,” our group was sitting on the edge of our chairs, mouths hanging open. Such a gifted storyteller! And such a classic story. Can we, for example, look at the busyness that infects America as a collective symptom of repressed, unprocessed grief?

At both events I demonstrated (mimicked) the primal howling that blew through me like so many tsunamis during that first year after Jeff died, and both times my extremely loud demonstration galvanized others into a deeper sharing. In both groups, at least one woman then commented, “But that's what I did too! And I never told anybody, because I didn't know it was okay to do that . . .”

Next up, Hamilton, two events, Tuesday and Wednesday. Think I'll get up off my library chair and mosey on down there now. Give me time to acclimate. And meditate. And thank the universe for all the blessings showering down along with the smoke! I look back already on this trip, now approaching two weeks, and what comes to mind is a sea of beautiful faces who greet each other as fellow pilgrims along the mysterious and profound journey of the soul.

Tuesday, August 7, 2007

Confessions of a rich American bitch

Greetings from smoky Hamilton, Montana, where the fires have so obscured the sky that the mountains east and west of town are invisible.

Today, for the first time, I needed to basically stay in bed all morning — I'm staying at friends' Kay and Tony's house — just to let go of everything and drop fully into restfulness. It worked. Even slept some. Then, this afternoon, I wandered down to Main Street in this little town of maybe 10,000, meaning to take my computer to an internet café, and forgot my computer (so I write this later, on Tony's computer). Wandered around in a daze, until I came across a place that did pedicures. If you recall, I tried to do my own pedicure back in Jackson, and my hand shook too much, so this was my opportunity. They advertised ½ hour and one full hour pedicures, saying that the hour-long one involved massage of feet and legs. So I grabbed it, thinking I needed some real luxury on this downtime day. Well, after 40 minutes, she was done! And boy was I pissed. Hardly any massage, and the nails weren't even expertly done. My inner bitch rose up and loudly announced that I would split the difference between half and full hour pedicure, and of course, the poor worker called for the manager, who said they shouldn't have advertised it that way, etc. etc., but that I did get a "full" pedicure. I decided not to press it further, except to say, in a loud voice, that I would not recommend them to my friends.

Stayed pissed all the way back to Kay's house. Told her about it, feeling foolish even as I did. Thought about how only a year ago I had never indulged in a pedicure, and now that I had, look at what it had brought me to, a petty argument over 15 measly bucks! Tried to justify my pique to myself, but the self-indulgence felt so ridiculous that it truly did feel like the complaint of a rich American bitch.

The contrast between this personality stuff — righteously proclaiming false advertising — and my stated intent on this tour to help ignite a collective fire that burns up old unprocessed grief — really quite hilarious.

So, in a mood of (no doubt, temporary) humility, I stop this rant to dress for this evening's book event.

Wednesday, August 8, 2007

Live and, hopefully, learn

Last night's event drew nearly 20 people, 18 women, one man (Tony), and one 14-year-old boy with his mother, sitting on hardback chairs in a circle in a fairly smallish room. All but one actually arrived on time — rare in Montana.

However, despite some very willing, heart-centered, open folks who kept nodding their heads “yes” at much of what I said, this was the first event where I felt like I was pulling teeth for the whole evening. Lots of lulls in conversation, which then would prompt me to start up a new topic, and see where that one would go. Unlike most of the other events, which last at least two hours, this one was obviously out of steam after only 90 minutes.

On the way back to Tony and Kay's house, I decompressed with my friend Star, the organizer for the Hamilton events, and we zeroed in on three women who came in together and who seemed to be somewhat out of it, disconnected. Two of them did at times seem to be responsive, though none of them ever spoke. The third one, however, felt to both of us like a black hole, dour, unexpressive, unchanging during the entire time. Could she — or they — have “scotched” the event, so that no matter what the rest of us did or said or felt, they kept dragging down the energy?

Oddly, as Star and I were talking, a policeman's lights started to flash behind me. I pulled over, and he told me that I had been driving on the center line and asked to see my registration, because the car didn't seem to be registered. Peering intently with his flashlight, he then checked the Vin number, and went through a few more official checks, and finally let us go. The timing of this incident felt uncanny.

It's not that this event didn't "go well" in conventional terms, with me as "the teacher" and the others "the students." Tony, for one, liked very much that he was present at a conversation which was deeper than usual. I realize now that my own disappointment was due to the fact that, once again, I had built up expectations — for some kind of alchemical ignition in the group process. Because that does sometimes happen on this tour, I have grown to personally need it. Once again, Ann, let go!

(By the way, the 14-year-old, who looked as if he had been dragged to the event, was very happy and energized afterwards, said he had greatly enjoyed it. Perhaps because it was because a number of people had brought up instances of magical phenomena that had accompanied the deaths of people they were close to, and magic is Harry Potter territory. So who knows? I may be entirely off in my assessment of what happened last night.)

Kay and I also remarked to each other this morning that if I had asked each person to state their name and why they had come it might have changed the evening's course. I had thought there were too many people present to make that a meaningful ritual. But, as Kay said, we were saying to each other afterwards that we didn't even know each other's name, and let's get to know each other now!

Live, and hopefully, learn. This afternoon, a book signing at the local independent book store, then tonight, a Sufi zikr (dance and chant) to which I very much look forward. Tomorrow I travel to my home town, Twin Falls, Idaho, and hopefully will be able to go directly south on highway 93, despite the Tin Cup fire, burning near Darby.

Friday, August 10, 2007

Soul, and Spirit

In order to launch myself on this ten-week journey through seven western states, I knew I would have to learn to “stay awake” continuously, or at least wake up a thousand times a day. Without a near-continuous state of presence, the journey might prove disastrous — from ill-placed keys, wallet, other belongings; from a sudden or gradual loss of the sense of groundedness that would throw me into internal chaos.

To a certain extent, I must admit that I decided to do this journey to see if I could. As a sort of experiment. Ever since my husband Jeff died, over four years ago, I have been gradually grounding myself into the little house that he bought in order to go to law school in Bloomington, Indiana (actually, in order to gift to me on his way out of body). This daily grounding process has been new to me, a double Sagittarian who, for most of my life, have felt most myself while in flight. Over these years, I’ve begun to recognize that what I have been caring for in Bloomington is “soul.” Through the smell of early morning as I step out to pick up the newspaper, through skin’s sensing of the variations of temperature and humidity in seasonal swings, through the over and over again routine of letting my kitties out, and in, over and over each day; through weekly grocery shopping, having friends in for dinner, yoga, chi kung and tai chi early morning and evening — I have found myself immensely appreciating the sheer deliciousness of quotidian rhythms, these troughs and valleys into which body sinks and relaxes.

So the question was very real. Would I be able to do this trip and remain grounded? Or would I be as before, a leaf tossed in the wind.

Then, on the third day after the trip began, driving through Wyoming during and after a hard rain, swooning into ecstasy with the aroma of sage, the endless wind-scoured

vistas, the vast tumultuous sky — all this made me say, out loud, with hands clutching the wheel, “Ah yes, my soul may be in Bloomington, but my spirit is here. Here in this wild, wild land.”

Soul and spirit. So very different! And to think that at one point in my life I wondered how, or whether, to distinguish the two. I even remember an astrology conference where some learned astrologer said that there really was no essential difference between the two, and cited sources, and etymological origins, to “prove” it.

I didn’t know whether to believe him. And now I realize that I don’t believe him. For in my experience, soul and spirit nurture two different parts of myself. Soul belongs to the body, to earth to the easy, comforting familiarity of routine that allows me to sink into the rich resonance of feeling. And spirit belongs, well, to spirit! To that part of me that rises, ascends, views from afar, finds meaning, links all together in a conscious whole.

Soul, operating mostly on an unconscious level, inhabits the whole, lives at rest inside it; whereas spirit, the more conscious it is, seeks to remember what it has lost through its marvelous capacity for self-consciousness, what allows us to split off from the body and flee, fly, forget.

Yesterday, I spent the day traveling south from Hamilton, Montana to Twin Falls Idaho, a journey that, as I drove through the Sawtooth valley in central Idaho — those mountains where I had ridden horses on long pack trips with my friend Mary and her family as a child, where I had honeymooned, over and over, trekking deep into the wilderness with my second husband Dick (and first love, in high school) — all this sunk me into deeper and deeper recesses of memory. Continuing south from there: over Galena Summit where a bunch of us hippies once tried to push our bus uphill and over the crest; through Ketchum and the Wood River Valley, where I craned my neck as I drove past the entrance to the road up the east fork of the river where my first husband had designed and built “the cabin” for my family, only to see it now totally obliterated inside a half-finished megamansion; through the tiny village of Bellevue where, as usual, I made a little detour to check on the little house where I had lived for about four

months with my third husband Phil (a sick, scary, alcoholic former “Black Beret” who taught me to take my power or die) and then escaped, in the early morning, in his old truck since he had surreptitiously pulled the spark plugs on my car; past the butte on the desert south of Shoshone where the Riding Club had trucked our horses for a ride one Saturday morning when I was a child; then to Twin Falls itself, where the pace of change into new, “businesslike” buildings and strip malls has been so dizzying that I continually get thoroughly confused and lost.

I continued releasing and reinvigorating memory here this evening, driving past the house where we grew up on Maplewood Drive (bigger trees, brick now painted white), past the little house where I lived in my mid-30s while I published “OpenSpace” magazine, a utopian publication that brought out all the creative types NOT connected to organized religions (house very run down; sad); and in the big square two-story house that was once my father’s office where I mowed the lawn one afternoon as a 9th grader, furious, and terrified that I had actually said “yes” to a boy who wanted to take me to the movies that evening.

