



# ON MOTHERING

## Meditations

1987-2008

© Ann Kreilkamp



## About the Cover

At the age of 46, after a checkered — indeed troubled — relationship history with both my own mother and my own mothering, in July 1989 I launched *Crone Chronicles: A Journal of Conscious Aging*, to activate the archetype of the Crone in our contemporary world where most women are determined to remain forever young.

I mothered this tiny, potent publication for 12 years as it grew in both volume and depth to homeopathically ignite a small, dedicated national audience.

I see Crone as the third archetypal stage of womanhood: Maiden, Mother, Crone. The photo on the cover of this ebook was taken from the Winter 1994 issue, *Mothers & Mentors: THE TARNISHED ARCHETYPE*.

# Introduction

“We are a generation that broke the mold, a mold which had been set for centuries, though cracks in it had been showing up for some time. Via the early suffragettes, for example. And even via my own grandmother, your mother, Johanna Rosenberger, now dead, who was rumored (you won’t speak of it) to have been committed, more than once, to an insane asylum. What I remember about Nana is her deep, guttural, juicy, *witchy* laugh. She too, may have been caught in traditional roles, but her laugh rattled convention.”

....

“You *came alive* that day, echoing your famous remark, 20 years ago. In your continuing willingness to jump into new experiences, you bely both your age and your generation. And as your mother’s laugh broke the spell of her own sad life, so she gifted the vitality which lurked underneath that laugh to her daughter, and you, in turn, gift that same vitality to me. Though I still cannot see you for who you are, down inside yourself — or perhaps you don’t know who you are except in relationship with us and furthermore you don’t care, it doesn’t matter to you as it matters to me — despite all this, I now claim the continuity in the female line that I crave. I am honored to be your daughter, Johanna’s granddaughter, of the motherclan Rosenberger, to have that huge life running through me, full on, full throttle ahead.”

— both from *Dear Mom*, 1997

I launched Crone Chronicles in 1989, spurred on by a Big Dream, of a giant Raven, sitting on my shoulders, cawing “WAKE UP! IT’S TIME!”

By the time 1997 rolled around, I was deeply into *re-membering* myself, putting myself back together again, as a female of the human species. This was not easy for me. I had “identified” (as wokesters would say now) much more with men than women, and so, coming to terms with my own biology had been a long, troubled process, indeed seven years of my own life dedicated to healing “Orphan Annie” via dreams, journaling, and co-counseling with treasured female friends.

“I am so scared. The saliva in my mouth tastes metallic. I am so scared to drop into my own heartbeat, for I know that it will take me back. That I will fall into the bottomless depths of my own mother’s heartbeat, and her mother’s, and hers before that. I am so scared. My eyes flutter, glitter in panic. For I can feel that

beat starting to drive me down, that rhythm of the universe, that intimate union, and know that I am lost. There is no breaking free, there is only breaking through, to that vast ocean of awareness washing eonic shores.

“Below the shouts of identity lies Love’s whisper. When she calls, we can only respond. We are as infants, helpless, pulling milk from our Mother’s soft, rounded breast.”

— from *Breaking Free*, 1999

The end of that period of re-membling ignited the Big Dream, and I found myself ready, willing, and able, to “WAKE UP!”

Of particular note is the fact that I also began the magazine only weeks after my own female mentor, my “spiritual grandmother,” as I call her, Kathryn, died. Though I didn’t recognize it at the time, Crone Chronicles became my way of honoring her legacy.

# Contents

Mothers & Mentors: The Tormented Archetype

In the Womb Tomb

Dear Mom

One Mother's Story

A Meditation on My Mother

A Meditation on My Husband's Mother

DEMENTIA, or: Getting Lost with Mom

Kathryn

The Grandmother's Dance

BREAKING FREE: An Illusion

PHOTOS

Essay

## THE TARNISHED ARCHETYPE

Introduction: MOTHERS & MENTORS

*Crone Chronicles #21, Autumn Equinox 1994*

© Ann Kreilkamp

The cover for this issue shows an idealized archetypal image of mother and child at the breast. The subject of the photo, taken in a cemetery in Venice, feels archetypal, timeless. Yet the marble, in places, is cracked. Like the skulls and bones lying below ground, everything in a cemetery eventually decomposes.

In looking at this photo, I especially appreciate the irony of what might be called a “tarnished archetype.” For although birthing and rearing children is a universal and timeless reality, each generation providing and ensuring the survival of the next, we are all well aware of how, in these dark times, our children are most at risk, suffering from generations upon generations of misplaced values.

This photograph seemed particularly appropriate when I recalled my original concern that the theme of “mothers” might lend itself to sentimental and/or cliché-ridden treatment. I should have known better. There is not an ounce of sentimentality in these pages. Rather, they are filled with very real, often anguished, yet at times, transfiguring passages facing up to our own mothering, the ways we were

mothered — and deeper, receding into history. I am struck by our collective attempt to reach back, to re-member, both the bad times and the good. As if, somehow, in remembering all of it, we can wake up to all of it, we can truly feel the love we know is there, underneath all the hatred and numbness and violence of our severed society.

When I allow all the voices on these pages to sink into me, it feels as if this rich and heartfelt humus of human experience cries out the long labor prefiguring the birth of a transformed humanity, one which remembers its origins in Mother Earth's womb, and which honors in each and every woman the image of that wild and ceaseless fecundity.

Editorial

## IN THE WOMBTOMB

*Crone Chronicles*, #3, January 1990

© Ann Kreilkamp

I set the deadlines for this third issue of *Crone Chronicles* for mid-November, thinking to get the issue out before Thanksgiving. There were problems. Not enough money. Not enough submissions. No obvious time slot on the computer . . . For the first time in my life, during the inception stage of this kind of a project, rather than forcing the issue, I backed off. Okay. Maybe it isn't time. Maybe I need to allow this thing to sit awhile longer. Either it will gather energy or it won't. Wait and see.

Sounds good. Sounds balanced. Rational. That was in the daytime.

At night, lying in bed tensed, pissed. Shit! It isn't coming out when I said it would! Guilty. Why start something if you don't plan on staying with it! How many times in your life have you done this — with other utopian projects, with men, with your own children . . . But wait a minute. Other publications you have founded lasted for years . . . and your children are now returned to you. The men? Well, each of these relationships hides a labyrinth of meaning . . . you are spending your lifetime discerning . . . So what! You said you would do this, now do it! Now! On time!

Tossing and turning as the wind outside howls my liver to a feverish pitch. Judging. Hating. Splitting. Finally dropping off to exhausted sleep.

Thanksgiving came and went. I spent it in the hills, the wind coursing through me, opening every vein and neuron, cleaning out those old familiar pissy feelings, reminding me so much of my father when I was young. The barely concealed rage. The terrible perfectionism . . . droppign down into the abyss; the annual Winter Solstice soul search.

Woke up one morning feeling my mother's face pressed to mine. Feeling her warm breath tickling the tiny hairs on my upper lip. Face melts into hers, skin dissolving, swimming . . . aimless disoriented . . . confused. Anxious. Acutely anxious. Drained of all energy. Gasping for breath. Suffocated. Crushed by the weight of the world. Trying to lift it up, lift it off me. Remember her telling me how she cried the whole time I was small, when Dad was gone to World War II. How I used to entertain her, try to make her smile and laugh. So she would pay attention to me. So she would take care of me. Take this burden from me. Let me be the child.

Woke up a few days later feeling her body all around me, feeling myself inside her, enwombed. Fragile fetal being poisoned by the fluids of her loss, her confusion, her anxiety, that deep deep desolation . . .

Then, this dream: of carrying my mother's dead body. Her small dessicated body lies across my outstretched arms. She looks very old, and very young.

And another dream of being chased by an old old woman who is pushing a grocery cart. She catches up with me, her face pressed to mine. She is the bag lady I once met sitting majestically near Port Authority in New York City, cart laden with her things. In my dream she is jabbering, a crazy old lady. An empty water glass stands balanced on her head. I am disgusted. How ridiculous it looks! I knock the glass off. Suddenly, a sob bursts out from within me. "Pani! Pani!" I cry. (In the book I was reading before sleep that night, the word "pani" meant "mother.") I continue subbing, and embrace her to my heart.

I am sobbing still as I awaken. The next morning, as I write this dream in my journal, I see, I feel her glass, her cup, is empty, is not overflowing. And I transpose the letters of pani into pain. Pain. Mother pain.

In reality, in my real life, the mother pain is in me; it is in my own mother. It has always been there. I have just begun to tap into her depths. Perhaps these *Crone Chronicles* are no utopian project; perhaps they are my story, our story, our pain.

Column

DEAR MOM,

*Sagewoman*, #37, Spring, 1997

© Ann Kreilkamp 1997

Dear Mom,

I am writing to you from within my own world, hoping to reach you in yours. I want to meet with you, Mom, *really* meet with you. Not just pretend to meet, or meet with our personalities alone — I always feel troubled by this. I can see you in my mind's eye as you start to read this . . . No, actually, I *can't* see you, you have always been a mystery to me. It seems that, when it comes to you, my own mother, I can sense who you are only by watching your interactions with others. Where you should be, in the center of your own world, I see only a hole, a blank spot, and I am left gasping for breath, dizzy with recognition that truly I do not see you, that I never have.

As a child, I experienced you solely as a function in the household, necessary for our well being, taken for granted. Later, when I left home, I wanted to forget you, your life, how you were buried under the burden of all those children. You can

imagine my despair when at 20 I found myself pregnant. I *knew* what I was getting into, and assumed that it would destroy me; but as a good Catholic girl, I would not have an abortion, and married the father.

During my 40s, when I was working through old emotional issues with my father, I saw you as dominated by him, a mere cipher, part of his reality. I wanted to get you away from him. I fantasized about spending time with you alone, without him, and even invited you, on several occasions, to take a trip with me. But you always refused. You and Dad “had other plans.”

And now, every year when I attend Crones Counsel (this year it was in Boise, Idaho, in late October; next October it will be in San Diego), I long to have you with me there, by my side. How wondrous it would be to experience this three-day celebration of the gifts of our aging together! How I long to be able to introduce you to the other women, to say with joy, “This is my mother, Renee!”

But for you the word “Crone” is something you don’t even want to pronounce, much less talk about. So, instead, I sit there at Crones Counsel, in the big meeting room with hundreds of other women who do claim the title Crone, listening to their heartstopping stories. My eyes seek out the mother/daughter pairs who are there together, and envy their courageous open display of love for one another.

Every year I think, next year? By next October will you come with me? Will I even dare to ask you? To risk rejection once again? And then I remember why you don’t come. Why my fantasies are fruitless: my father views *Crone Chronicles* with distrust. He doesn’t understand it. He doesn’t know why I publish it. He is afraid of me, his “radical” daughter. So for you, his wife, to go to Crones Counsel would be a slap in his face. You would not do that. You cannot do that and remain in the role you stepped into as a young woman.

Once again, I have to give in, bow to our tragic, lifelong separation.

As a child, I was the oldest of eight, mother's little helper. Every day I would come right home from school to help you — not because you asked me to, but because I knew that underneath your extraordinary management of that efficiently humming household, you were at times overwhelmed. Like those many days when Dad did *not* arrive home at 6:00 PM for dinner. We would all sit around the huge oval maple table in the family room, tense, waiting to eat, waiting for the sound of his car in the garage. Would he show up? Sometimes he was merely late, held up by his patients. Sometimes he would call to say that he would not be home for dinner, that he had an emergency, or had to go back out to the hospital. Sometimes, when that happened, though it was very rare, you would collapse, just completely collapse. Begin to sob uncontrollably. On those occasions, we would all pick up our forks, quickly gulp our food, and scatter, to our homework, to our phone calls with friends, to our rooms.

The other dangerous period was summertime, when we were all home from school, squabbling, jostling, slamming doors, stepping on each others' toys . . . If you collapsed into sobs then, we all knew you wanted us out of the house until dinner.

Those were the only times that we really noticed you as a person in your own right — when we were afraid our world would explode if you deserted us. On those two types of occasions we *did* leave you alone. Hoping you would get better, that it would be okay. It was terrifying to witness this unthinkable breakdown in the daily routine of our otherwise total physical security.

Sometimes, during those rare breakdowns, Dad would suddenly and unexpectedly appear, and the two of you would disappear into your bedroom (the

only one with a lock on it) and not come out for hours. Life would somehow go on as usual, with me as substitute mother — diapering, getting snacks, wiping grubby little hands, comforting the one who was crying, stopping fights . . .

How did you do it? I would have gone crazy early on as a young mother of four, then five, then six, then seven, then *eight children* — and stayed there. Had it been I who stole silently out to sit on the porch, smoking your one cigarette of the day during those long languid summer evenings, I would have insisted on solitude. But you did not do that. I don't ever remember you refusing my company.

And yet about you there was a perpetual air of distraction. As if your body were there, but not your spirit. That must have been the way you coped, by numbing yourself to our continuous chaotic intensity.

Given what it must have been like for you, the two moments which do stand out for me, moments when your reality, your authentic inner being suddenly appeared, feel like miracles.

The first came when I was in high school. One evening I had followed you out onto the porch. I must have been complaining, as usual, about my sister Marnie, sixteen months younger, with whom I shared a room. I hated her. I had always hated her, and now she was becoming beautiful, growing breasts, and popular. I, the eldest, was still flat chested. I was making my usual mean remarks about Marnie when suddenly you turned to me, and, looking directly into my eyes, slowly said, “Ann, you're *jealous*.”

Instantly, the quality of the moment changed. This remark, so unexpected, burned my ears, made my face flame. (Luckily it was dark now, you couldn't see me.) My mother had spoken Truth, and I knew it. And I knew that this remark,

because it stung, was something I needed to hear. You held up a mirror to me, and, despite the hurt, I was grateful. Our relationship was, for that one striking moment, real.

The other moment occurred during my rebellious 30s. I had come home for a visit, and one of my younger brothers and I had convinced you to take a couple of puffs on a marijuana cigarette. All three of us got stoned, and began to talk in an animated, intimate, honest way. Suddenly we heard the garage door slam. Dad was home. He walked into the living room, saw us all sitting there. He must have picked up on the altered atmosphere, because he said, in a puzzled voice, “What’s going on?” You turned to him, slapped your hand on the arm of your rocking chair, and exclaimed, in a loud and vibrant and authoritative voice, “We’ve *come alive*.”

*Of course*, you don’t remember ever saying that. Both John and I have reminded you of it now and again, laughing, and you laugh and say it never happened. The fact that it did happen is lodged in my memory, and serves as a connecting link whenever I am grieving over the chasm I sense between us.

