

Interview

THE CRONE CHRONICLES EXPERIMENT

Crone Magazine #5, 2012

Ann K: Crone magazine Publisher Anne Niven interviewed me on the occasion of my leaving my temporary position as editor of Crone magazine, the successor to Crone Chronicles (1989-2001). Begun in 2008, Crone magazine turned out to have a short-lived tenure. This interview appeared in what turned out to be in its fifth and final edition.

I've known Ann for close to 20 years, during which her visionary mind never ceased to amaze me. It was from Ann that I first encountered "Crone" as a living archetype, and began to contemplate Her place in my life. When I asked Ann to help me with the relaunch of Crone four years ago, she graciously gifted me with her experience (and funding) to get the project off the ground. I will always be grateful to my mentor and dear friend. — Ann Newkirk Niven

How did you first encounter the concept of Crone?

Crone has always been with me, though not in a conscious way. As a little girl I wanted to be 65, and told adults that, over and over. (They were always quite surprised!) I figured that by 65, I would know what adults knew — all of it! (As a ten-year-old I

began to read the encyclopedia from front-to-back, thinking there was a finite body of unalterable “knowledge” to be absorbed in order to become “wise.” I got to “C” before I gave up!)

I also longed for a time — presumably when I became “old” — when my appearance would have altered enough so that I would no longer be the object of men’s prying eyes and could begin to live freely, from the inside out, with no restraint and no concern for others’ expectations.

It was as an astrologer in the 1980s that the idea of Crone came into conscious awareness through my understanding of the Saturn cycle. These stages parallel those of the Triple Goddess: Maiden, Mother, Crone. Each Saturn cycle is almost thirty years long, so if we live through three cycles, then ideally we experience three developmental stages.

I realized that this process is evolutionary and that each of these three Saturn cycles has its own meaning and its own set of priorities and values. In counseling my astrological clients, I’d talk about the Saturn process. The first cycle is devoted to figuring out the rules of the culture and trying to either fit in or rebel. The second cycle is meant to be a time when we focus on figuring out how to fulfill our own individual natures within (or outside of) society’s boundaries. And the third cycle? We don’t know how to do this one, because we haven’t appreciated it for a long time. So, I’d ask, how do we live after 60? How can we consciously work with the aging process? How to value it, and ourselves for all we have learned and have to give to society?

So that was the background, leading up to the Big Dream I had in June, 1989.

Can you tell us about that dream?

In the middle of the night I was startled awake by a strong clear impression of a giant raven clawing into my shoulders from behind, cawing, no shrieking, “*Wake up! Wake up! It’s time!*”

Instantly, intuitively, I knew it was the Crone, and that I was to somehow help Her come back into collective awareness. But how? I had no idea. All I knew was that She had delivered a very powerful “big dream” that would not let me go.

Three days later I was drinking sake at a 40th birthday party with about a dozen other women in the tea room of a Chinese restaurant in Jackson, Wyoming, where I then lived. At one point I told my dream to my nearest neighbor, Clarissa, and others overheard it. Then they all wanted to know the dream. When I told it again, I found myself raising my little sake cup in a toast and saying, “We’ll have to start the Crone Chronicles!” (What?!? What did I just say?!?)

The way to help Her come back was already there. It had just come rumbling out of my throat without conscious intent: “Crone Chronicles.”

At this point, the tone in the room mysteriously shifted, to become both deeply sacred and utterly irreverent. For the next two hours we were riveted in our conversation about the Crone. The atmosphere was palpable, electric. When I got home, I realized that we had forgotten to sing “Happy Birthday” to Bernice.

Three days later, Clarissa lent me her Apple computer and printer, my boyfriend agreed to use his Xerox machine, others gave me \$50 for stamps, and a list of about 100 friends. An eight-page newsletter, “Calling All Crones!” went out to that list by mail; fifteen women subscribed, and our journey began.

What happened next?

The next two years were difficult, with lots of conflict within the editorial board. I imagined these women as a group of equals, but as vision-holder I held more power. Every time the situation veered in a direction I thought too small for the archetypal nature of the enterprise, I would yank it back, and then feel guilty for overriding the group. For example, one woman wanted to focus more narrowly, just on menopause. Instantly, from me, came a powerful response. “No!”