All of it pulling me down, down, into a place of feeling that I don’t understand but do know instinctively that it is good for me. The feeling of “being at home,” that relishing in the delicious depths of soul, is not just located in my little house in Bloomington, Indiana, but also found inside the cells of my being, each one shaped by a myriad of impressions from the deep past and enriching life immeasurably now.

Then the final descent — into a little canyon, Rock Creek Canyon, where I went for a walk this morning alone and found Rock Creek gurgling like a baby in my arms, the russian olive trees and sagebrush waving to me as I walked by. And everywhere, the dark volcanic rock faces silently reminding me of my own volcanic, volatile nature — it was as if for the first time in my life I truly and consciously understood how soul was present in my early years — as I rode my horse, as I played in deserted, overgrown “empty lots,” as my friends and I explored canyons and deserts of the Southern Idaho

landscape. I took it all for granted then, and longed for “greener pastures” literally — dreaming of Anne of Green Gables, and her much lusher world.

Last night, while in my ruminations about soul and spirit, I happened to be sleeping in a bed that had Thomas Moore’s book, “Soul Mates” on the night table. I opened it to the introduction, and there he is, talking about the exact same subject, in the exact same way as in my recent ruminations. Soul and Spirit, what pulls us down, and what lifts us above. Both, together, not in a static “balance,” but as a continuously shifting, paradoxical whole connecting our lives to both earth and sky, the depths of our memories to visions of the future, and all centered in a silent, nurturing, subtle presence that supports us unstintingly, at each and every moment of our lives.

A piece of volcanic rock, a sprig of sage, and a sprig of Russian olive now sit, tiny altar of soul, just above the wheel of the Prius.

Tonight: another book event, this one in the labyrinth in Buhl, a tiny town 30 miles from where I now sit in an internet café, downtown Twin Falls.

Saturday, August 11, 2007

Then, blowing in from stage left . . .

Several decades ago, Kathy Ruyts decided to manifest a long-held dream. She bought an old church in the tiny town of Buhl, Idaho, and turned it into a beautiful little temple with a labyrinth at its heart. This little jewel, with the bland name of “8th St. Center,” has become the cultural heart of not only the town it sits in, but a magnetic draw for the entire Magic Valley of Southern Idaho. My talk and discussion of *This Vast Being* was held there. Coffee, tea, cheese, crackers and brownies were all available too . . . but who knew how many would show up? Despite newspaper notices, lots of phone calls and emails, and even a small newspaper ad, only seven people came — and that includes me and three others who worked to put on the event.

My expectations, so battered by this trip in all ways, suffered another sharp jolt. I thought that by this time I had learned to flow with the Now, immune to expectation, but NO! I think what seduced me this time was the sheer beauty of this little space which can hold 50 people easily.

As usual, we formed a circle with chairs and began. Not sure how it started this way, but the conversation immediately moved to the slightly raunchy — on the theme of “men are assholes.” (Two of the six were men; all of the participants knew each other; and the two men were good sports, mostly agreeing with our comments.) Then, suddenly, like a tornado, blew in a giant, ungainly stranger with huge calloused hands and a dirty baseball cap on his sweat-streaked face, apparently fresh out of the potato fields. He strode over to the circle, pulled out a chair, and sat down, saying, “I lost my wife in March. It’s been a long, unending nightmare.”

Oops! Back up. Start again.

It was as if one play had begun, but then was scratched entirely, when a larger-than-life figure strode in from stage left. Riveting.

Immediately, we all entered the sorrowing spirit of Bill and his massive, flowing, vulnerably expressive grief. From that moment on, the evening galvanized all of us into the rich, paradoxical emotional field that the archetypal experience of death and loss engenders, encompassing both desolation and hilarity, and spinning out stories from each participant that riveted all the others. For the first time on this trip, part of our conversation centered on what might be the differences between men and women in how they grieve. (Men needing to “work out” grief, by engaging in something very physical.) Clearly, these three men, at least, were NOT assholes.

Nearly three hours later we were done, spent. Bill strode out with not one, but two books, and not before commenting, “I think there are 600 people in this town who could have benefitted from this evening’s discussion.

Whew!

Today, visits with old, nearby friends. Tomorrow morning, book signing at Chapter One bookstore, Ketchum, Idaho.

Sunday, August 12, 2007

Open Hearts, Open Space

Drove up to Ketchum, Idaho this brilliant blue early morning from Hagerman, where I stayed overnight with old friend Joan at her beautiful little lodge and retreat center on a clear, chortling creek that flows from one of the “Thousand Springs” and branches its way into many rivulets down a hillside. I took the back road, up from the gentle terminus of the Snake River Canyon to tiny, rural Gooding, then Highway 46 north to where it ends in Highway 20 a few miles from Fairfield. Turned right, and arrived in Ketchum about 45 minutes later.

All along the two-hour journey, processing. Revisiting the continuous connections with old friends of the day before — hiking in the Snake River Canyon with Brenda in the morning, an hour grabbed with Pegan at noon, laughter-filled discussions with Judy, Rex, and Bill at Miracle Hot Springs in the afternoon plus dropping off a book for David since our schedules did not mesh, then the fairy/elven/watercress retreat at Joan’s for dinner and overnight. How blessed I am, to enjoy such rich, rich friendships with people I have known for decades and who all still surprise and delight each other with the ways our unique, quirky original natures continue to unfold. So MUCH more fun now that our bodies are relaxing their “hard body” drive and our egos dissolving their opinionated edges into a shared, bemused, wise knowing of how we humans work, how we blind and kid ourselves, and still manage to survive and thrive . . .

So many of the men whom I’m renewing my connection with now are opening their hearts, wide, like little kids, drinking in the warmth of the sun. It’s this heart-opening that I seem to be drawn to, and which Jeff, and Jeff’s death, seems to have engendered in me. I see/feel it in individuals as well as in the culture, beneath the scary, loveless news, this tight spot that humanity has put itself in, this forcing through the narrowest

of gates, the needle's eye, into a vast, expansive spaciousness that includes us all and finds its echo in the vast, limitless desert north from Gooding — so much nothingness, such a silent presence that shimmers in the heat and calls us to remember that we too, deep inside, are this vast space, this vast being of limitless, unbounded love.

It's easy to move into mysticism when you feel the desert in your bones. I feel lucky to have spent my childhood in such a wild, abstract, mysterious country.

Ketchum: Chapter One Bookstore, 11 AM to what turned out to be 2 PM. Books on a round table near the front door, small group sitting around the table, talking about death, and grief, and sharing stories. Once again, the realness, the vulnerability, tears, laughter. Three widows present for at least two of those hours, and one man of such rare heart that I sense his life has been brimming with suffering and isolation. (Whatever happened to our discussion, only two nights ago, when we women were calling — for a short while, admittedly, and half-joking — men “assholes”? It's as if we had to bring that word up once again, just to let it go, since though a conversation we've had forever, it's obviously just not true, and never really was, once we peer below the crusty surface.)

A number of people in and out, to pick up books and have me sign them. Several even found me at a nearby restaurant to sign books later. At the bookstore, a few more widows came in to buy books and sit with us for awhile. A number of people are gifting one or more books to others grieving through the aftermath of a loved one's recent death.

This circle a very good and heartfelt time. So fortunate to be living right here, right now, in this body, on this long journey in this trusty little car, moved by the ever-enlarging presence of so many great souls.

Next: walk in the mountains tomorrow evening, then to Boise in afternoon.

Monday, August 13, 2007

“Deep spiritual practice” foiled by technology

“Former publisher of *Crone Chronicles*, Ann Kreilkamp engaged in conscious grieving after her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. Supported by a deep spiritual practice, Kreilkamp attuned to her need for ritual and ceremony to acknowledge and honor a path of grief that encompasses both pain and joy. Part cartography, part plein-air painting, *This Vast Being* gives form to a rich internal landscape of fierce love and loss.”

This review, by Connie Mears, in the *New Age Retailer*, sure looks impressive! Not sure I understand what “plein-air painting” means in this context. Oh well! No complaints. This little magazine goes out to 10,000 independent bookstores.

Meanwhile, back in the Prius, now in Boise at an internet café with my friend Azimat and our dueling MacBooks. Spent 45 minutes standing in line at the Cingular/At&T store to see if I could exchange my iphone, again on the blink, only to discover, as I finally got to the clerk, that Cingular does not exchange the phones, that I have to go to an Apple store for that . . .

(Here, fill in your own circuit-breaking rant on how technology both accelerates us to warp speed and stops us in our tracks.)

The other day, when I said, “Yes, of course, it would be great to eat quiche!” and meant it, to my dear friend Judy, when I had just had huevos rancheros, courtesy of my friend Brenda, only four hours earlier, in retrospect blows my mind. Eggs upon eggs, something I would never have agreed to even six months ago and makes me nauseated, now, to even think about! I guess it might actually mean that I’m moving into “the flow,” appreciating WHATEVER presents itself.

[Except for technological glitches! I still grow agitated when I think back to standing in line for so long, that conversation with the Cingular guy. My internal state was — is — that of complete chaos and frustration. All awareness OUT THE WINDOW!]