I grieve for myself and my own sense of abandonment, and I grieve for you, the painful puzzle that I have become. Like many of my female peers, born during the early 1940s, as an adult I ride the curl of a breaking wave that throws me out ahead of the collective reality, crashes down upon you (and *your* peers), and makes you worry how you went wrong. Or, as you have said, several times, “How did I *spawn* you?”

We are a generation that broke the mold, a mold which had been set for centuries, though cracks in it had been showing up for some time. Via the early suffragettes, for example. And even via my own grandmother, your mother, Johanna Rosenberger, now dead, who was rumored (you won’t speak of it) to have

been committed, more than once, to an insane asylum. What I remember about Nana is her deep, guttural, juicy, *witchy* laugh. She too, may have been caught in traditional roles, but her laugh rattled convention.

I spent much of my adult life hating my father, both for the way he suppressed my energy, and for, I assumed, the way he suppressed yours. You were there for him, primarily; the children were secondary. You were and are a Hera figure, and he was a Zeus whose mistress was his work as a doctor. Six of your children were girls, and you, a beautiful woman yourself, wanted that for us, and loved to shop for clothes that would show us off. I was the only one who rebelled against this as a child, even then wanting to see through the appearances. Now that I am in my 50s, I am looking at you in a new way, admiring what others admire in you — your childlike enthusiasm and energy, your light and welcoming touch with others, your ease and natural grace.

Last summer, at a family reunion, we convinced you to go with us (four or five brothers and sisters, their spouses, and seven or eight grandchildren) to a huge water slide park nearby. At first you were going to stay home with Dad and rest, but then you decided to come and “just sit and watch.” Well, within half an hour of arrival, our 78-year-old mother was careening down the huge, vertiginous slides, feet first, your soaked street clothes flapping in the wind.

You *came alive* that day, echoing your famous remark, 20 years ago. In your continuing willingness to jump into new experiences, you bely both your age and your generation. And as your mother’s laugh broke the spell of her own sad life, so she gifted the vitality which lurked underneath that laugh to her daughter, and you, in turn, gift that same vitality to me. Though I still cannot see you for who you are, down inside yourself — or perhaps you don’t know who you are except in

relationship with us and furthermore you don't care, it doesn't matter to you as it matters to me — despite all this, I now claim the continuity in the female line that I crave. I am honored to be your daughter, Johanna's granddaughter, of the motherclan Rosenberger, to have that huge life running through me, full on, full throttle ahead.

Column

## ONE MOTHER'S STORY

*SageWoman #36, Theme: Our Children, Winter 1996*

© Ann Kreilkamp 1996

I “abandoned” my children to their father’s custody when they were five and seven years old. That was 24 years ago. How could that have happened? Why was I unable to mother my own children? And, perhaps more important, what has happened since? Has there been a healing?

In order to address these questions, I offer a series of vignettes that will, I hope, introduce you to the actual living process of one mother’s life.

**May, 1964.** The birth of my first child, Sean, is “natural:” Conscious breathing, no medication, my feet in stirrups, enveloped in chrome, steel, and artificial light. Underneath the hi-tech veneer I surrender to ancient bodily rhythms and, as his head crowns, plummet into the blinding glory of continuous creation, *goddess consciousness* — though I do not know it. All I know is I have opened to eternity, to mystery. That I will never be the same again.

I do not mention this to anyone.

Several days later, I am nursing my baby in a rocking chair. I know Sean. I have known this soul forever. As he was handed to me, I knew his features, his body, his

being. But something is wrong. Nursing my new-born child is supposed to be the most beautiful experience of my life, and I don't feel it. I don't feel anything. I am numb, in shock.

**June, 1964.** I read a just-published book by a woman named Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. I want to shout aloud! Friedan, by identifying and elucidating “the problem that has no name,” describes my world, exactly. I am *not* alone. But there is no one here to talk to.

**June, 1965.** I have just gone on the pill, when my husband comes home from a week in the National Guard and, despite my insistence that we refrain from sex until the pill protects me, he forced me. He *raped* me. I don't tell anyone. Inside, a slow, furious burning. First Sean, conceived in shame and guilt when I was 19, and now a second child, conceived in rage. I cannot express this rage. I push it down — into depression. *Two* children? Now I will never be free. Just like my mother, with her eight children, and me, the oldest, “Mother's Little Helper,” I will be trapped by children forever.

**February, 1966.** Sean is only 20 months old and now there is newborn Colin, nervous, colicky, projectile vomiting. We take to the streets of Cambridge every day. I push the buggy; Colin lies swaddled, screaming; Sean sits on a seat on top, cheeks rosy, thumb raw from sucking. I *must* walk miles every day, no matter what the weather. Otherwise I will batter my children. I know this, know that the cat that I punish for no reason, that I throw against the wall, is being sacrificed for them. Thank God my husband is gone all day. So he won't see what I do to the cat. So I won't wish *him* dead.

**June, 1966.** Nancy and I begin to talk. About our husbands. About our roles as “wives.” I am afraid of what we will discover. I cannot stop talking.

**September, 1966.** I enter graduate school, part time, using neighborhood children for babysitters after school, riding my bike to Boston University. My husband is proud of me; now he can say his wife is “a doctoral student in philosophy.” Raises his status in this college town. Makes *him* look good. I know only that I am desperate — for meaning in my life, for real life beyond this domestic prison.

**March, 1967.** My mother-in-law comes to care for the children for a month while I study for my written comprehensive exams. I spend all day at a desk squeezed into our bedroom, while my husband has his own room as a study and is rarely there.

**March, 1968.** My children hang on me. Whenever I want to study, they force their little faces between me and the book. I resign myself to studying only during nap time and in the evenings. I resent them. I love them. I feel for them. I wish they didn't whine so much. I love them. I wish I could fly.

**May, 1968.** Washing the dishes at the kitchen sink. Suddenly there is a whooshing noise inside my brain. The universe opens. Infinite. Unknowable. I shudder, contract, close it down.

Nancy and I continue talking. Nearly every morning now, she arrives for coffee and cigarettes. Children underfoot at the kitchen table, we analyze our lives.

**June, 1969.** I tell my husband that I am leaving with the children to spend the summer in a commune on the beach south of Boston. He forbids me to go. I go anyway. My first act of outright defiance. Colin, my spirited little Aquarian, thrives in the freedom of a tribe of children. Sean, my shy, sensitive Taurus, sucks his thumb harder, freezes into terror, goes numb. His eyes are glazed over. I notice this. I cannot afford to notice this. He reminds me of myself. I spend most of the summer in my room reading, or lying on the beach, listening to others' conversations, wondering why I must first compose any sentence I wish to speak.

**September, 1969.** I am in the hospital, feverish, hooked up to antibiotic IVs and Demerol, my stomach swollen from general abdominal peritonitis, brought on when I took mescaline for the first time and twirled like a dervish from dusk to dawn alone. I told my husband to take the children to Maine, as planned. This is *my* time. Seven days have passed. The doctor comes in, says he doesn't know what more to do, that he is running out of antibiotics.

Abruptly, this question: "Am I going to die?"

He is shocked, defensive: "I don't know." Embarrassed, shrugging his shoulders, he backs out of the room.

A voice within thunders through the fever: *Live or die. It's your choice. You must choose. Now.* Suddenly I know: there is no big daddy god in the sky. Nobody "up there" to judge me.

Therefore, I am *free*.

Therefore, I am *responsible*.

For nine months I process internally the implications of my soul's newly emerged presence, its challenge, my decision to live.

**April, 1970.** I ask my husband to leave the apartment. For the next two years my children and I shuttle from one difficult living situation to another, on graduate student fellowships. Sean's eyes are still glazed. He sits in a chair and does nothing. Colin runs around, manic, destructive. I am free of my husband, my depression lifted, my fury rampant. Underneath, I love my children, and feel their desperation, mirroring my own. On the surface, I can only barely tolerate their huge neediness.

**November, 1970.** The boys drag me in to watch a program on TV, saying I will like it. They sit me on the couch between them. I stare at the tube. Suddenly, Sean, now six, turns to me and says, in a low voice not his own: *The man in you hates the mommy.*

**January, 1971.** Now there are four of us. Linda, Karen, Nancy and I at each others' kitchen tables several times a week to dissect men, hate men. Secretly, we long for Prince Charming and take turns breaking up our children's fights.

**June, 1971.** Summer at my parents' cabin in the mountains of Idaho, to write my dissertation. The children are in Cambridge with their father. I am ashamed to discover that I do not miss my children. My dissertation writes itself.

**April, 1972.** I have been accepted as a full-time teacher at New College of California, near San Francisco. Their dad refuses to let the boys go. Says he will take me

to court, put *them* through whatever it would take to make me look bad to the judge. I hate him. I must take them with me. He cannot have them. Inside, I wish I could be free. No, that's not true! It can't be!

**June, 1972.** Linda says to me, in a moment of excruciating clarity: "Taking your kids to California just because you don't want him to have them is not a good reason to take them to California."

**November, 1972.** The weekly phone call from California. Awful. Stilted. Hearing their wan little voices from so far away, "Hi Mommy . . ." It breaks my heart. I must not cry. Be strong! I long to comfort them, hold them . . . I cannot afford to feel this longing. I shut down, go numb.

I am the first woman I have ever known who has left her children. I *abandoned* my children. I committed an immoral, unnatural act. My family is horrified, my culture calls me crazy. I am *not* crazy. I *must be* crazy. I cannot go back.

**October, 1974.** I have just moved to my old Idaho hometown to marry my high-school boy friend. He has two children, one his own, one not. Their mother deserted them. Now I am a stepmother to two children while separated from my own! I *must* have my own children back. I cannot mother these children unless I have my own back, too. Their father refuses, adamant.

**April, 1975.** The girl hates me. Thinks her real mother — who makes constant promises to see her and seldom does — is perfect. I try to love her, but I cannot. My unfinished business with my own children is too present. It begins to be painful. This marriage melts walls, opening me to both pain and joy.

**June, 1975.** The girl moves, to live with her real father. I am relieved. I feel guilty.

**July, 1975.** On the road to meet my children at the airport. How will we greet each other? Will I feel stilted? Will they? What do they look like now? How long will it take us this time to feel comfortable?

Always, during these summer visits, a frustrated feeling: being frozen. Frozen out of their lives. Frozen inside.

**January, 1976.** I have moved out of my beloved second husband's home into my own apartment. My soul is calling again, and I must follow. I cannot do my work and remain married to him. What is my work? I have no idea.

**August, 1980.** I tell the boys, now 16 and 14, that they can remain with me for the school year if they wish. That it is time for them to make their own choices. *That I will love them no matter what they decide.* Their father threatens to "send in the U.S. Marshal" if they remain with me. They return to Massachusetts. He calls me to say that he "will make sure that they never want to see you again."

**October, 1980.** Another awful phone call. Worse now. Horrific, suffocating tension. I get off the phone and resolve not to contact my sons again until they are adults. This much tension between adults is too painful for children to bear.

The joy and the pain which I was beginning to be able to feel close down again. Desolate.

**December, 1984.** The abyss, so long denied, has closed over me. I am in hell. All I can do is feel it. I read Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child* and begin to descend into my own buried pain. The children I could not mother were preceded by the unmothered child, myself. I name this inner child, "Orphan Annie," and begin to claim her, honor her, rock her in my arms. The rage against my seemingly cold unfeeling father now extends to my mother, who, as a war widow during World War II, was depressed, numb, frozen, unable to be there for me, her first-born child.

**November, 1987.** I return to Massachusetts, to face my children's father, and through that reunion, to gain access to my children. My own mother accompanies me. After four hours, during which he rants, berating me as evil, awful, horrible, a *mother who abandoned her own children*, his venom is at last spent. As I sat there during his recital, I saw the inner child within him, the abandoned little boy who, when he was five, saw his father die and his mother go to work. When I left him and our little boys, that

old horror was catalyzed, and his hatred of me since then has been one long scream to his own parents, “No! Don’t go!”

It has now been over nine years since my reunion with my children, who, I am happy to say, are loving and wonderful young men. Their long-term girlfriends have become my unexpected allies in our continuing process of healing. These young women honor the path I forged for them. They help my sons understand who their mother is, and they tell them how lucky they are to have a mother like me.

---

Update 2010: Son Colin moved to Bloomington to live next door to me in 2009.

Update December 31, 2023: On August 16, 2023, Colin suffered a dissected aorta, both ascending and descending branches, which left him paralyzed, from the waist down and with horrific nerve pain. My mothering, in earnest, began then. (I post daily updates on [caringbridge.org/visit/ColinCudmorehealing](https://caringbridge.org/visit/ColinCudmorehealing).)

Column

## A MEDITATION ON MY MOTHER

*Sagewoman*, 2007

© Ann Kreilkamp

I've heard it said that a woman doesn't come into her own until her mother dies. If so, then I am still unconsciously tied to a mother who, nearing 90, is very much alive. Or is she? How alive is my own mother?

All my adult life I have contemplated this question. How much of her authentic self has actually been allowed to express? Who is she, really, underneath?

In asking these questions, I touch with anguish the part of myself that felt strangely detached from my own small children, and know that this sad reality reflects a primal wound in my relationship with my mother.

When I try to feel my way back into myself as a young mother, I encounter a sense of panic and entrapment. Mind reels, heart contracts; I feel confused, disoriented, numb. . . . Though I *knew* I loved my children, I couldn't uncover that fierce, tender bond that I also *knew* was natural. My mind cut off access to my feelings.

I encounter a similar confusion when I attempt to dive into the murky depths of my early relationship with my mother. What went on back then? All I have is “the facts.” That my Dad left for the war when I was nine months old and returned when I was two years and nine months. That I was so energetic I would bang my head against the wall of my crib and scoot across the room. That she was so depressed while he was gone that her mother would bring dinner to her daughter’s apartment every day, just to make sure she ate. That I would dance and sing for her, trying to make her happy.

In public, or even inside the family, she appears as an enigma, even more so now that she has lost most of her energy and cannot mask the mystery of her interior with bright patter and incessant activity. I am not alone in this assessment. As a former sister-in-law (now dead of breast cancer) whispered to me at one of our family reunions: “When I walk up to your mother, the closer I get the more her face disappears. She is not there.”

On the surface, until she entered the ranks of the very old, my mother’s energy seemed cheerful and lighthearted. A Libran who shied away from conflict, she expertly smoothed over tense social situations that her husband stirred up with his sincere but heavy-footed, all-or-nothing, right-or-wrong attitude towards life — and especially his own children. For me, his equally righteous first-born, he was by far the dominant parent. In comparison to him, her reality felt diaphanous, barely there. “A cipher,” I used to call her, dismissively.