These power struggles began to wear me down. I began to think about shutting Crone Chronicles down. One morning I decided to take a two-mile walk north to a warm

springs near where I lived, wrestling with myself with every step. Once there I sat on the ground and looked around. A raven was sitting on a pole of a nearby barbed wire fence, facing the other direction. I decided to ask Raven for a sign: *Should I continue this contentious project?* Raven ignored me, and a few minutes later, flew away.

The walk back to my yurt was even more difficult; in addition to my tumultuous thoughts I had to contend with my foolishness in having asked Raven for a sign. “Forget magic! “ I thought. “It’s ridiculous to think I can telepathically communicate with a wild bird.”

The next morning I was out once again walking, without my glasses (which I had put into my pocket.) I had just about made the decision to quit publishing and was struggling to truly embrace that idea when I suddenly heard the whoosh of powerful wings coming from behind. Instantly, I knew that it was Raven. As if in an altered state, I stopped, reached slowly into my pocket for my glasses, and put them on — just in time to see Raven sail two feet above my head, fly in front of me about 50 feet, and then turn, and sail directly back over me.

That was it. That was my sign. And I knew it.

When I got to my office that morning I checked the astrological chart of the Crone Chronicles, and discovered that this birth chart’s most potent (and contentious) aspect pattern (exact Moon/Pluto conjunction in Scorpio square exact Venus/Mars conjunction in Leo) had been crossed by the transit Moon during the minutes when that Raven visitation took place.

So not only did I get a sign, I got a confirmation from the chart that yes, the sign was real.

These two Raven visitations powered the entire twelve-year herstory of the Crone Chronicles. In order to fuse my energy with such a project I needed miracles, and I got them.

Has Raven continued to visit you?

Raven held a numinous quality for me during the entire course of the magazine. At one point, Raven dropped a feather as She flew by. On another occasion, a reader sent me a delicate, carefully-wrapped raven's skull. The image of Raven, Her beak open, cawing, "Wake Up! It's Time!" graced the cover of every issue. About a year before Crone Chronicles ended (and before I knew it was ending), I found a dead raven in an alley near our office and watched it decompose day-by-day.

How did you become involved with Crones Counsel?

The youngest women in the original Crone Chronicles group kept talking about holding a gathering of crones — as a camp out in the woods! I kept discouraging the idea, saying that most women of crone age wouldn't like to sleep on the ground. But the idea wouldn't go away.

However, I sure didn't want to be the one to organize it, and I knew our group wouldn't have the staying power to put it on.

Around that time a subscription to Crone Chronicles came from a woman who included her business card. On it were the words: "Shauna Adix," CEO (Crone Empowering Others)." Needless to say, I was intrigued. Shauna lived in Salt Lake City, so I arranged to meet her there. Over dinner Shauna told me that, ever since she had retired from her position as Director of the Women's Center at the University of Utah, she had been mulling over the question, "What Is Crone Work?"

So I said, "Well, I've got a project for you, if you want it: would you like to be in charge of a gathering of old women?" "Yes," she responded, with no hesitation.

Shauna gathered a group of Salt Lake City women around her and started planning. By the time that first Counsel, held in a Jackson Hole hotel in October, 1992, 107 women had registered from sixteen states. I was connected to the Counsel by the fact that I'd suggested the idea to Shauna, and because most of the women who came to the first Counsel found out about it through Crone Chronicles. Two years later, the Counsel became a non-profit. At Shauna's request, I served one three-year term on the Board.

How did Crone Chronicles change over time? How did your ideas about who Crone is evolve?

My main goal was to keep the magazine focused while encouraging it to deepen over time. I was to activate the archetype, nothing less would do. Much of the early material we published bored me — it felt trivial and superficial, culturally conditioned; but I knew that the articles would deepen if I just kept at it. Each time I wrote an editorial, or an essay, it was intended to take the reader deeper into Crone reality on an archetypal level. So it's not that my ideas about Crone evolved, but rather that my concepts about how to convey the archetypal reality of Crone kept mutating as the readers deepened their connections to Crone. Eventually, I began to eagerly await submissions as the stories became continuously richer and more multilayered.

What did evolve was my ability to enlarge my capacity to hold the Crone consciousness as it emerged from its dark burial ground into the light of day and got diffracted into a million different rays by the consciousness of each individual woman as she found the Crone arising within her. Meeting women face-to-face, soul-to-soul at annual four-day Crones Counsels was especially fruitful for me.