Azimat asked me if maybe there was some early childhood memory that my consistent trauma over technological glitches reminds me of, and I immediately sunk back into a day when I lay on a table in my doctor Dad's office — he was hooking me up to his brand new electrocardiograph machine to see if it worked. I was six years old, and do remember feeling the alien wires on my chest, but no memory of fear or rage.

Though most of this trip IS doing what I hoped personally, plunging me into the Now, these technology moments are my Waterloo, clearly where I need to remember, with every breath, to practice awareness. So, thank you iphone, for the intransigence of your sautered-in battery. I bow before you, most honorable opponent!

(BTW: if you will please forgive one more moment of obsession . . . Just wanted to report that I really felt for the Cingular guy. Clearly, he WAS sorry, and chagrined that he couldn't help, and I'm glad that I wasn't even tempted to take my rage out on him.)

Tuesday, August 14, 2007

Technology sauted to my nervous system

Had one of my rare insomniac periods last night, between 2 and 5 AM, and used it to come to a fuller understanding of this business of me and technology. That, plus a breakfast conversation with my friend Azimat this morning gave me a “take” on just “why” I go ballistic over technological glitches. Here’s what I came up with.

I didn’t start seriously writing until I was able to afford an electric typewriter, in 1970. So amazing! The keys could almost keep up with my thoughts which, because of my volatile, explosive, interruptive, mental nature (astrologically, that’s Mars opposite Saturn/Uranus in Sagittarius/Gemini) flash through at warp speed.

Then, when I got my first Mac, in 1985, I could really take off! For the first time, no resistance between head and hand, no slow-down where I would forget what the rest of that particular sentence was supposed to have been.

Thus, I’ve been embedded perhaps more deeply than some with this electric/electronic evolutionary process that has sauted itself to my nervous system and enabled me to actually express what’s shooting through.

So, when something stops the process . . . ach, it feels so damned interruptive, as if I myself have been slammed shut, my existence on hold.

As I said in yesterday’s post, I realize this is exactly where I need to practice awareness, and today, I realize that I must begin by practicing awareness in the middle of when my interface with technology is humming along at warp speed. Because the synchronization of my fingers with the speed of the computer (I type at over 100 words per minute) is so extreme, it’s very easy for me to completely forget myself while utterly intoxicated by the

joy of shooting mental/spiritual/linguistic rapids. If I can hold awareness during these good times, then most likely it won't be so difficult to hold awareness during times when I get hung up on a large, impenetrable rock!

A big order. The kind of challenge that I can sink my teeth into.

Tonight: book event at "Spirit at Work Books and Beyond" in Boise.

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

NOT a “good gypsy”!

Well, I can’t figure out how to edit these blog entries once I post them, and Azimat tells me that my word “sautered” from yesterday’s post is really “soldered.” Go figure. Yeeks, do I hate mistakes. I questioned her, thinking maybe there are alternative spellings of that word, and she told me she was a spelling champ in high school. Azimat (aka Lane) was the editor for the book, so who am I to question her? Except she says don’t send this until she double checks it. How very like her, and I’m ignoring her advice — how very like me.

Meanwhile, here’s clear evidence for me of how lack of presence, of staying awake, can leave me stranded on shore rather than flowing with the current. Today, I received an email message from Ada in Ketchum that I had left not only my yoga mat, but my address book at her house! I knew about the yoga mat, and had already gifted it to her in my mind and bought another one at Target. But the address book??!??!

I have some of the contact info I need stored in the computer and iphone (which is working now . . .) but not all of it, as I didn’t quite finish that task before I left Bloomington on July 25. And of course, the next address I need, for Rita in Bend Oregon with me due there tomorrow afternoon and a book event tomorrow evening, I do not have stored anywhere but that address book.

Quick flurry of calls to various people, none of which produced what I needed. Then, amazingly enough, I did find Rita’s phone numbers on an old email (actually, this is not amazing at all; what’s amazing is that I didn’t think of it to begin with!). Called her, and she didn’t answer. Left message. Someone else there called back immediately, and gave me the address, yelling back and forth over loud rock music in this internet café. Then my computer refused to go on the internet at this café — and of course Azimat and I had

just paid for our chai muffin and tea! So I couldn't google the address. But the internet did work for Azimat's MacBook, across the table from mine, so she googled it, and I sat down in her chair and laboriously wrote down directions (in absence of a printer). Such is life on the road for she who falls into a trance and forgets where she is, what she has, what she's doing, whatever! Reminds me of my old friend Chuck's mantra for me, "A good gypsy leaves no traces" . . .

Last night's event felt wonderfully warm and present. About 18 people there, apparently more than usually attend events at this new age center in downtown Boise. A number of people in active pain were present, including a widow of about my age whose husband of 47 years died only 11 months ago, and who has not been able to utter the words "my husband died" on the phone to insurance people and others with whom she must deal. I had asked her if she noticed a different response from people on the phone when she uttered those words, and that's when she muttered that she does not say them.

This was the first time I had heard someone in active grief say this, and of course it immediately magnetized a sympathetic response from the whole group, which was, up to that point, enjoying a spot of tea around a large table before retiring to what I had jokingly referred to as "the other side" (of the room) for the reading/discussion event within a circle of chairs and couches.

So often I and others discover how individuated are our various responses to grief. Over and over again, I am humbled to realize that, despite going through my declared year of "conscious grieving," I truly know very little about the range of responses evoked in humans to the death of a loved one.

The atmosphere of this evening felt slow and stately and very respectful. Many incredible, miraculous, evocative stories, as usual, and what stands out for me from this evening is the beautiful young woman who worked as a nurse's aide in a nursing home and actually functioned as a sensitive and very observant angel in the dying moments of her patients' deaths. Over and over again she would discover an intuitive way to help that particular person make his or her transition. An example here: the man who was

afraid, deathly afraid of what he was experiencing as the horrible dark (his way of symbolically depicting death), and she swiftly grabbed the bedside lamp and shined it directly onto his face to comfort him.

Saturday, August 18, 2007

Stuck in traffic with the Dalai Lama

Arrived in Bend Oregon after a gorgeous drive through wild desert (where I kept scanning for wild horses, no luck!) from Boise at 3 PM only to find that Rita, my hostess, had just left for the emergency room with her husband in great pain. How fragile life is, how the “best-made plans” . . .! (P.S. he’s okay, the situation was not life-threatening, though had to be attended to immediately.)

That evening’s event, at the home of two women who have long opened their home to gatherings-of-heart, held a dozen women in a circle, most of them connected to each other through their work at the local hospital. Half young and the others of crone age, like me. Really a special time, the young ones blushing to have to speak at all and yet eagerly absorbing the stories of their elders. One of them said to me afterwards that after our discussion she no longer fears death.

Yesterday, driving north through old forests with sudden spectacular views of Mount Hood, got stuck in an hour-long traffic jam while nearing Seattle and felt serene and grateful to be listening to an audio book describing a man’s experience with the Dalai Lama over three decades.

Walked around Green Lake with my dear sister Mary and her husband to get the kinks out after near-8 hour drive, deep into discussion of global warming, peak oil, need for community . . . Then a wonderful dinner and full-hearted talk on their patio until dark joined by their friend Carol, whom they met at the Chartres Cathedral in Paris and who also seeks to serve.

Today, take the ferry to Vashon Island, for this evening’s event at a bookstore there, hosted by my dearest sister-of-heart in the whole world, Claudia. So very grateful to be

alive and mostly conscious and awake during this momentous, scary, exciting crossroads time of human transformation.

Monday, August 20, 2007

Convergence and the needle's eye

Sitting atop a high stool at the kitchen counter in a lovely, large-enough rental home near the water in West Seattle, son Sean reading to 7-year-old Kiera and 4-year-old Drew upstairs while daughter-in-law Sue takes a shower. Feel full, contented, lazy, on this overcast, rainy northwest day. Yesterday's family meal here with 91- and 90-year old parents, four sisters and spouses, two other grandchildren (both grownups), and my dear friend Claudia was, as usual, rowdy, raucous, and high-spirited, all of us swirling around the folks as they sat in state, laughing at the jokes and joining in the merriment as well as can be expected, given that she has trouble understanding things that were, only one year ago, obvious to her, and he is doing his best to take on what may be his hardest role in life, despite his nearly 50 years of being a doctor: looking after, cooking and cleaning up after, his beloved wife who is slowly and subtly incandescing before our eyes.

Though being with family again was a shocking re-introduction into this old, familiar framework after another year away, and though I had just barely begun to process the intense book event on Vashon Island the night before, and had just driven up to the rental only two hours before the family started to arrive; though Sean, Sue and the kids had hardly slept the night before due to their 1 AM arrival from Boston, I, and I would say everyone else, somehow moved through the eye of the needle into a flow that felt delicious and warm and all those other fuzzy words that we use to try to describe the ineffable yet powerful connections we humans have for one another, especially those we have engaged with in one form or another all our lives, moving through crisis after crisis and somehow not only surviving, but thriving.

The book event on Vashon held 15 people circled on comfortable couches and chairs inside a bookstore, talking deeply about various experiences related to death and

grieving. More than any other of these evenings, this event focused on the mysterious connections we have to one another both pre- and post-death, especially as revealed in our dreams and other uncanny circumstances. Everyone very present. Though it did take some people a long time to open up, even their listening felt compelling, as they magnetically drew out the stories of others.

One of my favorites: the woman who talked about death as a part of living, illustrating it with a story of how her father (or was it her brother?) was dying of some chronic disease in an upstairs bedroom, while downstairs everyone carried on their normal lives, though visiting him once in a while upstairs. Then, on one day, at the same moment, three family members all suddenly ran upstairs, to reach him just as he let go of his final breath.