My mother birthed and reared eight children, yet I see her as a Hera figure, paired with Zeus, their children spewing from her almost incidentally. My doctor father had the height and bearing of a king, and she, a beautiful woman trained as a nurse, played queen. They still sit in these roles, though shadows of their former selves; and despite their advanced age, we remain their minions, sensitively attuned to their moods, what would make them happy, or at least not too upset. I was the only one who gave them real, long-term trouble, a standoff that polarized the family (me against just about everybody) for 30 years, and prompted my mother to ask, with real wonderment: “How did I spawn you?”

I find it interesting that in discussion with several of my sisters, their unanimous perception of our mother differs considerably from mine. They speak of her “cruelty” towards them, something that I didn’t recognize even when they started talking about it.

But then there came an occasion, only two years ago, when I finally — at 62 years of age!—grokked their point of view. Mom and I were visiting my sister Marnie. They were discussing how much they love their Kaelin leisure suits, and how when Marnie is through with one of them, she gives it to either Mom or one of her sisters (most wear about the same size). Suddenly Mom blurted out, “Do you have one for Ann?” And of course Marnie, always a generous soul, did. She brought out a lime green Kaelin outfit (not a color I wear), and Mom urged me to try it on, then and there.

Moving slowly, as if drugged, I undressed in front of them and put on the suit for their inspection. Mom then pronounced, triumphant: “There. *Now* she looks nice.” And in the very next second Marnie commented, “Cruel, cruel,” in a soft, sing-song voice. Marnie’s accurate assessment of what had just taken place woke me from my trance. I suddenly realized the sting in my mother’s remark, and how it had instantly seeped into my bones and left me exhausted, confused and demoralized. Such a gift, to be given the opportunity to be made consciously aware of a lifelong dynamic between our mother and her girl children. Thank you, Marnie!

But the surprise was not over. Later, in the car on the way back to her home, Mom apologized for her remark. She too had absorbed Marnie’s comment and, struck by its truth, moved to make amends. At 89 years of age, our mother is still growing, able to “call herself on her stuff” and seeks forgiveness.

I told the other sisters about this three-way interchange, assuming it proved that our mother didn’t mean to be cruel. They still didn’t agree with me! I seem to be the only one who sees Mom’s cruelty as unconscious.

I like to think that they are in denial, that my “superior” psychological understanding of the layers of the psyche helps me to see how unconscious forces prompt us to say things we don’t mean, or that we wouldn’t say were we more aware. On the other hand, one could argue that the very fact that she blurts these things out shows who she really is, the real person behind the face that yes, does seem to disappear the closer you come. And that may be how my sisters understand these remarks that undercut their sense of self-worth. Whatever is the truth about Mother’s level of awareness and her intentions, I imagine all six sisters do unconsciously suffer from the inner condition of feeling demoralized, exhausted and confused by her subtle and not so subtle zingers. Yet I may be the only one who didn’t recognize this aspect of her, and whose wound was covered by a thick scar of numbness.

So my mother is a light-hearted, high-spirited Libran who cleaves to her man and soothes social scenes; and, my mother is both “not there” and cruel? I do find it hard to grasp the fullness of her complex nature. And yet, somehow it feels important that I do — not in small part because I can see myself in her, her contradictions as my own. And now, as I come into cronehood and have apparently let go of my formerly desperate and addictive need to “cleave to a man,” unsettling aspects of my own character shift into high relief.

I was determined not to be cruel to my children, so when my frustration at being hemmed in by little ones exploded I would throw our kitten against the wall. I refused to let anybody in, so kept up a bright patter to smooth the social surface.

My mother was (and is) no cipher. I assumed I was like my father and, hating him, unconsciously modeled my persona on hers — at least the part that interfaced with the world. (My inner life does remind me of his, both of us perpetual students of life’s larger mysteries.)

After dinner, she’d sometimes sit out on the front stoop in the summer twilight, and smoke her one cigarette of the day. I look back now and realize that she probably needed to snatch a few minutes alone. But I’d find her there, and sit down next to her. She never complained.

I'd talk and she'd mostly listen. But on one evening that is seared in memory she said something very uncharacteristic and in so doing gave me a great gift. I had, as usual, been complaining bitterly about pretty, popular Marnie, the second oldest and my despised roommate. Mom must have felt fed up, for suddenly, out of the blue, she turned to me as she squashed out her cigarette and said, in a firm but nonjudgmental voice, "Ann, you're jealous."

Mom loved to "do errands," and she loved to shop. She'd leave several older children to look after the little ones and take us, one at a time, downtown to "The Paris," a department store, searching for sales. As soon as we walked in there I'd freeze up, get a headache. I didn't know what would "look good" on me, and I didn't like to stand in front of a mirror for all to see. Finally she gave up, brought clothes home for me to try on.

I did like to accompany her on errands, if I could wait for her alone in the car. She'd get to socialize with shopkeepers; I'd get to sit and watch people walk by, trying to sense their inner lives by the way their bodies moved, the look in their eyes.

I am needing to contemplate the nature of my mother and my relationship to her now, in May 2007 when transit Neptune has locked on to 22° Aquarius, square (90° away from, in tension with) my natal 23° Taurus Moon. Moon is the vulnerable, child self; More than any other Moon, "exalted" Moon in Taurus craves physical and emotional security — and I didn't get it from my mother, due to her fearful distraction during World War II when her husband was overseas and might not make it home alive.

This week Neptune slows to an apparent stop on May 24, and turns to go retrograde. Like a vice that grips stronger and stronger until it finally lets go, the stationary periods of planets dramatically amplify their intensity. Neptune is a powerfully strange outer planet that usually works on us unconsciously through subtle and little- or unnoticed ideals, dreams, visions, and yes — confusion, disorientation, delusion, exhaustion, demoralization.

Neptune's virtues are those of compassion, unconditional love and forgiveness, a spaciousness that includes all, knows no limits and melts the universe into Oneness. Neptune's vices that keep us from realizing the truth of that Love are those of cynicism and addiction — to substances, ideals, patterns, especially — for those born in my generation, between 1942-1957 when Neptune moved through Libra — patterns in one-to-one relationship. Indeed, my generation invented the term “co-dependency” to label our unnatural bending towards the other, so much so that we no longer feel our own essence as separate and unique.

For me, natal Neptune and Midheaven stand in close conjunction with Mom's natal Sun and my sister Marnie's natal Moon, a three-way karmic, co-dependent tie. No wonder I need to recognize and clear this dynamic inside myself. And given the current transit of Neptune in hard aspect to my natal Moon, no wonder I need to clear it now.

I don't remember Mom ever putting her arms around any of us, unless it was to carry the baby in her arms while stirring a pot on the stove, or to let that littlest one sit on her lap for a moment. I can certainly understand her apparent squeamishness. Can you imagine eight children clamoring for a piece of you all day long, and then your husband at night? How did she do it? How did she manage to keep her equanimity? Well, she didn't.

On rare occasions during long hot summers she would suddenly freak out, begin to cry, tell us all to go outside and not come in until dinnertime. We would skedaddle, scared that our mother, whom we wanted to take for granted, was vulnerable. Sometimes, on those days, Dad would break away from the office and hurry home. (I guess she must have called him. Otherwise he'd leave early in the morning, come home for a quick supper at 6:00 p.m., then leave for hospital rounds and house calls until late.) They'd be in the house alone for an hour or so, and if any of us tiptoed inside to use the bathroom, we'd pass by their locked bedroom door and listen for the murmuring.

On those days I'd walk around outside, filled with fearful fantasies. What if they got divorced? What would happen? I'd redouble my vow to help her, come home every day after school to fold four or five loads of laundry and walk the piles on the metal cart down the hallway to the bedrooms.

In my natal chart, Taurus Moon makes only one close aspect, a harmonious sextile (60°) to expansive Jupiter, also "exalted," in Cancer. So you might think that this Moon, and my early childhood, would have been favored by the gods. And it's true, while my father was gone my aunts and grandparents treated me like a princess, their little pet, the center of everyone's (except my mother's) attention.

But then the low blow: my father did come home. And from that moment on my spirit was ruthlessly and regularly crushed — to the point where my essence burrowed underground and I became like I feel my own mother to be, disappeared inside the dynamic she plays out with my Dad.

Like most women her age, my mother appears as a creature of her generation, locked into the role she has followed assiduously since marriage at 24 years old. Last year, on a rare afternoon of just sitting around with Mom and three of my sisters, I asked each in turn, "At this point, how would you assess your life?" One of my sisters said she wanted to be perfect, and was afraid that she wasn't. Another one remarked, without apology, that she "preferred the unexamined life." A third sister also ducked the question. But when my mother's turn came, she said, in a direct, matter-of-fact, and sober manner, "I knew my job and I did it." She has also confessed, now that they have moved to a retirement community and she no longer has to cook, that she "always hated cooking."

Yet such was her determination to do her job well that she presided over an extremely well-run household where meals for ten were served like clockwork and household tasks, geared to the age of each child, posted and rotated on the refrigerator door. She took her turn as P.T.A. president. She entertained the parish priest with tea and cookies and humor. And, for real relief, she would sometimes relax for an hour or two with her dear friend Marge before their children arrived home from school.

I sit here, combing through scenes from the past, as if she were already gone. Why? Do I need to cushion the inevitable sense of loss by prompting myself to feel it now? Or, more likely, is my need to form a clear gestalt to carry with me, like a talisman, reassurance that, despite my still partially benumbed state, I *did* have a mother? I was no Athena formed from the forehead of Zeus. I was a child of Hera, and she formed me in ways I am just beginning to comprehend. I need to breathe in her full flavor as she subtly incandescences in a graceful, slow-motion departure from this plane. Somehow, I sense that by grasping something of her that I hope to unpeel back to her vital essential core, then when she does go I will be able to feel the huge reality of my grief.

As the one child who did rebel against the dominant patriarchal father, I can sympathetically imagine how, given both her Libran nature and the world-view of her generation, she had no real conscious choice about how or whether she would cleave to her man. The greater part of her had to disappear. He, a decidedly alpha male, would not have understood, condoned, or allowed his wife, the mother of his children, to be otherwise. I took the heat for her, and I know it caused her great anguish to see Dad and I filled with rancor. She was faced with an impossible choice between husband and first-born daughter. She had to choose when he came home from the war, and she had to choose during those 30 years of our domestic war. As Hera, she chose him. And though I was the fiery child who could take the heat, the Moon part of me suffered.

About a month ago, I committed to a [ten-week book tour by car](#). In order to set this in motion, I decided to activate the informal national network established through both Crone Chronicles and Crones Counsel, and ask crones throughout the west to help me with both housing and book events. The process has been grueling, for I find myself periodically inundated by that old familiar numbness, desolation, shame, embarrassment, worthlessness, fear of rejection and abandonment — to the point where for days at a time I have not been able to pick up the phone or even write an email asking yet another woman for help. Yet, for the first time in my life, I deliberately “sit in my stuff” that pools from the wound

in my relationship with the feminine. Over and over again, I allow icky yucky feelings to emerge and, given enough time and honoring, to clear.

And yet, only now as I complete the writing of this essay do I actually recognize the links between the painful internal work that I take on to set up this tour and my current need to focus on my relationship with my own mother. For the mother wound is the deepest one, much more profound than the ideological battle with my father. And it is a wound that, though I have been aware of it subliminally for decades, I never blamed her for. How could I? How can I blame one woman for her place in the long patriarchal line? That role limited her conscious choices; she must have resented this lockdown on her own soul's expression, and it rendered her "cruel" towards her own daughters. (See what happens when you get out of line? Look what happened to Ann. Don't do it!) Nor can I blame my archetypally patriarchal father, who was living out his generational pattern with a sense of duty and dedication and integrity that I have always admired.

One last story sums up my mother more than anything else I could convey. I have treasured this memory for decades, and only as I write it down now do I realize how perfectly it symbolizes her gift to me. Though she was only able to hold this gift in herself momentarily, she threw down the gauntlet, and I, as a first-born pioneer in the second wave of feminism's great ocean of spiritual sisterhood, took it up and thrust it into the stuffy '50s world. Here is that story:

Sometime in my 30s I was at my parents home, along with my brother John, then in his early 20s. He and I decided to get high, and on impulse, I asked Mom to join us. Of course, she reflexively declined, but when her favorite son chimed in, changed her mind. We opened the windows to clear any telltale traces, sat down in the living room, took a few puffs, and launched into an astonishing conversation, the details of which I can no longer remember, but in which the three of us forthrightly explored aspects of ourselves and each other that ruptured the membrane of our usual family dynamic.

After about an hour Dad came home for lunch, walked in, and unconsciously picked up on our altered vibration. He walked across the living room, stood over Mom and, genuinely puzzled, asked, “What’s up?”

She looked right up at him and, slamming her arm on the rocking chair’s arm announced, in a strong, clear, resonant voice, “*We’ve come alive.*”

Postscript: I asked my 92-year-old father the other day on the phone, during one of our rare conversations when my mother was getting her hair done and his hearing aide working better than usual, “What was it like when you came back from the war? How was I with you?” And he tells me, “Well, you cried a lot.” And then, after a pause, “And you were negative.”

Several days later I phoned and my mother answered. I asked her the same question, and she replied, after a moment’s silence: “Well, I don’t remember it that way . . . You would look at him, like, ‘Who is this guy and what right does he have to tell me what to do?’ I told him that he couldn’t automatically expect to have you obey him, that he had to earn his place as your father.”

I ponder the difference in their responses.

## Essay

# A MEDITATION ON MY HUSBAND'S MOTHER

© Ann Kreilkamp 2001

*5/31/18: This essay could have a postscript, but it might turn out to be longer than the original piece. For example, I don't know why I didn't include the story of how Rhoda once burst out (soon after my meeting her for the first time), while standing in a circle with her daughters, husband, Jeff and myself in the waiting area to a posh restaurant in Disneyland, "Jeff, **you're** the one who always loved me!" This remark, coming out of nowhere, stopped time; I watched her husband zoom out into space, her twin daughters turn to each other for solace, and Jeff himself sink into the depths of his very deep self. Truly a remarkable moment.*

*And I don't know why I didn't include the time, much later on, when she was in bed and waiting to die, and I made a special trip from Massachusetts (and my grandchildren) to New Jersey, to visit with her alone. Jeff's dad told me not to bother; that she hadn't said a word to him or anybody for months. I decided to go anyway. And when he ushered me to the doorway of her room, announced my presence, and then quickly retreated, I walked in. She opened her eyes, gave me a huge smile, and said a huge hello. That was another time when she and I went into other worlds together, as detailed in the story below. I don't know if I've ever met someone so obviously vaster than her current expression in this body. But wait! I **do** know one. And that's Jeff himself, her beloved son, and subject of my book [This Vast Being](#).*

Jeff and I had been together for one year when his parents decided to visit us. We were both surprised. Rhoda and Amos live in a big house in New Jersey, near New York

City. Jeff and I live in a yurt in a tiny unincorporated village in Wyoming. The culture shock, for them, would be enormous.