As a writer and editor, my task was to allow and hold the energy of the Crone, write to that depth, and inspire others to move into depths of themselves where Crone resides. I was, and remain, very concerned that Crone not become a “brand,” not get co-opted by the tendency of our culture to devour and drain the potency out of truly revolutionary ideas. Using the word “crone” helps the archetype stay sharp, non-conformative, and anti-consumerist.

Why is “Crone” a better name for this archetype than, say, “Wise Woman”?

Unlike “Wisewoman,” or “Elder,” or “Grandmother,” the word “Crone” holds a penumbra of taboo, signifying a being of immense power, so intense that She feels both sacred and forbidden, fascinating and terrifying. Crone is not sweet and kind, nor is Her wisdom comforting, though it can enlarge perspective. Rather, Crone wisdom is straight, true, fierce, independent, astringent, and utterly fearless. Crone is both messenger and psychopomp, midwife to Death — including the death of the ego. Crone is paradoxical;

both transcending biology and at ease with the body's slow decomposition in the cyclical dance of the life force, that eternal upwelling and subsiding of form after form after form.

Crone is at one with both life and death, form and formlessness, being and becoming. Crone has absorbed both the innocent, spring-like qualities of the Maiden, and the Summer of the Mother's nurturant Love, to harvest the Fall's decay as it shades into Winter's deep, hidden, pregnant quiet.

Because Crone is no longer bound by cultural conditioning, she is free to authentically relate — or not! — to all beings without attachment. As Her perspective widens to include the entire cosmos, so does both Her compassion for suffering increase, and Her need for standing in her own center, in silence and solitude, with the great buzzing booming confusion of human drama wheeling around Her. In allowing Crone to illuminate our awareness as we age, we gain detachment from all that used to so trouble us — provided, of course, that our experiences are consciously witnessed and integrated. A big if! (Not all old women are crones.)

Crone comes as the final stage of life, as She-Who-Gets-Ready-to-Let-Go-of-This-Life. Crone has Death walking by Her left shoulder, and, when we embody Her, the experience of consciously walking with one's own death in mind clarifies intent. Extraneous issues just drop away.

There came a time when you re-evaluated the subject of gender as it pertains to Crone consciousness. Can you tell us about that process?

My view of Crone is more archetypal than psychological or sociological: I see her as the elder female aspect inside the human being — of either gender. I may have been the only person in the entire history of the magazine who actually thought that way! Most, if not all, of our readers thought of Crone as exclusively female-gendered. I can now see that the hunger to have this aspect of their lives be honored and respected — and for a healing community with each other during that process — were front and center for our readers and contributors. But to me, that stance — of Crone as exclusively in the female

body — felt too limiting, an attempt to confine the archetypal reality of “Crone” to its biological, psychological, and sociological meanings.

Crone Chronicles was actually never exclusively female; the very first issue had a male psychiatrist in it, and I invited a male/female couple to be columnists soon after. Gender issues were not a major source of conflict early on. However, when Jeff Joel, the man who would become my fourth husband, came into my life, the trouble surfaced. This was one year after I started the magazine, and I immediately enlisted his help. I loved the editorial and publicity aspects, and asked him to take on all the rest — circulation, production, legal and technical support. He reluctantly agreed.

As time went on, the time he had to spend on Crone Chronicles grew, which was difficult for both of us. I didn’t want to take on the work he was doing and depended on him to accomplish those tasks, but he was involved only because he felt duty-bound to follow through on what he had agreed to. This uncomfortable situation was exacerbated by the separatist attitudes of some of our readers.

More than once, when Jeff answered the Crone Chronicles phone, the woman on the other end of the line would be shocked that a man had answered the phone. Some women reacted rudely, saying they didn’t want to talk to a man, and even hung up on him! Naturally, that hurt his feelings, and my efforts to include men caused additional friction.

The backlash you endured in reaction to Jeff’s place in the magazine seems to suggest that many women viewed your openness to males as an outright betrayal. Did it feel that way to you as well?

Obviously, the wounding in women by patriarchal culture was so deep that, for now, it appears that the sociological meaning of Crone needs to be front and center. But I perceive this now with hindsight. At the time, I fought it, because it felt like a separation between the sexes that I wanted to bridge.