Tomorrow, we visit with the folks at their new home, the Covenant Shores Retirement Community on Mercer Island, for lunch. Mom: “Will hot dogs and potato chips be okay for the kids?” — trying so hard to be gracious in constantly deteriorating interior circumstances. Then tomorrow evening: a book event at my sister Mary’s to which sisters Kathy and Kristin also hope to attend. I notice that their evident interest makes me feel both grateful and hesitant: all my life I have kept my life and work separate from family origins. Are they about to converge? Are we about to take a new step in our family dynamic to ease the way for our parents as they are drawn through the needle’s eye of death?

Wednesday, August 22, 2007

Juxtapositions

Sitting here on final morning of domestic arrangements, in rental home with my son Sean, daughter-in-law Sue, and my two delightful and strong-willed grandkids, currently whispering vociferously inside a fort of blankets and chairs. Grey day in Seattle, as usual (three days of sun this summer, so far). Sean just told kids not to bring pillows into the fort. They convinced him otherwise. Sue and Sean eating eggs and bagels.

So interesting, the juxtapositions among various realities. This “mundane,” daily one vs. the quiet high intensity of the book events. Last night, Sue, a niece, and two of my sisters were present, so another juxtaposition for me, whose life and work have basically occupied an alternate reality from that of my family.

One highlight from last night’s book event: the woman, ten years a widow whose husband died of cancer at home, who told us she made sure that her children, ages three and ten, spent time with him in his bed before he died. “I wanted to make sure that they were with him at his death the same way that he was with them at their births,” she stated matter-of-factly, and then added: “As a result, they are not a bit afraid of death, not a bit.”

More and more, I notice that the book events move quickly into deep talk, rather than skimming the surface and then heading down. Having now facilitated 15 of these discussions, I notice that Death as the ultimate mystery seems to be blooming ever larger as an ineffable presence, palpable, larger than life.

Last night’s event, with about a dozen people, turned into a gourmet treat, with appetizers, a full meal, and, after our discussion, a fabulous date pudding with whipped

cream, fruit, and maple syrup. The discussion itself lasted not quite 90 minutes, perhaps too short, since four or five people came up to me afterwards to convey privately their own remarkable stories. We need to remember that our personal voyages into the archetypal domains of death and grief and loss have been sitting inside us for a long, long time, and sometimes can only be coaxed out. As we hear others' stories, so we gradually open to tell our own. I sense that, had the discussion been allowed another 30 minutes, there might have been a remarkable outpouring.

In any case, the evening was full and heartfelt, with sister Mary and brother-in-law John exceedingly generous and caring hosts. And their friends! Such a caring, gentle, spiritually-inclined group of people who accurately mirror their own rapidly-expanding and multidimensional world-view. Thank you Mary and John!

Today, Portland, where I stay with my old friend Clarissa this evening.

Friday, August 24, 2007

From forest to table, always Love

Take exit 6 off I-5, Mouna told me, and go three miles on the gravel road.

I envisioned a dusty dirt road winding through small rolling hills. The actual road hugs the side of a cliff in the middle of a silent old growth fir and pine forest.

As soon as I felt the arms of the forest encircle my little car, I noticed a strong feeling of internal calm. Probably what always happens in a forest, though I had not ever before noticed it so instantaneously. Welcome relief in a day that had begun at 6 AM when I headed out from my old friend Clarissa's house in Portland west (after a raucous evening with her and another old friend Candice (both from Jackson, now in Portland) towards Forest Grove to meet with publisher Anne Niven and her husband Alan at Maggie's Buns for a face-to-face talk about the new CRONE mag that we are producing, to launch next spring.

I got lost on the way, and arrived 45 minutes late. That meant my driving day had been lengthened by that much, and I finally arrived at Mouna's beautiful forested property south of Ashland and deposited my things in her 24-foot diameter hut around 5 p.m. Just then . . . my old friend Janet from Jackson drove up from Brookings, Oregon, over 3 hours away, on the coast — with her table! Janet, an extraordinary body and energy worker, did two sessions with me before I went to bed, and I slept for ten hours. Incredible, how I seem to be given exactly what I need when I need it, since I was utterly fried and overloaded by the time I arrived here.

Today, an event in Ashland 2-5 PM and another one in Grants Pass tomorrow. Then I stay with Jean Mountaingrove (who produced WomanSpirit magazine in the 1970s). I will interview her for CRONE over the weekend.

So glad to feel full and ready to meet this wide, wide world again, and so very very grateful for friends and family who cushion and support me on this long, strange, wondrous odyssey.

Tuesday, August 28, 2007

Pot-holes, dial-up, violence, and other primitive conditions

During the past four days, in both Ashland and Grants Pass I was reminded of the so-called “primitive” conditions that I lived in while a yurt-dweller in the Tetons — and with only “dial-up” available I decided to ignore the blog until now. So let’s see . . . I last wrote here August 24, the day after my dear body/energy worker friend Janet arrived at Mouna’s little forest compound up the Mount Ashland gravel road off I-5. She not only worked on me that night, but gifted me four more times in two days! An unheard of luxury that left my neck soft and my all-around condition firmly supported and purring with pleasure.

Meanwhile, two more events, August 24 and 25.

The first one, in Ashland, felt challenging at first, since the room held a temporary art exhibit on war, with violent images collaged on the walls and a gigantic photo of George Bush on the floor, meant, apparently, for visitors to walk on.

We folded up the floor photo and circled the chairs at the back of the long room, beyond the collages. The situation reminded me of my “peace activist” days in 1982-83 when I thought I was working to make sure the MX missile didn’t come into Wyoming (it did), and I was shocked to discover that I was, in fact, a violent peace activist.

That stunning surprise plummeted me into my own inner world, and I spent the next four months staring into a fire of the stove in the yurt in the Tetons into which I had just moved, shuffling through turbulent scenes from memory that made me wince with pain, shame, remorse, and an absolute determination to learn how to never repeat.

I thought that would be it, that having taken this time to “integrate my own shadow” I would be free and clear, ready to go on without unconsciously spraying my own inner weirdness all over others, but NO. It took six more years of work, deep work with “Orphan Annie,” the child who felt abandoned and covered it up with arrogance, before I finally began to feel that I was hopefully conscious enough of how my own unpredictable nature can wreak havoc in the world.

So when I sat there in that room with those war images all around me I noticed the turbulence I still feel when even glancing at them. Obviously, I’m not yet to the point where I can say that my awareness remains as a calm, still pool no matter what.

A dozen women, mostly of crone age, were present, and I began by talking about the CRONE magazine that we’re about to launch. And when one of them (a very modest woman whom I later discovered is a sculptor of international renown) asked, “How do you define crone?” the images on the walls reminded me of my favorite definition, “She who eats her own shadow.”

“What’s the shadow?” Someone else asked.

“The parts of ourselves that we don’t like,” I answered firmly, remembering — to the nods of many others.

Actually, I’m not sure if that question was asked then. It may have been at the other session, held in Grants Pass, again with about a dozen women mostly of crone age. The Grants Pass event was the first where I directed the entire conversation specifically to the magazine — and received lots of great feedback and suggestions for how we can make it even more relevant to women of crone age.

The Ashland event, on the other hand, felt similar to most of the other 17 book events so far — intense, deep, focused on the multidimensional range of our responses to death and loss and how allowing ourselves to process grief fully transforms us. Later, one woman who participated in the Ashland event heard about the more “informational” tone of the Grants Pass event, and how it was focused almost exclusively on the upcoming magazine, told me she was surprised that the second one was not like the

first, and wondered why. (By which she apparently meant, “Why didn’t the second group of women get to experience what we did?”) In fact, that was because my friend Jean Mountaingrove, the organizer for the Grants Pass event, had assumed that her group would want to focus on the magazine more than the book.

Besides the gravel road to Mouna’s yurt/dome compound, I got to negotiate a two-mile long pot-holed dirt road to Jean’s barn/hut/cabin compound north of Grants Pass. This second road made me decidedly nervous, since the Prius (now called the Pius, thanks to Janet’s play on both her and my Catholic origins, and the “holier than thou” attitude of we who drive these hybrids) runs very low to the ground, and I did scrape its front fender on the one pothole that went clear across the road. Otherwise, the potholes felt like moguls on a ski run, fairly easily swerved around.

Jean and I spent a day at her place with the tape recorder running on and off again, as a first step for “the interview” with her that will run in the first issue of Crone magazine. She and her then-partner Ruth Mountaingrove had run the seminal — oops, I’d better say “ovular” — little magazine *WomanSpirit* for ten years starting in 1974. This magazine initiated what one might call the spirituality arm of the second wave of the feminist movement. Jean’s now 82 years old, and intrepid, despite her cane and a recent hip replacement. Her compound, called “Rootworks,” now sports a compost toilet and electricity, both within the last three years, after nearly 20 years in truly primitive conditions. My yurt life was always luxurious by comparison.

Tonight, an event at the Open Secret Bookstore and Cultural Center in downtown San Rafael. This will be the first event where I was the contact person for it. In other words, no local contact! Yeeks! It will be interesting to see who (if any!) are drawn to the poster that they put on the door, and the books they placed on the table near their check-out stand. I was gratified and relieved to see the clerks’ preparations for this event when I checked in with the store yesterday.