I had learned from Jeff that his Dad had been an electrical engineer who worked for Bell Labs. That he held over 70 patents, having invented the switching systems responsible for most of modern telephony, including cellular phones. Amos had received many national and international prizes, he and Rhoda traveling the world to receive them. (Two years later, we would stand in the Rose Garden of the White House watching him shake President Clinton's hand as he received the National Medal of Technology.)

I was dreading the meeting with my future in-laws. Jeff had been born into an eastern intellectual family, and attended Ivy League schools. I was the hick from Idaho who had lured their precious son out of his high-paying job in Michigan to come live with a woman he had just met in a 20-foot diameter Wyoming yurt! Worse, this was the first time Jeff had ever made this sort of life decision because of a woman.

Was it because his mother still held him in thrall to her? Would no woman ever be good enough for her son?

Those were my fears during the days preceding their arrival.

So you can imagine my surprise when Rhoda walked into our office and without even saying hello, dramatically thrust a gift-wrapped object into my hands while announcing in a loud voice, "Here. If you don't like it, I'm leaving!"

What? Rhoda wanted *me* to like *her*?

The next day we toured Yellowstone the old-fashioned way, men in front, women in back. Amos kept his head down, looking at the map of Yellowstone, and when he did look out, would make remarks like, "Why are there so many dead trees? Don't they clean this place up?" Apparently, he had never encountered a forest in its wild state, where death and life intermingled, old downed trees slowly disintegrating into soil, home for upthrusting shoots.

Meanwhile, in the back seat, Rhoda treated me to a non-stop monologue. Especially about Jeff, her only son, whose arrival was doubly blessed since he was not conceived

for five long years. And oh! how proud she was of him! And how grateful and excited she was, she said, that he had finally met me.

I don't recall her looking out the windows, to see bison, elk, erupting geysers. On our one venture out of the car, to watch Old Faithful spout, she had trouble walking from the parking lot (about 1/4 mile), and Jeff mentioned to me that her knees had bothered her since he was a child.

By the time we finished our tour, five hours later, I was exhausted and near tears.

The next day, still on parental overwhelm, I begged off going with them to visit Jenny Lake and the Tetons.

Nine years later, Rhoda lies in a hospital bed in her bedroom, inert. She is slowly dying, sinking into the ground like one of those dead logs in the forest.

What happened between then and now? What is the connection between my exhaustion then, and her dying process now? I suggest some clues here.

Rhoda was a dramatic Leo, a big woman in every way. As a young woman she had studied voice at the New England Conservatory of Music, and wanted to become an opera singer. One year later, the depression hit, and her family could no longer afford to send her.

When Ethel met Amos, he was a shy young student at MIT. The evening they met, he took her to his dorm room to show her his engineering projects, and to explain to her how the telephone dial tone worked. She was a good listener. And over the years she nurtured him into becoming a star in his profession, an international authority in telecommunications.

Rhoda was a woman of my mother's generation. Like many of them, she did not find fulfillment in her life. This generation was expected to find household arts fulfilling; however, most of them didn't have as many children as their mothers did, and 20th century advertising had brainwashed them into buying newfangled appliances, "modern conveniences." The combination of these two factors freed up much of their time and energy. But for what?

In Rhoda's case, we need to also factor in her intensity and big expectations, her theatrical manner. Her opera studies had been interrupted, and instead of the large public stage she settled for the small private stage of the family. For a while the demands of mothering three children close in age (Jeff's twin sisters are two years younger) called out her natural big-hearted generosity. But then her children grew up and none of them married or had children (I was the first and only spouse, whom Jeff met when he was 43). As the years dragged on, Ethel felt more and more useless, her life more and more futile. New growth did not reinvigorate the dead rotting logs in her forest.

Her generation of women didn't often work outside the home, for fear people would think the husband couldn't support the family by himself. She was caught in this cultural expectation, and blocked by her own psychological failure to imagine another life beyond her thwarted desire for grandchildren.

She had a surfeit of emotional energy, and could find few places to express it. No wonder I was exhausted after those five hours in the car.

That was nine years ago. Ever since that time I have invited her, indeed begged her, to attend annual [Crones Counsels](#) with me. She subscribed to [Crone Chronicles](#) and said she loved it, so I thought she would be thrilled to attend gatherings with hundreds of other older women who were transforming their lives beyond habit and social expectation. But she never went.

Whenever we visited them in New Jersey, she would follow me around, want to hug and kiss me. Her huge need to love and be loved felt suffocating. Whenever I was in that house with her I felt trapped and I usually ended up sick. Moreover, Jeff's folks never open the windows (neither do mine; is this generational?) and he and I joke that the place feels like a mausoleum. On each visit, as soon as we arrive, we drop our bags in the kitchen and rush upstairs to open the windows in our bedroom.

For our annual visit two years ago, she came to the airport with Amos to pick us up, as usual, but then refused to go out for dinner with us. This startled me. Why? I knew that our visits were what she looked forward to, as everytime we left she would plead

with us to come back soon. Many times she hinted that we should just move in, that then she would be happy.

The next evening we did convince her to go out to dinner. I was walking her from the house to the car when she muttered, almost under her breath, “taking the old dog out for a walk, eh?” Her tone was bitter, ironic. I was shocked. This was the first negative thing I had ever heard her say.

She had always taken long naps, even when the kids were small, and during the years prior to that visit, her naps had stretched out longer and longer. A few months after that visit, Edward called to tell us that she seemed to be sleeping most of the time. That he brought her meals to her because she wouldn’t get up to eat, or take a shower, only to go to the bathroom. Edward was worried. We told him he had to get somebody in there to take care of her. He resisted, not wanting a stranger in his house. He talked about putting her in a nursing home, but she adamantly refused, announcing that she was “going to *die* in this house.”

So, with his children’s help and encouragement, and doctor’s orders, he arranged for a home health care aide to live in and care for Ethel.

Our next visit, in November 1999, was a relief to me. I no longer felt so suffocated by her need, since she was always in bed. Indeed, since she wasn’t reaching out for me anymore, I could reach in to her, kiss her cheek, pat her hand. One afternoon I spent time alone with her, sitting by her bed, talking. Usually, she didn’t talk at all, beyond one word answers to questions. But this time she gradually opened up and we entered a zone together unlike any I have ever been in with anyone. I still marvel at it, and wonder why I cannot remember a word that was said. What remains is the sense of a vast and spacious mind hidden inside that stubborn implacable face and body. Our conversation was abstract and metaphysical, amazing to me who had never heard her utter one word that was not connected to her children, her husband, or the stuff of the material world.

Meanwhile, however, she appeared to be going downhill. She used a commode now, and had to be washed in bed. Right after we left, they rented a hoist to lift her out of bed and set her in her comfortable arm chair — in which she would immediately fall asleep,

hunched over. When they would try to get her to stand, she was terrified, and disoriented, confused. What was the organic cause of this relentless decline? The doctors could find nothing “wrong.” All her organ systems were healthy, she had no discernable disease — except of course, the one they call “senile depression and dementia.”

Since there is no disease present, we cannot avoid talking about her dying as truly a spiritual process. She is the first person I have known for whom we cannot “blame” her dying on disease. Unlike most people, her dying process is *obviously* driven by the need of the soul to let go of a life which the personality views as purposeless.

Nothing motivates her. She simply has no reason to get up anymore.

Now it is May, 2000. Six months have gone by. We have just returned from another visit to New Jersey, where she continues as that old rotting log, sinking into the ground. She is now in diapers, fed pureed food by hand. None of her limbs work. She has lain motionless in bed for so long that they no longer move, even if she wanted them to, which she doesn't.

Now she rarely opens her eyes, and seems to be in a coma, completely unresponsive. And yet we all know she's not. It's more like she's a turtle, hiding in her shell, except for angry explosions when someone inadvertently touches her too roughly. “NO!!” and “OW!!” remain in her vocabulary.

If Amos is in the room, and her eyes are open, she glares at him fiercely. We assume she blames him for her unfulfilled life. He continues to be curious, energetic, and working even now at writing articles, attending conferences, and picking up prizes. He didn't realize that she was mad at him until we pointed it out, and then he asked “Why? She always had everything she needed.” He's right. It was up to her to change her life, and she never did it. And she's right too, in that he was always impervious to her internal needs, and insensitive, living in his own world, with little left over for her.

A few months ago her best friend, a neighbor whose children grew up with hers, came for a visit. She insisted that Rhoda talk with her. “I got only one thing out of her,” she said, “and it was very forceful: ‘NOBODY CARES.’”

It seems that Rhoda has reached a conclusion, both literally and figuratively, and that she is determined, with her vast will and stubbornness, to hold on to it. To not receive our love. It is a terrible time. And yet it is a good time, too, because at last the energies are moving.

Amos was attending a conference in England during part of our last visit, and I used the occasion to open wide all the windows and doors. You can't imagine the thrill of doing this, after all the years of dreaming about it. How spring, with its rustling leaves and lilac vapors and birdsong curled through the rooms, to begin to dissolve stuckness and decay that had settled there over 50 years.

And now, for the first time, we are all talking about death and dying, and we do it in her presence. She says not a word. It makes us all sad.

And, finally, for the first time, everybody is touching her, learning to slowly and gently stroke her body. We are communicating through touch what she will not hear in words.

I am learning, once again, that I cannot fix or change anybody else. That no matter how terrible the situation in which I am involved, all I can do is bear witness, and have compassion for the difficult part each one is playing in this, the last act of one Leo woman's long life. Despite her declared appreciation for *Crone Chronicles*, hers was a life apparently uninspired by the last phase of the Triple Goddess. Her operative dreams as a Maiden, her temporary fulfillment as Mother, did not transform into the detachment and wisdom of Crone. Instead of rebirth into a new phase of life, the matter to be transformed fermented into decay, and played out as hopelessness, bitterness, fury.

But Rhoda is not dead yet. We don't know how her final act will play out in the end. We continue to watch and wait, to pray for deliverance.

*Postscript: Ethel died, alone in bed, not long after this was written.*

Column

## DEMENTIA, or: Getting Lost with Mom

*SageWoman* Column, #75

© Ann Kreilkamp, 2008

This is the story of a journey that, looking forward, I dreaded, and in hindsight, feels miraculous.

The plan was to go to Seattle and live for one week with my parents in their “continuing care” retirement community on Mercer Island. I would attend to their daily needs, squire Mom about, and try not to fidget in the airless little apartment. While parading slowly to dinner we would exchange cheerful anonymous hellos with other revolving white-hairs and pass by the bulletin board, its latest funeral notices. Who would take that one’s place? Whose final reckoning would also lead to this handsome, well-run lakeside facility and its programs, tours, concerts, bridge, holiday parties, and one meal a day — while waiting to die?

My perspective was, as you might guess, jaundiced. I was only going because my sister Paula in Baton Rouge had casually suggested that I might think about spending a week with them. She had just returned from a month-long visit, where she made their meals and did their dishes and slowly walked our 89-year old mother around the beautiful grounds admiring flowers and birds.

Her suggestion came as a shock. Huh? Me, alone with the folks for a whole week? As the still skittish former black sheep, I stay with one of my sisters during family gatherings.

Even so, I found my extreme reaction to Paula's suggestion puzzling — until I realized that it felt like both an invitation and a benediction. She trusted me with the parents' welfare. She was inviting me to take my place, once again, within the family circle.

But what place? What could I, the eldest child, possibly have to offer, given my role as rebel in our strict German Catholic household with the biblical patriarch Father and the mother who, until very recently, I had dismissed as a “cipher,” not there?

I hoped my trip would be an exercise in patience and compassion. I prayed to angels of my higher nature that years of “practicing the presence” would help me wake me up, time after time, in the midst of boredom and breathe. Return to the Now. Feel the life force coursing through my body and let go the busy mind that secretly judges and counts days and hours until release from the parental prison.

Over the past several years Mom has been gradually losing her short-term memory. Dad, still mentally sharp, takes care of her. Sometimes they still walk together around the grounds, but his back bothers him.

Four of my sisters live nearby. Kris, the youngest, considers herself privileged to help them, and visits several times a week. The other three take responsibility at varying levels. Our two brothers, one of them near Spokane and the other in Anchorage, stop in periodically. Paula had just given them a month.

I would do my part.

Here, with very few changes, is the report I sent my siblings.

To all my wonderful brothers and sisters,

I suspect that those of you with whom I did not have some kind of conversation while in Seattle wonder how it went. Dad kept saying “Fine, fine” to those who asked in my presence. But what did that mean?

I’m here to tell you that it really did go fine, and that I hold memories from that precious time close to my heart.

Paula, I thank you for your suggestion that I spend a week with them. On some unconscious level, you gave me permission to both stay with them and be trusted to “not make things worse.”

I’ve long realized that my 30-year polarization with Dad was painful for everyone. And even though I had assumed that he and I “worked it through” years ago, in the past year or so I’ve noticed some animosity from him, and attributed it to his back pain. Now that I’ve lived with them for a week, I recognize his crankiness and short temper as symptoms of his grieving process as he valiantly shoulders more and more daily responsibility for his life partner during the slow dissolution of her personality.

I didn’t know what to expect when I arrived, and had been feeling quite nervous. I think he did too, for when he crossed the street to greet me as I got out of the rental car at around 9 PM on March 5 he started talking fast and couldn’t seem to meet my eyes. I found myself opening my arms wide to him, with no words, and I think he felt grateful for that.

When I look back on that week now, indeed, even within a day of my arrival, it felt as if the situation was uncannily choreographed. I kept finding myself saying things that I did not know would pop out of my mouth, much to our surprise, and realize later that each conversation seemed to be a “set-up” for the one that followed. It was as if I entered with a backstory that needed to be filled in before we could move forward.

Mom was, of course, glad to see one of her children, and shuffled slowly to greet me at the door. She looked frail and wan, and seemed to have “gone downhill” quite a bit since last August, when my son’s family and I lunched with them.