The backlash seemed to be deeply wounding to you personally. Did it have an impact on your relationship to the magazine?

Yes, that experience was deeply wounding to me, to Jeff, and to our relationship. Looking back, I can see that it was just my ego — which cycled through the usual conditioned female poses of feeling betrayed, misunderstood, victimized, and so on — that was affected. But that experience didn't affect my momentum to publish the magazine, which was powered by the archetype. Nothing could stop it, once I had signed on.

That brings up a related difficulty, one which I notice leaders tend to fall prey to when they feel they are being utilized as a vehicle by some kind of higher power. Archetypal overlighting is exciting, yes. It energizes so powerfully that all circuits are in danger of burn out, and the ego can inflate to monstrous proportions. The key is *not* to identify with the archetype, to remember that one is human.

In my case, I was very fortunate to have the counsel of my dear friend Claudia during those crucial early years. She kept me from going too far out or up as I ecstatically rode the great black bird. She helped soften my natural, fiery Sagittarian Sun/Ascendant/Mars arrogance, which was also fueled by my position as eldest in a family of eight.

And yet, and yet. When it was time to stop, I knew it. That moment came suddenly, out of the blue, in the fall of 2000. When I started to work on the editorial for issue #45, I noticed that I had no energy. For the first time, the work bored me. (For me that is always a sign of impending change.) I went to Jeff and said that I couldn't do it anymore. "Let's just stop," I said.

But Jeff — who had partnered with me only out of a sense of responsibility — said, "No, we can't just stop. That wouldn't be fair to the readers." So we announced that we would be ending with the next issue, which we would dedicate to our readers' letters. Instead of just stopping abruptly, we held a long, drawn-out closing ceremony. That final issue contained 35 pages of letters, an extraordinary outpouring of gratitude which more than made up for any past wounding.

When the magazine closed, did your connection to Crone continue?

It subsided back to where it was before the dream that pulsed it into manifestation. That was eleven years ago, and my life has changed drastically since then. Within eighteen months of closing Crone Chronicles, Jeff and I had moved from Jackson to Bloomington, Indiana.

More shockingly, four months later, Jeff suddenly died. With his death in January 2003, I was launched into a profound kind of crone work, what I called “conscious grieving.” This was a deeply intimate, solitary and yet guided process that lasted for one full year.

That year launched me into the experience of the multidimensional nature of the universe, with the veils between dimensions gossamer thin. My connection with Jeff continued and deepened; he still serves as a partner and mentor to this day. As I moved more fully into this phase of my life, I have shared my experience through a book, *This Vast Being: A Voyage through Grief and Exaltation*, and now on my blog at exopermaculture.com. It feels as if everything I have ever done and been, all the various lives I have led, have been woven again into a wholly new cloth.

I have noticed that my interest in “Crone” as a phase of life has waned over the last decade. I identify less and less with being in a body on this planet; it’s as if time has opened into space, so that I identify more with the vastness of infinite consciousness than I do with the narrow arc of one incorporated lifetime on a tiny planet whirling through the cosmos.

I feel like a traveler from afar who has come here to mingle with earthlings. Of course, I still play a role in our connection to Earth through my activist work as a permaculturist heading up a neighborhood garden, but I’ve noticed that my passions are returning to what originally fueled them: ontology, epistemology, and the links between them.

The question, “What is real, and how do we know it?” which dominated me in graduate school, fuels me once again after decades on the back burner. On the blog, I seek to help others open to the universe as an infinite array, without having to “believe” any of it; to encourage us to continuously expand our awareness while remaining

centered. Let us ground our feet into the Earth and our head in the sky, and simply enjoy the ride! As bodies, we are antennae for Earth. As souls, we are transmitters of the spirit. Both! Always balancing, moving into equanimity in the center of whirling forces that buffet us during this extraordinary time of vast change.

In my personal life, I am fortunate in that my son Colin has moved from Massachusetts to Bloomington; of course, I want my other son Sean and his family to move here, too. My fondest wish would be to create a family compound, with them in the house and me in a yurt in the back yard. That's where I feel most comfortable, in a simple structure with walls thin enough to hear Raven's cry. So perhaps Crone lives in me still!