Then, on August 30, my interview with Angeles Arrien in Sausalito, also for the launch issue of CRONE.

BTW: I decided to stay in a motel during these three days in Marin. Sudden strong craving for solitude.

Wednesday, August 29, 2007

Grief, as the Secret that Opens into Praise

When I tried to imagine last night's book event beforehand, I found it impossible. By this time I am quite used to the fact that somewhere between 7 and 15 people will show up (averaging 10 to 12, though a few have numbered as much as 25), and that I will feel connected and supported by my local contact.

This person, usually a woman, is the one who, at my request, agrees to organize the event and contact her friends and others who might be interested in actually looking at and working with the deep wells of unexpressed and unprocessed grief that seem to live inside all of us, both individually and collectively. All along, I have felt that the key to this kind of independently operated tour is the network of local contacts, as well as the willingness of the person who is going on the tour to actually ask for help!

This was my biggest stumbling block, as I am stubborn and proud, and prefer to do things on my own rather than risk rejection. Indeed, I think I said here in an earlier post that during the two months that it took to organize this ten-week tour there were a number of days when I felt paralyzed, unable to act. All my old voices would come up, especially the "Who do you think you are?" (said sarcastically) that I heard from my mother so long ago, and probably not even very often. But of course, that was the one remark from her that I remembered. As a typical mom of her pre-feminist generation, she felt an unconscious need to make sure her six daughters didn't stick out too much, less they be ruthlessly cut down — "by the patriarchy" — I used to add, but now that phrase seems so hopelessly dated and angry and, even if true, unhelpful, in terms of my own personal healing.

At any rate, all along my intention for this tour felt strong and clear, and when those days would take me down I'd just notice the place in my body that the pain was

constricting, breathe deeply into that place, and honor and embrace the pain for how it had served me in the past. Finally, like a vise grip (or is that vice grip?), the pain would ease, let go. And the next day I could once again pick up the phone or write an email to some friend or acquaintance on the route I had chosen to ask if she would help me create an event in her town.

At this point, after 17 of these events and 10 more to go, I feel immensely grateful to all who have supported me in this quest, and indeed, I'd say that whereas during the first year of my grief I was intensely grateful for solitude, in this fifth year after Jeff's death I am learning, through this amazing journey, just how inextricably interdependent I am with all living beings. All the new and old friends who have surrounded me during this odyssey feel like a deeply-held, purposeful human matrix of caring that I am just barely beginning to tap into on a feeling level. So thank you all, so much!

Which brings me to last night's event, the only one for which I have NOT had a local contact. I arranged the reading/discussion event myself, by looking up bookstores in the Bay Area on the web, and contacting three of them. The Open Secret Bookstore in San Rafael was the only one to agree to an event by this non-local author whom they didn't know beans about. Given the clamor for book events in California where I imagine most alternative people are either authors or in the process of becoming authors, I felt gratified — and actually somewhat amazed — that the door to the Open Secret Bookstore and Cultural Center actually opened for me.

But I didn't know anyone here. And would anyone show up?

Amazingly enough, nine people did — including an old friend whom I last knew in New York, and who had seen the poster on the door — and once again, we found ourselves circled up, talking intensely and deeply about various multidimensional and paradoxical aspects of the grieving process and how the layers upon layers of our grief, when processed as fully and with as much awareness as possible, can serve as a transformative agent for both ourselves and the culture at large.

Three of those present mentioned with great praise a CD called "Grief and Praise," by Martin Prechtel, as well as books by Malidoma Somé — both aboriginal teachers who

work to help us Americans who are unknowingly stuffed with and paralyzed by a mass of lifetimes and even generations of unprocessed grief. So once again, I feel the continuity of the work of this tour with the work of others, and I am full of appreciation for all those who both bear grief willingly and expressively and who work at ever deepening levels to access the wonder and awe that greet our recognition of grief's continuity with praise.

Next up: Dillon Beach for the afternoon. YES!

Thursday, August 30, 2007

Our Creative Edge

Glad that I accidentally took the wrong road for Dillon Beach yesterday, because Route 166W winds through redwood groves with the Russian River to its mouth at the sea. There I walked the beach to a bluff on one side of the river, sat down, and watched a panorama on the other side that stunningly illustrates a permaculture principle, namely “the edges are where the action is.” (Plant, animal and mineral species congregate, communicate, commune with each other at edges of all kinds, to encourage diversity, integrity, stability.)

I was at the EDGE of the ocean (the beach), at the EDGE where a river meets the sea, and there were obviously lots of fish present, because hundreds of gray pelicans and thousands of seagulls were on the other side of the river, peacefully intermingling. Most were resting/sleeping on the sand, but gobs of pelicans (and a few seagulls) were swirling in circles, looking down, and then suddenly diving into riffles (where stones create lots of EDGE with water) next to the shore.

Meanwhile, probably 40 fat seals lay motionless, lining the EDGE where the water meets the river/sea. While I sat there one of them flopped his whole self into the water then flopped out again and, with a tremendous heave, flipped over onto his back to once again, lie supine. (His natural, unself-conscious manner in his body, plus the contours of his bodily form, reminded me of my late husband, Jeff. So many reminders, more than four years later!)

Then, of course, the tides were continuously creating and destroying EDGE in their relentless, mysterious synchronization with the Moon, and we humans (maybe 20 of us along a half-mile long beach) had also been drawn to ocean’s edge, full of longing yet mostly not knowing why; not realizing that we too, participate in the infinite panorama

of life, and that our species, for all its current propensity for destruction, has its place in the whole.

We try to stay within the bounds of our cultural conditioning — to separate from our own bodies and ignore nature while achieving success, wealth, power; to “play it safe” in that unconscious structure — but something in us seeks to go beyond. The ocean symbolizes that mysterious Other each of us feels within our own psyche, a dark, pregnant, inner cosmos where structures continuously form and dissolve into the vastness to which we are all surrendered.

I just about dissolved into the vastness myself, yesterday. After weeks of having to be on “high alert” much of the time (though striving always, to remain “present”), finally, while sitting there on the cliff’s EDGE, my mind let go.

The mental dissolution just about extended to the physical, given what happened next . .

While slowly walking back, and peering closely at tiny, tide-formed channels in the sand, suddenly, a powerful rogue wave caught me from behind. Instantly, it rose to my armpits and, while just about jerking me off my feet, had the grace to not remove my car keys from the shallow pocket in my pants! What god did this? Who is responsible for this sudden awakening to the larger mysterious presence that both knocks me down and holds me tenderly?

Or: was it the work of Jeff as trickster, laughing, calling — “Wake Up!”

And I had even read the sign: “This is one of the most dangerous beaches on the California coast. Do not stand at the shore with the ocean behind you” — or risk being caught by a “rogue wave.”

While I was peering into the microscopic forms made by water’s EDGE with sand, the abyss nearly swallowed my own form.

Inside me, too: at the EDGE between whatever I am paying attention to, and the awareness of the whole — what is attended to, the me that is paying attention, and the

entire panorama within which I live and breathe — is where the action is. The creative edge, the place from which anything is possible, anything.

Saturday, September 1, 2007

R&R, poison oak, and what makes a person tick?

I sit in the shade-dappled lawn of The River Inn in Big Sur, California, my legs tired from walking probably three miles or so up the canyon trail at Julia Pfeiffer State Park this warm morning among ancient redwoods next to the sea. Physical exhaustion would make me feel good, except that near the inside elbow of my left arm is, horror of horrors, a spot of poison oak! Probably due to the three hours I spent at Point Lobos yesterday, where poison oak is ubiquitous.

I've taken two high-powered 200c Rhus Tox homeopathic doses so far, and have one more to go, but this stuff might just get me anyhow, just the way poison ivy used to get me, until I started to take pantothenic acid on a regular basis. If poison oak does get me, then it's time to "practice the presence" even more thoroughly, to accept even the itching into the moment and not separate from it!

Meanwhile, one day into three days of personal R&R, I've begun to delve into a question that fascinates me at present, namely, what exactly, uniquely, drives me? Perhaps with transit Pluto turning to go direct, right on top of my 27° Sagittarian Sun, this question is currently inevitable. In other words, how does the mysterious Plutonian life force channel itself through my particular mind/body/soul to distinguish "me" from other beings? My studies in astrology point to one way of looking at this question of the uniqueness of every being. But what I'm looking for now, is a statement or two that describes what I've been searching for, what all my projects and products are spin-offs of, all my life.

The question has come up in the wake of my interview with Angeles Arrien on Thursday, a riveting 75-minute occasion where it felt as if we were diving down into what makes her, this specific woman, this extraordinarily gracious teacher/healer cultural anthropologist, tick? You'll have to wait for the first issue of CRONE: Women Coming of

Age, due out Spring Equinox, 2008, to “read all about it.” We were both pleased, and at least I was slightly surprised, that our time together flowed so smoothly and efficiently and created content that even she seemed glad to uncover!

Sunday, September 2, 2007

Rogue dog(s) attack!

Who or whatever sent me that rogue wave at Goat Beach five or so days ago, delivered me to another rogue experience at Pfeiffer Beach in Big Sur just before sundown yesterday.

I was walking along, thoroughly enjoying the various dogs that are allowed to accompany their people on this particular beach, saying hello to some of them, petting others. All friendly. I was feeling particularly relaxed and content, having napped in the early afternoon. A picnic dinner at sunset in daypack, sand underfoot, ears open to the crash of the surf on this dramatic and rocky beach where waves roar in through openings created by enormous rocks . . . when suddenly, out of the blue, in the corner of my eye two Australian shepherd dogs hurtle at me from 20 feet away. I turned to face them, thinking they too, will be friendly and want to play.