The first thing that popped out of me came that very evening, when I mentioned a remark John Bayley had made in *Iris*, a book that recounted the final years with his wife, the British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch, as she moved through dementia. I don't have the exact words, but it's something like, "Iris's mind may be gone, but she's not gone. Iris is still here, still the same woman that I fell in love with so long ago." The remark had struck me forcefully when I read it; Bayley so clearly identified and valued, felt connected to, an Iris beneath (in her case, famously brilliant) mind. Indeed, I got the impression that the Iris he loved was *not* her mind.

The next morning, just prior to breakfast — which I fixed, but failed to get their usual cereal, o. j., coffee, and half and half on the table at the same time, so one or the other would diplomatically get up to retrieve what I had forgotten — I asked Mom what she wanted to eat and she just looked at me, sort of weary and perplexed. What popped out that time was, "Oh I can just see you, standing above all of this, wondering why people still eat? What's the point of eating? Why eat one thing rather than another?" Of course I laughed when I said it, and they sort of laughed, but the remark unsettled everybody — in a glancing way, since my own energy level kept the situation moving more quickly than they are used to.

Later that first morning, when Mom looked bewildered about something that she was supposed to find, I made a similar observation about objects: "I can just see you, above it all, looking down on we who are still dealing with objects, moving objects around, taking this one, getting that one, looking at them, valuing them, discarding them. All this business about objects. So silly, eh?" Something like that. Again they both looked nonplussed.

After breakfast, Dad got up and started to clear the table, which I humorously objected to, saying that's why I was there, to help them. That I had asked Paula to send me what she remembered of their daily schedule so I could pick up where she left off.

He responded, also with humor, that he'd work with me the first day to make sure I knew what to do, where things go, and so on, and that after that I could take over.

As luck would have it, the sofa bed for their guest room was due to arrive that morning, so Dad and I could look forward to a project — a third thing to mediate between us and ease the awkwardness.

Together we unboxed the sofa bed; together we figured out where the legs screwed in, each taking direction from the other when one of us got stuck. (It was trickier than it looked.)

Afterwards, Mom came to me and said, in a low voice, “Shall we go out to lunch?” I thought that a great idea, and went to find Dad who was in the kitchen, smearing mayo on white bread for the usual lunchtime sausage and cheese sandwiches. With Mom standing timidly by, I said to his tall broad back, “Dad, Mom and I are going out to lunch.” (I hadn’t seen what he was doing in the kitchen.) Without turning around, he said, “Oh no you’re not. I’m fixing three sandwiches, see? We can eat right here.”

With Mom still witnessing from behind me, I again said to his back, in the same tone as before (surprising myself at how easy I felt with this, how casual, not worked up as I would have been in the past), “No Dad, Mom and I are going out to lunch, and you get to stay here, in your hermitage.”

Again, he replied, in the same way, with his back to me, busily fixing sandwiches. “No. We’re eating here, I’ve already fixed the sandwiches.”

Again I replied in the same way, the same thing. And this time, he caught himself, right inside his cranky, grumpy, commanding tone; he caught himself and turned his large frame around to face his smallest daughter, looming over me in that tiny kitchen, and said in what seemed a half humorous, half menacing tone, “No you’re not — because I’m bigger and stronger than you are!”

The tension broken, we all laughed.

Kris tells me that Dad has sometimes done this with her too, catching himself in his meanie act and using humor to change the mood. Pretty amazing for a 92-year-old alpha male.

As Mom and I walked out the door, he said to me in a low voice, “I do appreciate the other,” which I took to mean our lunch out giving him time to himself.

That was the first of a number of lunches out for Mom and me, and each day we’d also run one errand. That first day we were to buy a mattress pad for the new bed. For this Mom thought we should go to Bellevue Square. Dad gave me directions on how to get to Bellevue, and I assumed Mom could lead me from there. I think she assumed she could too, but soon got disoriented. “Oh Ann, this is awful!” she wailed as I drove miles past our intended destination. I put my hand on her knee, saying, “Hey, it’s okay Mom, we’ll find it, and besides, it’s fun to get lost. You should see how many times I get lost! And remember, there’s always options. You’re never really stuck.”

I was attempting to calm her fear and panic, with little success. Finally we saw two women out for a walk and stopped for directions.

This first occasion of “getting lost” (three in all) helped start a discussion about what was going on inside her. At some point soon after this, I asked, out of the blue, “What does it feel like inside your mind?” And after a slight hesitation she pronounced, with unusual animation, “Empty.”

I was flying by the seat of my pants here, and once again, something popped out. “Empty? Wow! Do you realize that this is what many of us are trying to achieve? I’ve been working on letting go of all the silly stuff that’s in my mind for years! This is what meditation is all about.” I went on for some time in that vein, her sitting beside me in the car as we drove, energy level up, way up. First the panic brought it up, and now this surprising take on her situation seemed to be re-calibrating her whole system.

As we sat at a little sidewalk café eating good, thick soup (I ate most of hers), she suddenly looked up and said, with unusual focus and intent, completely present and open: “I really appreciate being with you. I feel comfortable being with you. Because you understand me, you accept me and you don’t judge me . . . I can feel a lot of people talking about me behind my back.”

I was so moved at this direct, sustained connection! So rare, in my experience with her at any age. So very moved that I said to her, full of feeling, “I am honored to be with

you during this time. During this time when your personality, held together by memories, is thinning, dissolving, so that your real self, your real essence or nature, is shining through. So very honored. You are becoming what I have always wanted to be. You are letting go of that which society teaches us, to value ourselves only for our minds, and the roles we play, our 'identities.' It feels wonderful to be with you as you move into your original nature." Something like that.

That conversation set the tone. For the next six days, now that I understood the nature and purpose of my visit, I utilized every opportunity to reinforce that perspective, and help her not only come to terms with what is happening, but to value the direction in which she is moving, both for herself and for her gift to the rest of us.

On our return we again got lost. I didn't have a Mercer Island map in the car, and realized later that we had been driving for 30 minutes on the west side of the island rather than the east side as she descended deeper into panic, directing me one way then another, with me following all her directions and laughing when they didn't pan out while trying to ease her fear, saying, hey, I love to get lost, I'm always getting lost, and would certainly rather be lost on the island than somewhere in downtown Seattle! Her body tense and contracted, she kept sighing and saying how awful it was to not know where she was. The confusion deepened. "Where do I live now?" she asked plaintively, several times, minutes apart. Sobered by her plight, I responded, softly, "Covenant Shores."

I used this occasion to speak about her fear, and panic, and how they were making it worse for her. I soothed her by saying that she would never be alone, and that all she had to do was to relax and trust her companion. I asked her to slow down her breathing, and to breathe deeply.

The next day, we got lost trying to find the Mercer Island library. Again, 30 minutes. This time we were both laughing. And she exclaimed, several times, out of the blue: "I trust you. I trust you completely. Because no matter what happens, you always land on your feet!"

I found these three experiences of getting lost with Mom a terrific metaphor for the disorientation and confusion that she undergoes as her various types of memories dissolve. I also found it interesting in view of what happened that first morning, before the bed arrived.

She and I had been sitting at the dining room table with my computer. I was questioning her about her life and transcribing her responses. Besides historical questions, I was asking her things like, “What was easy for you when you were small, what was hard?” Almost immediately she mentioned being left-handed in a right-handed world, and made to write with her right hand. Later, I spoke to her of that original disorientation as closely related to her current disorientation.

I mentioned her left-handedness to Dad the next day at breakfast, and asked her to repeat for him how it made her feel to be singled out early on as “different” (thus, in her mind, wrong, bad). I hoped that he would pick up on how it affected her emotionally back then (and not just how it led to the “trick” of mirror writing). He did seem to listen to her more closely than usual. (I sense that he treats most of what she says as if coming from a child, treating her like a child. And now she was saying to him, in the voice of her original nature, what it was like to be that child.)

At one point, after hearing a lot of childhood stories, I said to her, “You know? It seems like much of what you say can be grouped into two themes: fear, and the need to learn how to be alone.” She agreed, said that her older sisters got to have a big room together in front of the house and she had to live in the small back bedroom by herself.

By naming these two overall themes, I realized later that I was attempting to help her to begin to look at her life as a whole, to get some perspective on what she has been doing here, and what she still needed to do. Fear and in particular, fear of being alone, are now front and center as she works with the loss of her memories. And yet, of course, this is precisely the time in her life when we must not leave her alone.

By the way, I really enjoy the fact that Mom’s now much more physically oriented, holding on as we walk to the car or to meals, or around the grounds. I think that holding on to someone is really good for her, helps her orient and stay present in her body. It

makes me wonder about the focus on getting her a walker. I realize that she will need it at some point to move from room to room, but feel that when she is out, due to periods of sudden disorientation, she should *always* have someone with her, and why not hold on to that person as they walk? I even worry about her getting lost in the building they live in when she goes out to do the trash. Which brings me to the next part of the story of my week.

On the third day, I was doing yoga/chi kung/tai chi in the early morning in one room with the door closed. I overheard her ask him something, and then his answer, instructing her to “go down the hallway, turn left, go through a door, turn right” — something like that. I instinctively stuck my head out the door and said, “How about if I accompany you?” Dad turned and said, harshly, “I need to have her do as much as she can for herself, independently, for as long as possible, to keep her self-worth.”

I quietly closed the door again, taken aback by his attitude, his tone and his talk of her “self-worth” in front of her, and also feeling doubt about my role there. I berated myself for coming in from outside to a situation where he’d been dealing with it on a daily basis for years, and thinking I could tell him what was best! I wondered if I should shut up completely.

Just then Dad came into the room, Mom having gone outside after his instructions.

Speaking in a less harsh tone (he evidently felt bad for barking at me), he repeated what he had said in her presence. I said that I could certainly appreciate what he is going through with her, how hard it must be, and then asked, “And may I say something here?” I was surprised at how quickly, even eagerly, he said “Yes, go ahead!”

“On our lunch together and our errand yesterday,” I told him, “I’ve been working with Mom to help her locate her self-worth *below* her mind.”

“What? What do you mean?” My statement obviously shocked him. But it also seemed to open him. As if he was looking for another way to see the situation.

I told him that it seemed to me that as her personality, normally held together by memory, was dissolving, it opened the door for her nature, her essence, her soul, or

whatever you want to call it, to come forward. That the veils hiding her real, original self were disappearing, and that I felt honored, even privileged, to be with her during this time.

He was stunned. And obviously grateful. “That’s a great idea, a good way to look at it!” We all know that Dad has always seen people in terms of soul and personality, and values the soul over the personality; he just hadn’t applied his theology to this real life situation with his own wife.

It often takes someone coming in from the outside to point out what has been obvious all along. I’m so glad I could offer this perspective as part of what I can do during this time when so many of you bear the long-term daily burden.

Later that same morning, when I was getting ready to go on my walk and Mom was at the hairdresser’s, I again felt moved to speak with Dad, though with no idea what I was going to say. I went to where he was sitting sprawled on his recliner, and for some reason felt moved to hold his big toes as I again referred to the dissolution of the personality as not only a loss, but as an opening to something much larger. That Mom is way bigger than her mind, and that her real nature is beginning to shine through and I feel so honored. And I acknowledged the great and continuing sorrow he is feeling as he loses contact with her old familiar persona, and what a great job he’s doing with her, how patient and steadfast he is. His eyes welled up with tears as he strove without succeeding to contain the extreme emotion on his face.

So that’s what I was up to in Seattle, helping to stimulate a paradigm shift in our perspective on Mom’s continuing changes, from focus on loss of the small self to a focus on opening to the larger self. I feel that this shift has the capacity not only to benefit her, and him, but all of us.

By the final evening, when the three of us went out to a pub for dinner, he and I had a theological discussion in which I baited him humorously, saying I hoped he wouldn’t think I was going to hell for believing in a God that was in the world rather than above it. And it was good, he didn’t take the bait; said that I was welcome to my perspective, but

that he “prefers” to think of God as separate . . . We agreed that neither of us could prove anything. That it’s all very mysterious.

I end this with the request that those of you with whom I have not talked personally ponder what I’m saying in this letter, and that hopefully we can all be on the same page as we work to help both Mom and Dad in this immense, very precious passage that they have now embarked upon.

Essay

KATHRYN

*Crone Chronicles #15, Spring Equinox 1993*

© Ann Kreilkamp

*I am on the table for a massage session with Chris. She tells me she is getting an image of a great white owl. "Now, when I work on your left shoulder." Oh? I consider this. Shrug it off.*

*That night Ellen shows me her completed talking stick, an owl. This reminds me of the image Chris saw. I am startled. For several days I have been wondering whether to include the story of Kathryn in this issue of Crone.*

*The night Kathryn Tempest died, she told her granddaughter, Terry Tempest Williams, that there were owls outside. Terry didn't pay much attention; there hadn't been owls in Salt Lake City for 50 years. At dawn, Terry wandered out into her grandmother's backyard. There were two owls, facing each other, dancing on top of a telephone pole. Terry is a naturalist. Her grandmother, in her dying, presented her with a sign, a miracle of nature. (For more of what Terry saw and experienced during that time, see her extraordinary book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (Pantheon, 1991)).*

*So Kathryn is talking to me again. As a great white owl, she is tapping me on my left shoulder.*

*I wrote what follows in the summer of 1989, a month after Kathryn died. Several weeks later, I published the first edition of the Crone Chronicles. Looking back now, on the timing of those two events, I have a feeling that her death and the emergence of this journal are connected.*

Terry tells me Kathryn didn't wake up until she was 50 years old. That's when she began to read Krishnamurti, during the 1950s, when everybody around her was asleep. The two of us are talking exactly one month to the day after Kathryn's death, at the "ripe old age" of 84, the year the planet Uranus returned to the exact place it occupied during the moment of her birth.

Kathryn had been my mentor for the last several years. I had even dared, in my farewell letter to her only weeks before she died, to call her my "spiritual grandmother." Shortly after that she sent a message to me, through Terry, saying "yes, it is true, you are my granddaughter."

So, in this conversation in which Terry will go on to detail the extraordinary events of the nighttime hours before Kathryn's death at dawn, we are kin, granddaughters, privileged receivers of a tradition so exquisitely and grandly done that neither of us feel we can possibly carry on.

"And when she woke up," Terry continues, "she found herself still the matriarch of a huge extended Mormon family, in which many of the men held high posts in the church and the women were busy raising large broods of children."

Terry pauses here. A hush fills the room, as we allow our separate memories of her to come into view. How alone she must have felt! How isolated! I recall the last three hour luncheon in which the two of us indulged ourselves.