I think now that at first they just somehow had picked me out as an animal to herd, nipping at my ankles and legs. But then one of them actually bit me, hard, on the back of the left thigh, drawing blood. A puncture wound. Suddenly the situation turned extremely serious for all three of us. I started raging at them and they went into full-on pack behavior — whipping into a frenzy and circling endlessly opposite one another, so that as I was yelling furiously and rushing towards one of them the other was moving in for the kill. This went on and on (how long? How long is eternity?) until the dogs' owners, two girls perhaps in their late teens or early 20s, finally arrived from where they had been sitting, against a cliff perhaps 300 feet away, and tried to capture them. To no avail. The frenzy worsened, always the dogs were aiming for me, teeth bared, ears back, barking and whipping faster and faster, easily eluding their mistresses.

At some point, three young men arrived, and formed a defensive line in front of me with my back to the ocean. It still took many more minutes for the girls to corral their dogs and leash them.

They have collars, with rabies tags. The girls said their shots were current, in fact one had had his shot just last week (sudden thought: could a rabies shot stimulate rabid behavior in rare cases?). That this had never happened before, and they were so sorry, etc.

All sorts of thoughts went through my head, chief among them just how seriously should I treat the wound? I rubbed a little water on it from my water bottle, and sat down in a sheltered spot to eat. But how could I eat? My adrenaline was still pumping furiously. The whole ordeal had taken perhaps five or six minutes — a lifetime, in a survival scenario. At this point I was simultaneously both extremely agitated and totally depleted. Had I tried to eat I probably would have thrown up.

I walked back to the ranger station, taking care to give the girls and their leashed dogs, also walking back, a wide berth. I asked the ranger if he had a first aid kit. No. But would I like to file an Incident Report? I was inclined not to, but decided that I might regret it if I did not. As he was getting out the form, I saw the girls and dogs in their car, and indicated to him the culprits. He walked over to them and was gone for some time. Meanwhile, a pleasant, middle-aged couple in a rented VW Vanagon was at the gate, and heard what was going on. I asked them if they had a first aid kit. YES! They rooted around the van, saying they were sure the rental agency had given them one, and finally found it. The woman administered to the wound, while the man started talking about seeing a doctor, and that I should take pictures, in case it goes to court.

The ranger then walked up, saying that he had noticed the aggressiveness of those dogs when they came in. That he had got one of the woman's names and her birth date and the car license. He then copied them for me. When the man (of the couple) heard that the girl's last name was "Rodriguez" he started ranting (only half in jest) about how all the Mexicans have attack dogs. On and on, despite the protestations of me and his wife.

And that was but the beginning.

I went down the road to where I had seen a medical station for Big Sur. Closed.

Went to the restaurant of the motel where I'm staying and told the woman at the desk. Instantly empathetic, she left to get me a cup of hot soup for the road (gratis) and wrote down directions to the Doctors on Duty office (open 24 hours, she said), in Monterey, a 45-minute drive on winding cliff roads.

The attack had taken place about 6:20 PM. The sun was setting over the ocean as I drove that road, still over-stimulated and slightly panicky.

Arrived at the doctor's office at 8:10 PM. The office had closed at 8:00 PM.

Went next door to a Blockbusters video store, where a sweet young man looked up the numbers for other Doctors on Duty offices in the area. I called one of them. The woman on the other end of the line said they were closed, and then, as I was starting to ask another question, hung up on me! He then gave me the address and directions for the Monterey County Hospital, to which I drove, arriving about 8:30. Had to wait to 9:45 to be seen, not bad, considering it's Labor Day weekend. The doctor dressed the wound again and prescribed a heavy oral antibiotic. Gave me directions to the nearest 24-hour pharmacy, a Walgreens, 5 miles away. Had to get gas first, or I wouldn't make it back to Big Sur. Did that. At the pharmacy, they told me it would be a 20-minute wait. Instead of waiting I went to the grocery store to get yogurt, so that my gut wouldn't suffer too much from the antibiotic (really need probiotics, but health food stores probably won't open until after Labor Day, two days hence).

Even as I was absorbed in wrestling with the ongoing saga of my trauma, I noticed that the car parked next to mine at Walgreens held a woman and her pre-teenage son, both huddled with blankets on, trying to be invisible. Homeless. Sudden switch from focus on me to her much more difficult situation. Then sudden switch again, this time to how lonely I feel in having to go through this medical emergency alone. Then again, back to her. Who cares about my trivial evening's ordeal when some people are on survival's edge much much longer, even their whole lives.

Finally got on the road back to Big Sur about 11:15 PM, after stopping for a to-go hamburger to ground my energy, figuring otherwise I would be a menace on the dark twisty narrow road so late at night. (And geez! It's late at night on Labor Day weekend. What about drunks coming at me! Mentally, I call upon all my guides and angels to keep me safe.) Could barely down half of the burger, but it did do the trick. Arrived back here at the motel, without further incident, at 11:59 PM.

Went immediately to the computer to see the astrological configuration in the heavens for the moment of the dog attack. As I suspected, the Midheaven/Immunus Coeli axis of the chart for that moment was exactly conjunct the Mars/Uranus opposition in my natal chart. Mars/Uranus can signify "sudden, violent action," and it certainly did, this time. But what made this moment so very propitious was that transit Saturn had just moved that very day, after two and a half years in lordly Leo, into Virgo, where it squares (90° away from) my natal Mars/Uranus in Sagittarius/Gemini. Virgo, which often deals with health issues, calls on us to focus very precisely in the moment, and pay extremely close attention to detail. This I did; this I had to do all during that unexpected five-hour ordeal, most of it at night, with directions to many places scribbled on tiny pieces of paper and making sure, during that whole long strange trip, to not misplace keys or wallet, not hit other cars on the twisty road nor even for a nanosecond look away from the center of the road lest I plunge over a thousand foot drop into the sea.

THIS is R&R? Some kind of cosmic joke? Anyway, good fodder for practicing staying aware in the present moment. The poison oak is spreading, but who cares. All things are relative.

And of course, speaking of astrology, I forgot to mention again that transit Pluto is turning this week, to go direct, and so much more emphasized than usual, and that it happens to be, for the first and only time in my life, exactly conjunct my natal Sun. Twice in one week, I've endured sudden, unexpected life-death situations. Each one a death of sorts, cleansing me of all that went before, opening me to the sheer exhilaration of the present moment.

And by the way, that incident required that I open to encounters with perhaps 18 other people, most of whom were very nurturing and supportive.

Tuesday, September 11, 2007

Crone Mag Retreat, Crones Counsel, Visalia Event, and more!

Nine days later, I'm still alive. No more sudden unexpected rogue attacks by natural forces like ocean waves and dogs. What I take from my two strange near-disasters on northern California beaches is the idea that there is no use looking for "causes" for any phenomenon, that sometimes all I can do is bow to the mystery that presents continuously changing circumstances as food for contemplation. When I contemplate the nature of my experiences, rather than try to understand or figure them out, I open the door to an ever-expanding, ever-deepening field of awareness that shimmers with currents of all kinds and colors. Indeed, more and more, what I distill from this ten-week journey are the twin Buddhist notions of impermanence and interdependency. I dance with others in an ever-shifting ocean of experience that generates a continuous, unceasing flow of meaning and significance.

To bring up to date: After my three day personal retreat at Big Sur Riverside Inn, I met up with eleven women from the staff of the new CRONE magazine at the Big Sur Lodge, and over a 48-hour period enjoyed a group process that felt miraculous in its depth, clarity, insight and cooperativeness. We created a truly Aquarian group process with everyone present utterly herself, free to speak her mind, and open to all others. Next, I drove to Asilomar, near Monterey, a spectacular resort on the beach, to attend the 15th annual Crones Counsel (www.cronescounsel.org), 160 women gathered for five days to honor, sort out, make fun of, and have fun with, our shared process of aging-onto-death, tell stories from our lives, share concerts and interests, buy and trade handmade art and crafts, walk the beach, drum, sing, dance — an annual full-hearted convivium that, as usual, left us refreshed, exhausted, and, for some of the "newbies," transformed.

That very evening I was due for a book event in Three Rivers, California, five-hours driving distance, in the hills near Visalia, and was concerned that I would be too wiped out from the Crones Counsel to give my all at this meeting. But once again, just as in Ashland when Janet drove over from the coast to work on me four times in two days, this time the universe gifted me with my niece, Megan, a skilled and highly intuitive body and energy worker. I arrived at her home at 3 PM, and by 7 PM, I was ready to go, thanks to both her ministrations and her home-cooked meal.

That evening, the conversation moved in such deep realms and widened to such abstract and yet palpable dimensions, that after two and a half hours I finally had to cut it off due to my own need for sleep! One man there said that his experience of reading the book helped him to realize that, like Jeff, he needed to open his heart, and thanked me profusely for that recognition. Another woman, whose partner had died “thirty months and nine days ago,” and who had driven an hour and a half to be with us, was grateful to be in a group where she could actually talk about her continuing sense of loss without people turning away.