Kathryn and I were at an expensive restaurant. The kind where they serve you so slowly that they don't mind how long you sit there. We expected it to take three hours. It always did. Each time we met like this, two or three times a year since our first meeting in 1984 — she would be in Jackson or I in Salt Lake City — we would find, to our

surprise, that when we did finally look at our watches, three full hours had passed. I have never met anyone with whom I could so consistently lose track of time.

That particular day we had been sitting in a booth, oblivious, as usual, to everyone around us. Eyes flashing, intensely talking, we were both the same age, we were ageless, timeless, we were talking about the structures that form us collectively, invisible structures, as revealed in our dreams, visions, stories from our lives.

Then, as if moved by the same impulse, we both looked at our watches. Yes. 2:50 PM. We must stop now. Jack will be here to pick her up in ten more minutes.

I stood up first, and went to get her fur coat. (She was a queenly Leo, and always dressed grandly). She stood for me to put it around her shoulders. Then, in one of those rare moments in which time swells to a near standstill, revealing details clearly, in themselves, in their relations to others — in one of those moments I watched Kathryn slowly turn to face the world outside the charmed circle of our intimacy. Her face, which moments before had been glowing with the continuous discovery process stimulated by our interaction, was now dead, lifeless, masked. She began to walk slowly out of the room.

I was stunned. Shocked by the change in her. “Kathryn!” I cried, walking quickly to catch up, “Do you see what you just did? A moment ago you were with me, intensely alive, burning with energy and desire. And then when you turned around so that others could see you, all of a sudden you became an old woman.”

Time swelled again. Her head loomed in on me, eyes huge, staring, a shock wave passing slowly over the intricate design of the skin on her face. I was in shock myself; both for my impulsive comment, and dreading what would come next. I could feel her appraising me, taking me in all at once. Then, breaking the tension, she smiled, clearly pleased to have learned something.

That was in January of this year, 1989. In May, I dropped everything to make a sudden trip to Salt Lake City. It was to be our last meeting, and we both knew it. I went

directly to her house. We wouldn't be going out to lunch as usual; she was now too weak, too sick with the cancer that was to release her only one month later.

Instead, she had announced over the phone that I would have the privilege of sitting with her in her private study. I had been admitted once before into this small serene aquamarine room. Her own deeply interior and symbolic paintings graced the walls. Above the desk were several long shelves holding her collection of Jungian works, and a large sign in calligraphy, KNOW THYSELF.

During the long drive down I was wondering just how weak or sick I would find her. I had no idea how long she would be able to visit with me. All I knew is, when I heard the doctors had found yet another tumor, I felt intuitively that she would soon be leaving us. Was moved to go see her immediately. Wanted to be with her while she was still lucid.

To my surprise, Kathryn greeted me at the door with her usual regal dress and manner. She was a bit thinner, she walked carefully, and a perfectly coifed grey wig covered her bald head. Aside from these slight changes, and aside from what I would now describe as a subtle attitude of internal resolve beginning to engrave her long patrician face, one would never have known that she had already embarked on her final journey.

We ended up spending exactly three hours together that day too. Terry told me later that she had had several bad nights in a row, that she rested all the day before and that morning too, in preparation for my visit. She wanted to be in good shape, Terry said. "She wanted to see you as much as you wanted to see her."

Our conversation roamed the usual distances, now including death as a subject, her death, immanent. She said she hadn't quite accepted it yet, but that she had made out a will the week before. She said she still didn't know if there was anything on the other side. I asked her if she had ever astral projected. "No." "Well," I said, "once you do this you know, beyond a doubt, that you are not your body."

I went on to talk of my experiences in this occult realm, stressing the way they had changed my way of looking at life and death. She didn't seem to be listening. Was off in some remote internal space. I was frightened of the distance between us, upset and abashed by her nearness to what was for me still so far away.

What right had I, a woman in the prime of life, to teach an old dying woman about what lies beyond?

This confusion of feelings agitated me, so much so that my mind automatically became engaged in an attempt to cover them up. On an unconscious level, I didn't want to face the fact of my essential ignorance of what she was beginning to encounter. On a deeper level, I was terrified of feeling my fear of separation, of impending loss. Meanwhile, my conscious intention was to persuade her to believe what I believe, that there is life after death (and that therefore she wouldn't really go away, wouldn't abandon me).

I found myself becoming furious with her doubts. Was shocked that this most eminent Jungian scholar and student of human dreaming had not recognized what I see as the central fact of earthly human existence! I wanted her to believe. Wanted to be able to quell her doubting.

I thought I was trying to help ease her passage from this world to the next. In reality, I was desperately needing our connection to continue beyond her approaching death.

I can say all this now. Can recognize the unconscious underpinnings of my conscious intent. Can see how my rational arguments for life after death were being fueled by strong emotional undercurrents which I was unable to acknowledge at the time. Had I been more centered within myself then, had I been able to discern the various levels of my response to her, our conversation might have deepened to acknowledge more directly the finality of this visit. I am saddened now by the fact that I was not able to share more directly my pain at the prospect of losing her.

That is how I would now describe the complexity of my internal process at the time. What she received from me, however, was something else entirely. I could sense her discomfort as I talked. Could tell she was experiencing me as righteous, dogmatic, overbearing. And perhaps her sickness was heightening her sensitivity to my fiery personality. My recognition of her response to me made me panic; I went into overdrive, talking even faster, more intensely.

She looked at me after I had finished my impassioned speech and said, slowly, quietly, “You know, Ann, the older I get, the less I know.”

This stung me. I could feel her, in her gentle, but pointed way, letting me know that I had gone too far. That I was being presumptuous. That I had a lot to learn. I felt stung by her remark, and simultaneously grateful. The way I often felt, actually, in her presence; she stirred up things in me which I couldn't ignore.

The moment passed. We moved on to other things, though I was still smarting inside. I know she sensed my hurt. And was moved to help me through it with praise. It was at this point that she told me that when she recounted to others how I had told her she suddenly became old when turning around to face the world outside, her listeners were uniformly shocked at my audacity. “They either thought you were awful for saying that, or they realized you must have been quite a friend to be able to tell me such a thing.”

I was one of the few people on earth with whom she could express her whole self, uncensored by the constraints of an unexamined world view. The passion of her nature propelled her on an endless search, the heroine's quest for the meaning of life. Yet her great age had distilled detachment from passion; she possessed the ability to see herself and others from an enormous distance, finding humor in our most fervent investigations. What truths she had gleaned over her many years, she took them too with a grain of salt.

She was fearless and uncompromising in her need to discover, for herself, and by herself, the fundamental laws of her own nature. The one exception to this was what seemed to me to be uncharacteristic obeisance to the medical profession, a willingness

to give her bodily being over to her doctors without question, to trust completely in their way of looking at her, their prescription for her future.

When I talked to Terry later, she said she also found her submissiveness to the doctors' world view puzzling, given her grandmother's fiercely independent nature. We agreed then that her attitude seemed to be more generational than individual.

I will always remember something she told me pointedly, not once, but many times. (Apparently she didn't think I was listening. And maybe I wasn't. At least not the way I am now.) "I couldn't have gone around preaching what I found to others," she said. "They wouldn't have understood me, they would have been hurt, or upset, or angry. They would have thought of me as ungrateful, or wrongheaded, or crazy."

From the first time we met I had detected in her an extraordinary inner strength. Her presence was large; wherever she sat was the center of things. She would inhabit a serene and untroubled space, attentive to her surroundings without being attached to them, fascinated by the ongoing stories of others' lives without being tempted to judge them. These qualities were what had drawn me to her in the first place. I meditate upon them in remembering her. I hope someday to embrace them, embody them; I pray that I prove worthy of the trust she placed in me.

I have a feeling that it was the very isolation produced by awakening in the middle of her huge and bustling family which in turn created in her that hidden inner reserve, that strength. And it was probably that isolation which made her so very happy to know me, another person, besides her granddaughter and one or two others, with whom she could really talk, who shared her perceptions of the inner life, the realm beyond the visible.

The day Kathryn died Terry called and left the fact and the time of her death as a message on my phone. Acting on a hunch, I set up the astrological chart for that moment in Salt Lake City.

In order to appreciate the full impact of that chart on me, I need to fill in some more background information. Please bear with me, as to do this I must also describe certain technical elements within astrology.

After my final visit with her grandmother, I had spent time with Terry, and told her, upon leaving, that I would send her a tape outlining what I thought would be the most significant times for Kathryn in the months ahead. The day after arriving home I made this tape, looking at her birthchart especially in terms of the planet Pluto, since Pluto had been emphasized by temporary aspects to other planets in every significant event of her history with cancer — the onset of it, operations for it, its reoccurrence on several occasions, etc.

Pluto is the planet which symbolizes the power of death and regeneration. Moving at the rate of only two or three degrees per year, it signifies slow moving epochal changes which operate upon us from deep within. Working below the level of personal identity, Pluto operates at the cellular level. Its transformations are those which concern the evolving nature of our very existence. Pluto has long been associated with cancer and other seemingly inexorable disease processes, as well as with the seemingly miraculous power of the human being to spontaneously reverse the course of any disease.

In Kathryn's birthchart, Pluto is in the sign of Gemini, as it was for the entire generation born during the first decade of this century. These were the years of the Einsteinian revolution in physics. Pluto in Gemini signifies deep transformation in the way the mind works. It also bestows a consciousness which values objectivity, rationality, and skepticism — all qualities Kathryn possessed in abundance.

In Kathryn's chart Pluto is elevated, occupying the 10th house of the path, its position preeminent in her birthchart. In her case, the objective consciousness was turned inward, her Plutonian power used to probe the depths of the psyche, to investigate the self which was doing the knowing.

In the tape I made for Terry, I mentioned the end of June as a time when energies would be high — a likely time, given the trajectory she was on, to leave this planet.

During that time, there would be a rare convergence of several unusual planetary alignments: transit Uranus, signifying sudden changes, would be directly upon the same point it occupied at her birth (it was crossing back and forth over that point for the first and only time in her life during all of her 84th, and final, year); transit Mars, symbolic of assertive energy, would be returning to its natal place for the first time in two years; and most significantly, for the first time in 12 years the expansive and philosophical planet Jupiter would be directly upon the same point occupied by her original Pluto.

In fact, Kathryn's soul did utilize these expansive energies of the end of June to leave this life.

I watched intently as my computer began to print out the "birth chart for her death" (this is no contradiction, if we remember that the end of one cycle is the beginning of another). What I saw made my spine freeze. *There, on the Ascendant of her death chart, was the precise degree occupied by Pluto at her birth.*

In order to appreciate what this means, we need to consider that the Ascendant, the degree on the chart which rises in the east at the moment for which the chart is cast, moves at the speed of one degree every four minutes. Kathryn waited for exactly that narrow window in time to leave this planet. And she did so in her full Plutonian power, her genius for objectivity now calmly entraining to the rushing wind transporting her to the worlds beyond.

It is difficult for me to convey just how extraordinarily significant this is. The Ascendant, as the point where one expresses oneself directly into the world, is symbolically one's "window to the world." Since it moves so quickly, the Ascendant is the most personal point in the chart, unique to the person who was born at that moment in that place. Kathryn, in her dying, used that same window to leave this world. In her final moment as an embodied spirit, she gave me an extraordinary confirmation of my work as an astrologer. *Her soul showed a remarkable precision, an exacting finesse, in waiting until that very moment when the zodiacal point which had been occupied by the planet Pluto at her birth — Pluto, the planet which had been consistently correlated*

*with her disease process, and which was now activated again by the expansive and philosophical planet Jupiter — she waited until that very moment when Pluto was briefly illumined by the swiftly moving Ascendant, to breathe her last.*

Kathryn, in her final initiation on this planet, gifted both Terry and myself with supernatural signs. Her soul was saying yes to us, to the trajectories we are individually traveling.

A few days after her death I had the following dream:

*I am out on my daily walk. I'm in a trusting, innocent state of mind. I see a shepherd type dog about 30 feet away, sniffing at some bushes. Suddenly he sees me, and in deadly silence charges me swiftly, as if he had been shot out of a cannon. He viciously attacks me. I become utterly enraged, start yelling, flailing with my arms and legs. I am more vicious than the dog is. He runs off with his tail between his legs.*

The dream was so strong it woke me up. I identified the dog's anger as that of the suppressed rage of the man I was seeing at the time. Was glad that I had shown such surprising strength in the dream, as I have a history of being fearful of dog attacks.

Three days later, I was out walking in the early morning. Was internally experiencing the same kind of innocent trusting space as in the dream. I see a shepherd type dog about 30 feet away, sniffing at some bushes. All of a sudden he sees me, and exactly as in the dream, rushes me silently like he was shot out of a cannon. In the few seconds it takes him to cross those 30 feet I slip into an altered state. His swiftness is now experienced in slow motion. I make ready for the attack.

As the dog attacks me, biting viciously, I become a human volcano, utterly enraged, screaming at him, kicking viciously, my own attacks so quick and so lethal that he suddenly turns tail and runs.

The entire episode had lasted not more than one minute. The adrenaline released by my defense was so powerful that it left me weak-kneed, and I walked the rest of the way

home shaking, crying, shocked at both what had occurred and at the dream which it had so exactly repeated.

Within three weeks of that occasion I broke up with the man with whom I had been involved for two years. The break up was sudden, unexpected, and explosive. Since that time a flood of feelings have been unleashing. Feelings of rage, of sadness, a mourning for this relationship; these feelings trigger deeper feelings — of the same order but stronger and long buried; of a deep deep sadness that no amount of weeping seems to still. It is as if that dream and the replay of the dream in reality unleashed a plug in my feeling life. As if it signaled the beginning of a new phase in my life, wherein I finally begin to acknowledge and express my deeper instinctive emotional nature.

Oddly enough, I happened to note the time of the dog attack as it occurred: 7:50 am. Was toying with the idea of setting up an astrological chart for that moment, but it was not until my most intimate female friend urged me to do it, that I actually found myself watching intently as the printer spit out the astronomical pattern for that moment.

Again, there was a sort of replay, my spine freezing as I *noted the Ascendant of this chart was crossing over my natal Pluto as the dog was attacking, exactly*. It was as if Kathryn were there, showing me the correlation between the two of us, equating her own death and resurrection with a death and resurrection in myself. As she timed her death to the passage of the swiftly moving Ascendant of June 27 over her natal Pluto, so had my unconscious timed the death of a lifetime of repressed feelings to the passage of the swiftly moving Ascendant of July 4 over my natal Pluto.

The meaning of this uncanny synchronicity revealed itself through reversal: as Kathryn had to learn to leave her body behind in order to surrender to the fullness of a larger life beyond earth, so I had to learn to truly enter my body — its instinctive life, the life of the pure and innocent flow of feeling — in order to surrender to the fullness of a larger life here on earth.

Suddenly, as I stood there contemplating this chart in awe and wonder, I remembered the very last thing Kathryn had told Terry to tell me, only weeks before she died. At the time, her final words to me had seemed true enough, but somewhat

ordinary. I had expected something more profound. “Tell Ann,” Kathryn had said to Terry, “tell Ann to stay in her feelings, and let go of her mind.”

Essay

## THE GRANDMOTHERS' DANCE

*Welcome to Planet Earth, 1987*

© Ann Kreilkamp

### Introduction

The essay which follows is devoted to understanding, embracing, and ultimately transcending certain contradictions I notice within both myself and others who live within the shadow of the Grand Tetons in western Wyoming.

Since that time the contradictions have magnified. Now, in July, 1989, the monetary value of open land in this area has more than doubled within the past six months. What we call “highenders” are moving in from cities, parking their Lear jets at the airport, building enormous homes and shopping at new local shops — one sells expensive furs, another is an outlet for Polo, Ralph Lauren.

Just last week I heard that the current issue of the glossy coffee table magazine *Town and Country* has a 22-page spread on Jackson and other parts of Wyoming with the message to rich urbanites, how about buying a nice little ranch in Wyoming?

Both Wal-Mart and K-Mart hope to plop down enormous square or rectangular buildings in the middle of vast parking lots, burying under concrete yet more wild land.

Jackson has been discovered. There is no “slack” season anymore. Giant “Suburban” wagons cruise the town all year round.

Since I am a professional astrologer, it is natural for me to pepper my language with astrological symbols. In this essay I used the symbols Saturn and Uranus, which were then traveling together through the sign of Sagittarius, to help me illuminate the contradictions both within and without. I hope the reader will not be offended by the astrological metaphor; indeed, I encourage the reader to embrace the symbolic possibilities within this most ancient, sacred language.

## The Grandmothers' Dance

A woman kneels in the center of a room on a dark cloth spread out on a polished, hardwood floor. Silent, utterly absorbed, she removes tiny objects — stones, feathers, crystals, flowers — from leather and velvet pouches and arranges them on the cloth in a semi-circle around her. Directly in front of her lies an enormous phallic crystal, facing North, lined up with the Tetons. I am sitting on the floor with 30 other women in a circle around her. Our backs lean against blue walls. We are talking quietly among ourselves and watching Brooke Medicine Eagle, beautiful, with high cheekbones, hooked nose and long black braided hair. I notice her hands. Big, strong, expressive, intimate, these hands bond her energy to the energy of anything they reach for. With utmost concentration, she is slowly and carefully placing each object in relation to others on the cloth according to some hidden inner order.

The altar is completed. Brooke looks up, smiles widely, begins to speak. There is much she has to tell us this evening, she says, her energy uncoiling to a standing position, those hands punctuating each word.

Can you remember old pictures of signing ceremonies between white soldiers and Indians? she asks. On one side stands the general surrounded by his officers, lined up in a row. On the other side stands the row of braves, flanking their chief. And behind the row of Indian men, she continues, her voice growing stronger, stands a row of white haired women. The grandmothers. Female elders of the tribe. They were not there to negotiate. Rather, their continuous silent presence was to remind Indian men: any treaty you make with the white man must be such as to not harm any living thing.

The grandmothers, Brooke tells us, carried the wisdom of the tribe. They no longer menstruated; they “held their blood” — and because they did their power was great.

The younger women, during their menstrual flow, would retire to the “moon lodge,” to rest and to dream. This time coincided with the new moon, a time of new beginning and of cleansing, when the veil between the visible and invisible thins to the point where the women could easily pass beyond. During these few days each month they would enter the spirit world through the center of their beings, their wombs. In their dreaming together they set in motion whatever was to happen during the coming moon cycle. Through their wombs they attuned to the Great Mother, Earth, and learned her ways.

According to Lakota tradition, the female principle precedes the male. It is first, what must happen before anything else can. The female principle is the number before all numbers start. It is the womb, the starry night sky; it is the great void, the source of all possibility. Actual creation begins, she tells us, when lightning pierces the night sky. From this union, does all that manifests flow.

If, she continues, I were to spear you and twirl your body in the air, the exact point in which I would thrust my spear would be your womb. This is the center of your being. This is the point where you balance heaven and earth — whether you be biologically a woman or a man.

She gets up and starts walking around the room, long soft leather moccasins treading the hardwood floor as surely as if it were a forest trail. Placing her hands to that center of herself, she outlines a triangle. We need to walk with this part of us leading, she tells us. Our wombs link us to our mother, and receive what she wants us to know. Instead, we tend to walk like the absent-minded professor! Brooke laughs, bends over, and walks head first, tottering from side to side. We laugh too, seeing ourselves in this reflection.

Brooke stands up straight. Alert, balanced, again she walks steadily around the inside of our circle. Her eyes seek each of ours in turn. “We have moved from the center of our beings to the head, the forebrain,” she says, slowly, quietly: “we have severed our bonds with all living things.”

Brooke asks us to stand and form a circle with our arms around each other. She starts drumming, softly, to the four-beat rhythm of a human heart. “Press your left foot into the floor with each dominant beat,” she says. “Your left foot links to your left side, the female side. As you press that foot to the floor you are making contact with mother earth, and she is pressing back. Now start moving in a circle, an inch at a time, still emphasizing that beat with the left foot.”

We begin to dance, slowly round and round, hearts and feet entraining to the drumming, thirty women in a circle, arms around each other, no beginning, no ending, left foot, left foot, left foot, entering our left sides, thinning that veil between the visible and the invisible, entranced.

“Now look at each woman in the circle, how beautiful she is, how individual . . . And now soften your eyes, let them lose focus, concentration, and see this woman circle as a circle of women everywhere, women anywhere, anytime. Become your mother dancing this heartbeat, become her mother, and hers. Go back through your foremothers, back to the first two-legged mother, beyond her to the four-leggeds, the winged creatures, beyond them to the tree people, the plant people, the rocks, the waters. Become the great mother, feel her wisdom, feel her pain.”

## Next Day, Out Walking

It is Saturday morning, the day after the grandmothers’ dance. I sit curled in my easy chair, tensed, head down, concentrating. Frowning, I turn page after page of a thick, blue paperback book, Alice Bailey’s *Esoteric Astrology*.

No use. Can’t seem to read today. My eyes keep losing focus, bouncing off the page. My head feels light, constricted. And my body, growing increasingly restless, wants to move! I subdue it, forcefully, no! You must sit here, stay still, and read this! You still haven’t mastered Alice Bailey. What’s wrong with you? Are you lazy? Stupid?

Suddenly, without thinking, I close the book, get up, bundle up, start out on my daily walk. Today I walk even faster than usual, head first, body striving to keep pace

with the debate raging inside. Once again I feel that war between the two ways I'm learning, the two roads I travel . . . the metaphysical and the aboriginal . . . so different, so opposed! Going up and down at once . . . up with my head, down with my body . . . Will I break in two? (Oh my god, is this the meaning of the dream I had last night? When my car broke into two separate pieces, front and back? And I knew it was due to my carelessness. . . Oh wow, there's Saturn and Uranus operating again, in my dream. The car breaks — negative Uranus; my inattention — negative Saturn.) Hey! Stop thinking! You are walking now. Walk on. Pound those ideas from the brain through the body into the ground. Release that brain, let go let go . . . breathe . . . in . . . out . . . in . . . out . . . Be the walking, be the breathing, left right, in, out. Forget! Forget yourself. Become empty, become the air flowing through you, allow each in-breath to replenish you, each out-breath to clear out old ideas, cares, worry . . .

I have followed this same routine for 27 years, walking long distances, balancing, getting head to join with body for that one hour each day. "It keeps me out of the psychiatrist's office," I joke to those who ask — and laugh, ruefully, knowing just how true that is. My training has been left-brained, male, rational. I am the perfect example of Descartes' mind/body split. I think, therefore I am. Therefore only my thinking is me! For Descartes, the body and mind, though separate, worked in unison; they "paralleled" each other, he said. For me, they seem utterly opposed, body wanting to continually move and express, mind wanting to capture each movement, to fix it in place.

As usual, within one mile hip and pelvic tension relax and my stride lengthens to the usual fast rhythmic Sagittarian pace so few of my friends can keep up with. I'm glad. I need this aloneness. Need this discipline. Feel very Saturnine today. Uptight. Can't let my mind go. How to integrate Alice Bailey with Brooke Medicine Eagle? How to reconcile such an esoteric scholastic hierarchy with the simple Lakota way of being in the world?

It seems to me Alice Bailey deals from on high with what is here below. In order to read her, I must forget my body, deny its restless existence, and become pure thought, unadulterated by emotion, by concern, by anything but the processing of rarified ideas.

Much of what I read in astrology has that same character, if less extreme. I include here even the revered mentor of us humanistic and transpersonal astrologers, Dane Rudhyar. While there is a certain spare celestial beauty to his ever enlarging and looping rhythms, I must admit, I find his tone dry, abstract, bloodless — with no concrete examples, nothing to bond it with what really happens here below. Pure thought. No passion. No life!

And there's the other extreme too, an astrology which focuses too narrowly on mundane events, with the result either gossipy or full of staccato data. Here, in the intellectual polarity between the bloodless abstract and the trivialized concrete, is that same mind/body duality reflected. First, mind splits off from body; next, mind itself splits into two kinds of thinking, and neither one feels alive.

As I walk, I look across four miles of snow covered sage to the west, and am, as ever, awed by the sight of the snowy Tetons rising precipitously from the valley floor. Boiling silver clouds play peek-a-boo with the frozen north face of the Grand Teton. So high, so remote, cold stone and ice . . . and so indifferent to the play of human passion rippling out from each of us, linking us together, no matter how alone some of us may feel, down here below.

Mountains have always been metaphors for both solitude and lofty thought. Asian monks leave householding behind to sit on them and commune with the gods — sometimes forever. Tourists stop their cars and try to capture the scene with camera or video. At their next restaurant meal they may discuss what they saw out there for a few moments, fumbling for words, eyes taking on that misty faraway look humans are prey to. This longing, a yearning, but for what? what? — is what separates us from our wild animal friends.

Painters try to represent what mountains evoke in them. The Tetons have been painted and postcarded so many millions of times that their actual presence sometimes seems clichéd. Grandiose, two-dimensional Valhallian mountain scenes in ornate carved wooden frames dominate public walls in banks and law offices, they hang over living room mantelpieces and king size beds . . . As we go about our daily business such

paintings sometimes catch our busy eyes. They remind us of our more exalted possibilities . . . they numb us by the very familiarity of what is or should be so rare.

Some of us choose to place ourselves where such glory will be the constant vibrant background to our every heartbeat. It is precisely the extraordinary beauty of this still pristine land that draws us here in the first place. But how many of us acknowledge this place in the manner of Brooke Medicine Eagle, as a tiny but sacred spot on the skin of mother earth? And how many of us feel her, in our wombs?

But wait, wait . . . remember that day when I walked down out of Death Canyon, tired and alone. So tired that my mind slipped into my body, and gave my feet the lead. Remember the cool breeze, tunneling through the canyon, picking up the creek's tumbling rush, rising and falling, caressing my ears with its music? And remember that one extraordinary moment when, for some unknown reason, I suddenly stopped walking, turned around, and looked up to the exact spot where an eagle soared high over a spired ridge?

Yes. And remember another time, that soft spring afternoon, sitting on a rounded hillside of Shadow Mountain, looking out across three miles of valley to the Grand Teton? Remember lying back in that field of yellow flowered balsam root, watching clouds scud by? And remember turning over, my hands clutching plants, sticks, seeds, stones, body caressing full length the soil in its yearly awakening? Remember bursting into tears? And feeling so full, so alive, so sensual . . . yielding to the earth as my beloved.

Times such as these are the exception. They are so intimate, so strange, so haunting . . . Like certain dreams at night, which pass into other dimensions altogether, these experiences in nature are so foreign to my usual waking dream that I have trouble even remembering them, much less putting them into words for others. And even if I could I would be too embarrassed . . . until, last night, that is, when Brooke reminded me of their value.

I speak of nature as my lover. Not poetically, not lyrically, but in reality. Encountering her in this manner I see/feel her utterly differently than usual. She is not

something to be viewed, classified, evaluated, and, in some way, used. Rather, she is someone to be cherished, held, surrendered to. In opening to her we drink her in, and are charged by her presence; she is overwhelmingly real and alive.

Speaking of nature in this manner throws me outside the society I grew up in. Certainly it is alien to my usual ways of walking on this planet, even now, now that I'm "new age." And I'd bet that very few of even the more sensitive ones who live in this extraordinary mountain valley — who say they "love" this land, they "love it here" — really, in any full sense of that word, do. How often do we interact with nature as our lover? Aren't we usually relating to her more with an eye as to how she can fulfill our individual desires?

Take the intense loner athlete, for example, who scales these mountains. He climbs straight up sheer rock — or ice — walls, mind over matter, to the top, where he overlooks everything, having conquered both gravity and his own body's natural fear and pain. Most athletes here are equipment freaks as well; they blend a single-minded desire to get to the top with an exacting hi-tech attention to precisely which climbing shoes will offer most frictional advantage, which materials in their clothing will "wick" sweat away.

Mind over matter. Brain over body. Tune that machine. Tune it up, make sure it's hard — to go the distance, to scale the heights, to ski straight down steep powder slopes. Even athletes, seemingly most in tune with their bodies — obey the cultural command. Rather than flowing with nature and her ways, these bodies are designed and continually retooled to meet their owners' rigid specifications. Nature's extremes are viewed as challenges, to be conquered, dominated, controlled. Not just eggheads move with their heads first.

I think of the legends surrounding these jagged peaks, how they are likened to giant crystals, magnifying everything that goes on here. Of the great crystal caves rumored to hide somewhere inside the Grand Teton. Of the Great White Brotherhood which, it is whispered, meets here each year in spirit form, on the fourth of July. I think of all the high spiritual books, including Alice Bailey's, which this brotherhood is said to have inspired.

I think of one man in particular, he is here precisely because of these legends. Richard is so abstracted, so wrapped up in his mind, that he ignores his body altogether, noticing neither what it is wearing or the ground upon which it walks. His body, reflecting that lack of concern, is puffy, shapeless. (Like so many tourists' bodies. During August especially, I notice that fully one out of every ten people walking the streets of Jackson is seriously obese.)