I am now in Oceanside, where I stay with my high school boyfriend (also my second ex-husband) and his “new” wife (30 years together now!), for a week. Judy and Dick’s home has always been a welcome stop for travelers, and three other wayfarers here with me — Megan, plus equally old friends Chuck and Ellen, with whom I stayed in the yurts in Jackson at the beginning of this ten-week tour. We all attend a wedding of another member of our tribe this Saturday. Three book events also in this area, two of them in Oceanside, the other in San Diego.

Grateful, this morning, for jasmine tea, a quiet corner, sunny sky and lush scarlet flowers blooming just outside the open window.

Saturday, September 15, 2007

Flooding, inside and outside

Well, I spoke too soon . . . way too soon. Indeed, ten minutes after my arrival at my old tribal friends Judy and Dick's home in Oceanside, we sat down on the patio and the sprinkler system went haywire. Nothing seemed to affect it, no amount of tinkering with the controls, until that night when we turned the main water source to the yard off completely.

Next day, around noon, no one else was home. I thought I'd throw a quick load in the washing machine and get that out of the way. Went downstairs and started to talk on the phone with an intense friend who has seemingly terminal cancer when I heard the tinkling, then the pouring of water . . . through the ceiling . . .

Ran up, turned off the spigot to the washing machine, unhooked the hot and cold faucets, and still the water poured out from underneath the machine. Thereon followed 30 minutes of trying to catch up with it, using every towel in the house and probably ten large bowls to catch the ceiling leaks, running up and down stairs, having cut off my phone call with this incredible woman to do this awful task.

And here's the really horrible part: as we sat around the patio the evening before, I heard the story of their recent flood from the washing machine, how they had to get 28 industrial fans in to dry out the whole place for a whole week, how they had to vacate the house for the interim and that it cost \$3800 . . . and thank god it didn't happen this week or the next because there's a whole houseful of guests coming for the entire two-week period!

I HAD JUST CAUSED EXACTLY THE SAME SITUATION TO OCCUR AGAIN . . . because I had not put two and two together. Apparently Judy had mentioned that we

can't do wash right now because the washing machine is not yet fixed, and I had not heard the remark; but had I had my wits about me, I would have paused and paid attention to the fact that I had to hook up the faucets to get the machine to work.

I — that is, WE — have been living with the consequences ever since. Big consequences, ongoing. I did a load of 24 large towels and uncounted small ones in a laundromat that evening. Can't use the house because of fans. Camping outdoors. Who knows what the fan cost will be this time, but I will pay for it. Everybody incredibly inconvenienced.

And, one more twist: the plumbing under the sink in the laundry room also now leaks — no relation to the washing machine . . . I can't help but think that I am bringing some kind of huge energy with me, and that it is related to GRIEF (water). Hopefully, it has all spilled by now.

Meanwhile, I had three book events to do here, and given that the events of that day unhinged my entire physical and emotional system, I had to repeatedly lie down and rest, try to nap, any time I could for the next two days since I wasn't sleeping well at night. Thankfully, these events are all now behind me, and all went incredibly well despite the fact that I had been (and still am) living with the devastation that I caused and attempting to absorb it, to forgive myself, to stay present, etc.

This water event not like the rogue wave and dog attack were, and I don't see it as coming from out of left field, out of my control. There is no question that I caused this event to happen, due to my momentary inattention to extremely pertinent details. And the consequences still cascade down — some of the fans still on, still camping out, bill not yet known or paid . . . and the worst part about it was its effects on others. It's not so difficult to stay present at least at some level, when I'm working with situations that only involve myself. But when I CAUSE problems for others!!!!

Any tendencies towards arrogance and feeling like I've really figured out what I'm doing and can do it well on this kind of trip — DASHED TO SMITHEREENS. I know that's good, and that this will all be a hilarious memory and story in the future, but frankly, I'm still feeling like a complete fool and idiot . . . and I know that's good, too! Or that I will have that perspective on it someday.

Meanwhile, some highlights from the three events.

The first was Judy's soroptimist group, about a dozen women, who are used to a "social evening" with a speaker, and so at first I was taken aback, and felt (especially since this event happened only one day after the flood, and we had to move the event from Judy's house to a neighbor's, and dear Judy cooked chicken for the event in her hot, thunderously noisy, fan-filled kitchen) quite unsure of myself, whether I could "pull off" my intention to start a deeper conversation around death, loss, grief, and its gifts in this kind of situation.

To my surprise and wonder, the social veneer of many of these women stripped off easily once I began to read a passage from the book that Judy recommended I read to them. And there we were, once again, in a field of energy that allowed at least somewhat of a deepening into the numinous, mysterious reality that our contemplation of Death presents.

The second event was the next day, in the community room of the Kroc Center in San Diego, thanks to Jean, a woman who works there. This time about 15 women present, most of whom had been aware of my written work for years due to their involvement with the Crone movement and *Crone Chronicles* magazine. In fact, these women seemed to want me to show them who I was more than what I was interested in, and so I found myself telling my own stories more than usual. But still, the conversation did deepen, and I sensed a real camaraderie among us. One woman who has already read the book said it helped her a great deal to get in touch with unprocessed grief that she had still carried from the death of her 20-month-old daughter more than seven years ago when she was pregnant with a second child. Her doctor had told her not to grieve, because it would harm the developing fetus!

The third event was held at Crone friend Ginger's home in Oceanside. Seven of us sat around an oval table on her garden-surrounded patio. These were women that had somehow got onto Ginger's email list, and she did not know any of them! We introduced ourselves, and discovered that all but one were widows! A wonderful conversation followed, which ended on this note:

One of the women's husbands had had Alzheimer's for eight years before he died. During the first four years she took care of him before placing him in a care center and, she said, while she took care of him she was full of rage, a rage, she said, that she still has not moved out of her, despite three operations since his death a year ago, from breast and ovarian cancer.

"But," she said, "last night I had a dream. All my dreams until this one have been nightmares. Alzheimer dreams, when he does something completely unpredictable and floods me with rage. But in this dream, he was clear! He was clear and he looked as he used to look, normal and present, there with me." As she said this her face flooded with light and love.

We had just been talking about my discovery (or interpretation of my inner experience of, Jeff's continuing journey) that people continue to change after they die. The dream felt like a gift for all of us.

Next up, Palm Springs event, on September 18.

Thursday, September 20, 2007

Inside the Thinning Veils

Greetings from Tucson! Arrived here yesterday afternoon to stay at the high desert home of my old friends Todd and Scott from Jackson, Wyoming after a whirlwind visit with my old crone friend Elizabeth in her own high desert home near Desert Hot Springs, California. She's just painted the various outside walls of her home with gorgeous purple, yellow, green and pink colors to match her colorful and artistic personality that is well known in Palm Springs museum circles. Elizabeth had arranged for the local Peppertree Bookstore as a venue for a Palm Springs book event, and so we set up our circle of chairs in the back of the store and ten people, including three men (!) joined in for yet another intense, provocative, continuously spiraling and deepening discussion of the interdimensional realms that we can access when we allow ourselves to open the doors that beckon us through death and grief and loss. When I mentioned my sense that the entire culture is saturated by unprocessed grief, and that it may be responsible for addictions of all kinds, including our incessant need for speed of all kinds to fend off our feelings, one woman who is an addiction specialist echoed that comment, saying that she too, is realizing that grief, unprocessed grief, may be at the bottom of our collective dysfunctionality. And she brought up the idea that not only are we unable to deal with our own grief, but that we all may carry other people's grief, and that our first task may be to separate what is ours individually from what belongs to others.

At this point, when I tell people that my dead husband Jeff is working with me to set up the energy field for each of these events, the circle participants hardly bat an eye. Is it because I am more sure of myself in saying this as time goes on? Or is it because the veils between the worlds truly are thinning so that such remarks no longer seem strange?

Likewise, my feeling that Grief is a gate, perhaps THE gate to Love, the love of all for all, the field of vast being that surrounds us and we all float inside. This too, when I speak of it, seems to naturally slide into the interstices of our minds as we speak with one another within these larger dimensions.

Each time we must break the circle, must finish with the time we have with one another, it feels strange, incomplete. But then I must remember that the whole point is to start this conversation, not to put it into a tidy little box. That the feeling of incompleteness may be what we all need to continue to open to these worlds, to share our openings with each other, and especially, to open to them together. So many times during these events, I have felt myself in the presence of mystery, of a quickening that I'd like to reach out to grasp, to feel all the edges of, to KNOW what it is in all its details, to assimilate it consciously, but NO!

So LET GO! Just let go, I tell myself, and live through these moments, remembering them as precious and unknowable and infinitely rich in meaning that I and others will perhaps be digesting for years. Or maybe not that either! Perhaps our time for chewing our cud is over and we must learn to stay present, to forget analysis, to just open, open, open wide to more and more reality while holding our own clear center. That may be enough; that may have to be enough. That may be all we can do as time speeds up to warp speed over the next few years and swirls us all into its intoxicating vortex.

Tomorrow I begin the final five book events: one here in Tucson, two in Phoenix area, one in Silver City New Mexico. Then one day off, preceding the final event in Albuquerque on September 26. From there I look forward to the three-day drive home, to Indiana. And since I look forward to it, it may mean that I DO need to process and I will get my chance to do just that as I make my way across the endless flat, straight, I-70 monotony below, giant limitless sky above, that constitutes the heartland of America.

September 23, 2007

Presence? or, Past/Present/Future

Over the past few days I have been noticing how my thoughts increasingly reach out towards home — Bloomington, my kitties, my own bed, my morning routine, and so on. This comes in startling contrast to my immersion in the flow of the present moment for all these weeks, mostly at-one with the Now. As I notice my mind shift gears, I also sense how my emotional connection to others changes. I begin to grow impatient and judgmental, in a mild, but very real can't-wait-to-get-out-of-here mood. Then, when I pay attention to such bifurcation, I can alter it, let it go, move back into awareness, at-oneness with what IS going on, rather than anticipating the imagined, glorious near-future when the trip is complete!

This new contemplation of how I split myself into two when I focus on the future, so that the present (and the presence) gets short shrift, feels utterly familiar, and no wonder. This state of existing in my mind, outside my actual experience, is exactly the way I lived for over six decades. Only in the past few years have I turned my attention to the great task of learning how to continuously bring myself back to this place, this moment, right here and right now.

Looking back on this trip — and this is also a new state, for not only am I beginning to look forward with longing, I am also beginning to look backwards with nostalgia — I realize that this trip itself has done exactly what I had hoped it WOULD do, surrender my mind to the living river of life. And as such, it has been a total blessing. Even the various tests (all of which, by the way, for any astrologer reading this, occurred during the weeks when Pluto was at or near its station, turning to go direct exactly conjunct my natal 27° Sagittarian Sun) — including the rogue wave and rogue dog attacks, and the washing machine flood — I see now all as grist for the mill of learning how to stay in the

presence no matter what — including experiences of extreme shock. In none of these three situations did I panic, leave my body, act dithery and dysfunctional. So in that sense I do feel “proud” of myself.

But of course this “pride” of mine is what I have to watch out for most. With a fiery Sagittarian Sun in the first house of my chart now being crossed by transit Pluto, arrogance is or can be my middle name. So an even greater teaching has been given by the third test — the flood — a lesson in humility the awareness of which I ask myself to always remember.

Meanwhile, since I last posted here I have “done” two more book events, one in Tucson and the other in Phoenix, both with the usual strong energetic field surrounding them, allowing for an unusual vulnerability and intimacy among participants and a greater depth of discussion than usual around death, loss and grief and their gifts. And, as usual, both these events were also precisely and uniquely themselves, with the Tucson event seemingly slow and stately, almost formal in tone and the Scottsdale event more lively with participants primed for not only death and grief but also very much open to and wanting to experience the energy of the Crone. I take this “preparation” among the participants as an outgrowth of the venue where we met, the wonderfully goddess-blessed home of Sara, a woman who has been working with ancient female energy for decades as a teacher and consultant.

This morning, my hostess Win and I went to a riparian preserve and sat by a pond where we watched a snowy egret stand and wait for many minutes and then suddenly lunge that long neck for a fish — plus many species of ducks and other birds as they landed and took off on the water, calling to one another, all in concert with the waving of the sun and its play with the clouds and the many different types of desert plants and trees. A never-ending symphony in sound and color and light and movement, so very beautiful and serene.

This afternoon, 2 to 4 PM, the final book event in the Phoenix area, here at Win’s house. Then I drive back two hours to Tucson and Scott and Todd’s house for the evening,

before driving four hours tomorrow to Silver City New Mexico and my second-to-last evening event there.

Yet another indication of my return to future-orientation is that I have begun to count the days, and the events, that remain until the completion of this odyssey. As of Sunday afternoon, I'm three events and four days away from the blessed three-day drive from Albuquerque to Indiana. A drive with no interruptions, no people, no conversation, no intensity! I may not even use the radio. I may not even listen to a book on tape. I may just indulge in silence, and more silence, and still more. Right now I imagine I will head like a speeding bullet straight for home. Or maybe not. Maybe, by then I will have surrendered once again to the presence and instead wander back like an animal, nosing around as I proceed, slowly, savoring, at-one with the process that yields the goal.

Sunday, September 30, 2007

Home again, so blessed I could cry

It's now the morning after arrival home, my final three days in the Prius across I-40 to I-44 to Indiana 46 fueled by Starbucks frappacinos and the audio version of Grisham's "King of Torts" — highly recommended, by the way, as a clear course on the corruption that fuels class action suits.

Both my kitties seem to have forgiven me, though they are hedging their bets by eating in both my house and the neighbor's next door and — sob — neither slept with me or even stayed in my house last night. (To my catsitter's anguish, they preferred my neighbors to him.)

A quick inventory of important things lost while en route: yoga mat (replaced); special pillow with pillow case (twice! The first time replaced with a K-Mart version; the second one near the end); plus, my two favorite sun hats. A few more things lost too, which I no longer remember . . . Not bad, considering that I didn't lose my keys or wallet!

In 66 days I drove 8915.4 miles (averaged out to 50.2 mpg), slept in 33 beds, held 28 book events to start a deeper conversation around death, loss, grief, and their gifts, and sold (and usually signed) about 200 of my own books, one at a time.

Mostly stayed with friends, and loved it. I am still surprised that I loved this aspect of the trip, because of my perennial hunger for solitude. But after this odyssey, I realize that some of my habitual need for aloneness is an attempt to stay in my mind (and refuse all distractions that would drive my already too-busy mind into chaos)! In other words, some of my need for aloneness is fueled by Fear, not Love, and I now gladly let it go.

Indeed, I'd say I DID succeed in mostly staying present, surrendering to the flow of experience rather than attempting to control it. As a result, my mind felt much less busy than usual. This state of grace was in great contrast to last night, my first at home in my own bed, when I woke up at midnight and kvetched for three hours. It felt as if the great corpus of my various (self-created) "duties" that I had largely set aside while on the road landed on me with a great thud, and of course, started my mind racing, racing, racing.

What better moment than NOW to set my intention to stay in the flow of experience no matter what? I hereby vow to gain control of my mind so that I can direct where it goes, what it thinks about, how it thinks about it, and when. In this way the mind, rather than dominating my life, will function as a welcome servant, when called upon, within the larger awareness.

Meanwhile, to catch up: of the last several book events, one was somewhat upsetting, as my skills as a facilitator were no match for an active, extraverted alcoholic who thinks of herself as an entertainer and whose eyes betrayed a jittery terror of her own woundedness. Looking back on that event now, I see this woman as the person I would have become, had I not finally taken hold and begun to work with my own "abandoned child." So scary, to be in her shoes. And so amazing, how one person in long-held denied pain can hijack an event meant to be a group experience.

Of the final book events, the one I remember best was in Silver City, New Mexico, with a group of about a dozen Sufis who know each other well and are unusually open to exploring the wide range and complexity of inner feeling and experience that grief presents and can transform. Our two hours together after a great potluck in the Zikr Hall felt vibrantly alive.

After that event my dear friend Darvesha and I caravanned 13 miles (and 40 minutes) up a dirt road to the newly constructed straw bale, off the grid home that she shares with her husband Ishan in the Gila National Forest. During our wonderful 36 hours together, Darvesha and I bushwhacked back to the source of the spring that feeds the small creek that runs past their home, and invited two Sufi women for a leisurely lunch on the patio

Ishan had terraced in the shade near the creek. Indeed, my entire time in or near Silver City felt so exhilarating that during my drive between there and Albuquerque, over a seemingly endless winding, narrow pass to I-25, I was surprised my car didn't just take off and fly!

Once in Albuquerque, I walked along a strand of the Rio Grande, within a stone's throw of the lovely little casita in which I stayed while at the home of crone friend Amelia. That evening, after another potluck, we circled up for the final book event of the tour. This one happened to be the first to include a young person in very active grieving process over the recent death of her father, a situation, of course, which tended to direct both the course and the tone of the discussion. Our empathy for and nurturance of her replaced what might have been a deeper, wider reach of perspective that I have grown to expect from these events.

But then, the point is, to let go of expectation. Let go of attachment. Let go. As I said over and over again during this tour, what we grieve is the "loss of form" — not only of our bodies and the bodies of our beloveds, but the loss of any particular way of organizing experience. As I let go of that, as I immerse myself in What Is, over and over again remembering to wake up to the present moment, I and we DO begin to enter the awareness that knows no bounds and drops us into Mystery.

I do think something has been initiated with this epic journey; it certainly started something moving in me, and may have reached further. Each event, held in a circle with somewhere between 7 and 25 people, but mostly around a dozen, and mostly women, seemed like a seed that dug itself into the ground of our cultural space and set in motion an invisible spiraling of energy out into many dimensions, most of them both palpable and invisible.

One more story here before closing this final chapter in my trip blog.

On the day when I experienced the rogue wave, at Goat Beach, August 29, I also experienced another unusual situation, very different in kind. I'm surprised that I didn't write about it then. Perhaps because it felt so intimate, so private; perhaps because it felt

so subtle that for the moment I almost forgot about it, especially compared to the rogue wave!

In any case, here is that story: as I was walking on that beach, after the exciting Edge experience on the bluff overlooking seals, pelicans and seagulls intermingling at the confluence of the Russian River with the sea, I had finally stilled my mind enough so that all that was happening inside was the tidal ocean whooshing in and out. Then, suddenly, and very very soft and subtle, a kind caring female voice seemed to enter in my right ear, on the ocean side. And this is what she said, almost in a whisper, just this: *"I am with you always."*

I am with you always! Just like that. No explanation, no before or after, just those words, infinitely comforting.

Had any thoughts been crowding my brain then, I would not have heard the voice.

Twenty minutes later, the rogue wave.

Always, she is with me always. She is with me in all ways. Through nearly 9000 miles and many many experiences, some of them dangerous and raw, some beautiful and overwhelmingly loving, she is always with us. I feel so blessed I could cry.