Athletes only seem to be body oriented. Actually, most of them are mental, wanting total control over their bodies, treating them like machines. Some metaphysical people ignore their bodies, they are more obviously mental in orientation. The point is, neither of them *feel* nature, in their wombs. They would laugh at Brooke's aboriginal point of view.

Then there are those who came here to use nature in blatant ways — to use her up. They carve up hills and river bottom land into “real” estate, and sell it, for profit. They build huge houses on five-acre tracts, or cluster condomaximums at river's edge, and think of eco-nomics as if it is restricted to money.

This valley is crawling with real estate agents and others who obey the dictates of “progress.” What keeps them in check are the efforts of the Jackson Hole Alliance and the Jackson Hole Land Trust, whose members do seem to genuinely care about preserving wild lands. Unfortunately, they must spend an inordinate amount of time fighting not only human greed, but also the legalities of state, federal and corporate claims for oil, mineral, grazing and deforestation “rights.” One cannot do battle with bureaucrats without, in some sense, becoming one. I watch this happen now, as the environmental movement comes of age, and pulls up its backpacking grassroots for the move to Washington, D.C.

Of related concern is the fate of the Great Bear, which during the past several years has come to national attention. As once vast tracts of true wilderness shrink to nearly nothing, as what is left gets carved into tiny bureaucratic fiefdoms with no common agenda, the grizzly's normally wide-ranging habitat is so seriously disturbed that, as of

1986, there were only 34 breeding sows remaining in Yellowstone Park. Yellowstone and Glacier Park are the only areas left in the contiguous 48 states still viable for the grizzly. If many had their way, these wildernesses too would be gentled, made user-friendly to man by destroying what few bears remain.

The poet Robert Bly spoke of what he termed the hidden “hairy man” within each man in a now famous seminal article, “On Being A Man” (1982). Bly’s hairy man is a wild man, he has more in common with the grizzly than with either macho men or the gentle, “liberated” males escorting either feminists or each other today. We fear this hairy man, his genuine natural potency, as we fear the grizzly, and his dream partner, the legendary yeti. We fear the wildness in ourselves. We fear our feelings — the joy, the passion, the rage, the surrender to our mother and the terrible pain inflicted upon her by our unnatural forebrained habits.

These feelings arise as we plug into our centers, our wombs. These feelings move us to change our ways and preserve life on earth. No amount of reading high spiritual — and astrological — material, no number of hours spent meditating in quiet contemplation will do it. Our minds and spirits may expand our awareness, but they do not originate anything.

Men and women alike, we are all male and female, creative and receptive. Each of us is mind and body, and within each of these, there are creative and receptive aspects. Receptive, we open to the ground, what our mother wants to give us; creative, we reach for the stars.

Midway between our head and our toes is our womb, our center. We are each the center of the universe, the still point of a turning world. Through our centers we link heaven to earth and balance ourselves. Saturn represents centripetal force, gravid, drawing us down. Uranus is centrifugal; spinning out like electrons, we fill the heavens with our wonder.

Finally, I am reminded of a good friend of mine, I will call him Coyote, as this most adaptive of wild creatures is his totem. Coyote is a dreamer and storyteller and music maker. His source is the waters of Boiling River at Mammoth, Montana in Yellowstone.

His roots are aboriginal. Coyote feels more in common with the monkey than with the straight man role his civilized conscience still sometimes forces him to play.

Coyote's "environmentalism" is primal, pure; he doesn't give a hoot about how to trace his way through a bureaucratic maze. Yet even he, who could teach us so much, seems confused. Coyote man! He who drums in tune with the pulsing geysers, he whose words and music soar like the thousands of pelicans that whirl in vortex formation over Yellowstone River — yet even Coyote said to me once, why worry about the planet, when we're about to lift off the earth?

Coyote would forego his aboriginal roots for a hi-tech future. He would solve the planetary crisis the same way Tim Leary would (not to mention military industrial contractors); they look to technology to save us, and advocate peeling out of here in rockets. Born-again Christians and fundamentalist Muslims can't wait to leave either — for their various heavens elsewhere. What care have they for preserving our creaturely nest?

Here I am, walking along head first, preoccupied; I wrestle with Alice Bailey and Brooke Medicine Eagle and wonder how the two shall join. Surrounding me are athletes and metaphysicians, artists and tourists, greedy ones and preservers, Coyote and the bureaucrats. Here we all are, living mostly in our minds, ignoring the mysterious life in our bodies, and the way they resonate with the larger body, our mother, Earth — the substance of which she is composed, the wild creatures upon her. We are in association — whether or not we know it — not just with each other, but with the trees and rocks and water and plants and soil and all the bear and deer and geese and swans and eagles and hawks and moose and elk and bison and other, more delicate and unnoticed beings inhabiting this magical land. Intense, individual, extreme, and full of contradiction, our energies are magnified by the giant crystalline Teton range. Blindly, but with hope, we grope haltingly towards a shared life in this small mountain valley, sixty miles long, twenty wide, population 10,000, on the western edge of Wyoming.

## Return to the Grandmothers' Dance

Uranus is the sky god, wild, electrifying, innovative; lightning piercing the night sky. Saturn is “reality,” social reality, civilized; form, in its actual manifestation. Uranus is the Grand Teton, a gigantic lightning rod. Saturn is the social roles we play down here below, who we *think* we are — the infamous forebrain.

Uranus above, Saturn below. Mountain above, valley below. Sky above, earth below. Mind above, body below. Alice Bailey above, Brook Medicine Eagle below. Forebrain and womb. Male and female. Light and shadow. Nature and technology. Each of these a duality, polarized.

Without duality there is nothing to balance. Polarity is a fact of consciousness, which is always, an awareness of something, a relation between self and non-self. It is only when the teetertotter crashes to the ground lopsided that the balance of priorities is disturbed, and are we, as a people, disturbed.

The mind/body teetertotter has crashed to the ground, leaving the mind high and dry. We need to balance metaphysics with aboriginal wisdom, our minds with our bodies. And we need to re-member our bodies for what they truly are, formed from the soil, continuous with mother nature and her laws.

I think back to the grandmothers' circular dance, and remember the woman opposite me. She is the only one I see full on, rather than obliquely. She offers me the other side of the world, a direct frontal mirror. Our “opposition” constitutes one of infinitely many that could people any circle. Each of us one endpoint of a single axis. Together, the two of us define a diameter, measuring how large this particular circle happens to be. There are no dualities, nothing is really polarized, once we place it within a larger circular space — valley wide, global, and beyond.

I stand at the center, in my womb, the still point of my turning world. Circular orbits surround me, concentric. Each a cycling planetary energy, each one including, enclosing the next. There is no end to it. Space reaches out — and in — forever.

Lightning pierces the night sky. My hands reach out and up into space — forever.  
My feet press down, to the mother, firmly — and she presses back. Through my womb I  
direct the light from sky to earth and refract it, in rainbow colors to spread in each of the  
four directions and all points in between.

Column

## BREAKING FREE: An Illusion

*Sagewoman* #45, Spring 1999

© Ann Kreilkamp

I was the *only* person in my family to break free. That's how strong our German family system was. My rebellion was doubly astonishing because I was the model child for all the others. Maybe that's why the atmosphere of obedience felt so oppressive to me. Maybe that's why I *noticed* it, and, when the time came, wrenched that heavy burden from my shoulders and hurled it to the ground.

That story of how I broke free of parental and societal bonds when I was 26 years old became a teaching tool, an essential gadget in my bag of tricks. I relished telling the tale, relished the astonished looks in my listeners' eyes. I enjoyed their participation in my own freedom, if but only momentarily. The story served to set in motion the same dynamics for them when their time came.

When we tell our tales we complete our stories, we close that chapter, and can move on. I've heard this many times. Well then, why did I not move on? Why repeat the story? Was it simply because there were so many eager listeners? Or were other, deeper motives at work. Was I, by repeatedly telling my tale of breaking free from all that would oppose me, by insisting on my complete and triumphant autonomy, forever running in place?

The whole family thinks the break from my parents was over religious belief. It was but the first in a long line of breaks: from my first husband, from my children, from my second husband, then my third. I was proud of my capacity to assess the situation, find it wanting, and move on.

I notice the tone here is ironic. Not one I usually use — not for myself, nor in any public writing. What does this tone signify? Where am I going with this tale?

I suspect the tone is a symptom of a process that has just barely begun. A process in which I am, once again, uncovering something that I did not know was there, something inside me, something deep. And worse, this is something of which I have long been proud, so that now, I must, pardon the phrase, “eat shit.” I blush in the face of my own blustering arrogance. I see how I have been manipulated, once again, by my mind’s tendency to transform anything I do into a legend and brag about it. I sense that my irony is therefore a defense — against my anguish at the stupid mistake? At my abysmal ignorance? My shameful pretense? Whatever was the stimulus for this defense, I sense it lies just below the surface, and, once unleashed, it will overwhelm me. I must not allow that. I must work through this process with dignity and circumspection — so I think.

Just as I have done for years. Always looking at myself, attempting to get to the bottom of things — in order to break free of whatever was hampering me at the time. My speciality has been “breaking free of ‘unconscious assumptions’”— those unnoticed habits of mind that pervade the mental atmosphere in which all our thoughts arise; which we might see as the hard-wiring of our brains, but which, I discovered, can be melted down. I wanted to melt down my assumptions because I knew — and still do know, about this I am not ironic — that once brought to the clear light of awareness, assumptions lose their power. That they are like bogey-men in the dark, hiding under the bed, upon which I lie paralyzed with fear.

If I can, whatever the terrible odds, set my foot down on the floor, and not be snatched by the bogey-man’s bloody claws, then I can stand up and walk. Or run. I have broken free.

This was the metaphor that I have operated with all these years, a resonance reaching back into the darkness of a fear-strapped childhood from which I have been forever running.

But now, the hard part. Where I must drop the irony and say what exactly is going on. What new thing has grabbed my attention and demanded that I stop in my tracks, stop running, stop running away? For that is exactly what I have been doing, I now realize. I have run from the very thing that I thought I have been running towards, real connections with other people. I thought my differences with my parents, husbands, even children, were so great that I had to leave. That I had to go off on my own and establish my autonomous identity. And maybe I did. Maybe I needed to do that, as an initial step in a process. But the process, no matter how large or long, winds back on itself; once again, I have caught a glimpse of its subtly curving walls.

I thought I was leaving all these connections behind because they were not real, i.e., because I couldn't "be myself" with them. So I went to look for myself, and found a disappearing act. All the many and various identities of which I have been so proud are veils of illusion I have worn (proudly) to entrance myself into believing that I was separate from *them*, different, better than/worse than.

The above realization came to me, stole into me like a thief in the night and robbed me of the meta-identity I will call She Who Breaks Free, and who has encased all those smaller identities, two evenings ago, as the moon was darkening from her fullness. I am entering the dark of my own moon, the Crone phase of life, and things have a way of catching up. Things that used to look so obvious and certain, are now laughable. Things like identity, especially, whatever I used to call myself, whatever I still call myself when people ask, because they want to know about identity; that's how we are taught, to establish positions, poses, which we then defend and promote.

To make a long story short (the story involves a ritual I did with myself, including a 45-minute meditation during which I fell asleep several times, a candle, a Tarot reading, and a brilliant flash of insight once I had gone to bed), I realized that I never did leave my parents, never did break free, not really. And that realization came as not only a jolt,

but as a thrill of discovery, the kind of thrill that I feel when my world has suddenly, unaccountably, opened. Because after all these years of “separation,” years in which my heart has felt the blows, over and over again, of my mind’s insistence on feeling estranged, I realized that my isolation is not only self-imposed, it is a joke! Not real.

Now comes the really, really hard part, the part where I must soften, soften the mind and its penchant for identity, melt down the brain as a whole. So that I listen, listen, listen! — to the heart. To the heart and its message. A message which comes as a whisper in the dark. A quiet, barely discernible whisper in the exact center of an enormous, yawning cave, and it draws me like a magnet. I am making my way slowly, slowly to the center, to that still point of the turning world, to the place where all the illusions flying by, all the beliefs, religious and otherwise, which I have used to divide and conquer, are just so much mind-stuff, that joke!

I am so scared. The saliva in my mouth tastes metallic. I am so scared to drop into my own heartbeat, for I know that it will take me back. That I will fall into the bottomless depths of my own mother’s heartbeat, and her mother’s, and hers before that. I am so scared. My eyes flutter, glitter in panic. For I can feel that beat starting to drive me down, that rhythm of the universe, that intimate union, and know that I am lost. There is no breaking free, there is only breaking through, to that vast ocean of awareness washing eonic shores.

Below the shouts of identity lies Love’s whisper. When she calls, we can only respond. We are as infants, helpless, pulling milk from our Mother’s soft, rounded breast.

---

Update 2010: this essay was/is also informed by forty years of contemplation of my astrological birth chart, in which the planets Mars (thrusting energy) opposes Uranus (sudden changes) in the signs of Gemini (surface understanding) in the 6<sup>th</sup> house (daily

practices, analysis) and Sagittarius (larger perspectives) in the 12<sup>th</sup> house (investigating the unconscious).

There, I just had to say it! As incomprehensible as it may be to others, to me that one long sentence speaks volumes, as a sort of code for both “break free” as an unconscious reaction to internal pressure for enormous change, and “break through,” as its eventual conscious transformation from reaction to responsiveness.



The day Dad left home, shipping out to the Phillipines

World War II, August 1943



Our nuclear family in 1969, only months before it exploded.  
I kept the children with me until 1972, when I moved to California.



With sons, Sean and Colin, during our first summer visit, when they were nine and seven years old. I had left them with their father in Massachusetts when I moved to California to take a teaching job at a small experimental college. Our summer visits lasted for six years, until communication with their dad broke down to the point where he refused to let me see them again.



Christmas in Seattle 1989, with Colin and Sean, two years after our joyful reunion.



Seven out of eight of us, in 2012, pose for a pic with Mom just before Kris and John flew with her to Louisiana, where our sister, Paula, awaited her. (I'm sitting above Mom, in white pants). Mom had been in a care center after Dad died, at 96, and one day at lunch, despite her dementia, she looked into Kristin's eyes and said, "My life is crazy. I want to go live with a family that loves me." Kris (in blue shirt) told me thought she'd forget her request by the next day. She did not. Paula was overjoyed. Paula's husband Dave took them out to lunch with cloth napkins every day for the next two years until she too, let go, at 96.



MOM

Renee Rosenberger Kreilkamp

1918 - 2014