

Essay

“GETTING OLD” vs. “GROWING OLD”

Reflections on “Crone”

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I offer these reflections on “crone” as a challenge to members of the baby-boomer generation, now beginning to pass through the gate of sixty. For, though all decade markers feel significant, this one does seem like a particularly crucial crossroads. We may still feel young, but we can no longer, if we are honest, claim to BE young.

It appears that we are each offered a clear choice of two very different paths to follow as we advance into old age. I call these paths “getting old” and “growing old.” The first is the default choice, and leads to unnecessary suffering. The other path, “growing old,” believe it or not, leads to unexpected serenity, even joy. Moreover, it appears that a single, simple criterion distinguishes the two, and this is a deliberately inculcated awareness of the multidimensional process of aging.

What follows is an explication of the two paths, and their respective fruits.

As the third millennium dawns, the word “crone” gradually re-enters the vernacular, its meaning transformed from the dictionary’s “ugly, withered, witchlike old woman.” *Crone* has been resurrected: as an honorific title bestowed or claimed in “croning ceremonies” by women of a certain age; as a newly re-activated archetype of the collective unconscious; as the third aspect, or phase, of the ancient Triple Goddess, Maiden-Mother-Crone. Many elder women refer to themselves as “crone,” both to signal a connection with others who call themselves crone and to acknowledge their own inner value.

Yet no matter how “enlightened” we think ourselves, the transition between the second and third stages of a woman’s life does feel momentous. Most of us confront a seemingly instinctive reluctance to embrace our own aging process. I am reminded of a local woman who paints portraits of young and old women, but not middle-aged women. Why not middle-aged women? “Because,” she says, “they do not like what their portraits show them.”

We should not be surprised at our reluctance. As members of a throw-away culture that recoils from aging, old age, and death, it feels natural to shy away from any reminder of wrinkled skin, sagging bodies and forgetful minds. We all have a fundamental need to belong. None of us wants to lose value over time.

To embrace Crone is to become the Fool in the world’s eyes. We dare to step into a life that no longer takes its cues from the outside world. Indeed, one definition for Crone is “She who lives from the inside out.”

Our capacity to embrace Crone emerges naturally from our willingness, throughout our lives, to live in harmony with the laws of nature, both inner and outer. Experience teaches us that all of life moves in cycles, and that in any cycle we sense the life force press forward to begin, then settle into fullness, and then, when the time is ripe, to gradually — or suddenly — let go.

Early on we learned to flow with day and night, summer and winter. In our teens we surrendered to the wax and wane of the blood’s lunar flow. Over and over again, our social world gifted us with and then yanked away friends, lovers, children, money, honors, things, careers. At about the half-century mark even the Mother’s menstrual cycle ceased, ushering us into the final, letting go, stage of life.

Just as the carefree innocence of Maiden gave way to full nurturing immersion into family, social and career responsibilities of Motherhood, so too Motherhood gives way, if we are fortunate, to some measure of solitude and its fruits: the detachment, wisdom, and compassion of Crone.

We who, moment by moment, embrace death in order to more fully live, know that each succeeding cycle or phase of a cycle is or can be experienced as subtler, more complex, and thus more interesting, than the one from which it emerged. Each phase requires that the prior phase die and be absorbed into a larger reality. So while the gap between Mother and Crone may feel enormous, so did the gap between Maiden and Mother. Inexorable hormonal and biological shifts herald both transformations; they accompany or cause changes in appearance, psychology, values, perception of and manner of interacting with the world.

Both Maiden and Mother have socially recognized value. It felt natural to recognize the gap between the first two stages and, unless we were “tomboys,” embrace the shift from one to the other. In contrast, given our cultural conditioning, we tend to resist the shift between Mother and Crone. And since we are the first generation in recorded history to look forward to life spans long enough for the Crone stage of life to be significant, it is difficult to honor or even recognize the contours and content of what we are heading into.

Indeed, our transition into Crone appears first as Mystery, a great unknown. Insofar as we have identified with our bodily form — and our scientific, materialistic culture suggests —urges, almost insists, that we do this — we will want to hold on to this life forever. Yet we cannot. Crone is the stage where form ultimately yields to the spirit — and there’s no holding it back. Like the phoenix from its ashes, spirit rises. Sooner or later, gradually or suddenly, we all incandesce.

Indeed, another definition of Crone might be “she who transforms matter into spirit.”

Let us grab hold of this unparalleled opportunity to both acknowledge and celebrate our destiny as pioneers, the first generations in thousands of years who may live long enough to consciously map this archetypal wilderness.

And yet we cannot pretend that we are inventing something new. For if Crone is an aspect of the ancient Triple Goddess, then her place in the pantheon was secure and her

divine realm reflected in terrestrial affairs. And, as an archetype, the attitudes, values and possibilities of Crone have nestled in latent form within the human psyche forever. What we *are* inventing is a way of understanding, enhancing and productively working with our experience of the aging process in a contemporary context.

Few models exist, so few that sometimes we wonder if we're just pretending, making it all up! Yet certain truths *do* seem self-evident. For example, we recognize intuitively that not all women become "crones." Some do, but most don't. But why do we say this? What is our criterion for "crone"? How do we distinguish between those who do and don't? What *is* crone?

One might say that we wish to describe the difference between those who "age gracefully" and those who don't. But should we even use this hackneyed phrase? For though "grace" is something that I, for one — being awkward and easily aroused — aspire to, the phrase itself does not explicitly honor the power inherent in we who aim to live from the inside out and who may — at times, and with good reason! — choose to ignore cultural forms of politeness. That's why we use the so-called "ugly" word "crone." Crone is taboo, it carries a charge. Crone signifies at the very least an unpredictable woman, one who is no longer bound by convention, who endures a larger perspective, and cannot, nay, will not be silenced.

I am often asked, at what age does a woman become crone? Many markers have been suggested. When her blood flow ceases, for example. Or at one of her decade birthdays, the 50th, or the 60th. When her children leave home. When she retires from the workplace, or gets divorced. When her husband or partner dies. When she "loses her looks."

In my view, as Louis Armstrong is reported to have said when asked about jazz: "If you have to ask, you'll never know." Well, maybe not never. But it might take a few more years, a few more knocks, a bit more practice at letting-go before any particular woman can say, without reservation, that she *is* crone.

And for some women, of course — both those who recognize intuitively that they've been working with crone energy for years, even decades, and those who quiver with rage or terror at the very mention of the word — the question does not even come up. Such women hold the extremes.

Most of us occupy a vague and wavering middle ground. Crone steals in softly over the years, heralded by little clues — we have trouble getting the waiter’s attention at a restaurant; our face falls and our memory stalls; our hands morph into our mother’s hands; we go to bed early, can’t sleep through the night, and no longer spring up upon awakening . . .

Reverberations deepen. We realize that we have fewer years to live than we have already lived; every decision feels momentous, and we refuse to waste any more time. We wonder how we will be remembered, and how we want to remember others. We actually consider the idea of long-term care insurance. Memories from long ago steal in, fill our nostrils, our skin, confuse and enliven each moment. Horizons broaden, deepen, to include more, more, ever more . . .

We all have experiences like these. Yet how many of us embrace them, see them for what they are, heralds of a primary shift in focus, the spirit’s longing, an altered life?

In any case, though for some the crone stage arrives as an inner state or condition of awareness early, some late, for some gradually, others suddenly, and for still others not at all, the archetype must be consciously activated in order to be fully and authentically experienced.

But what does it mean to “activate the archetype”? The original question remains: just what, really, *is* crone?

For me, the essence of crone is that she “eats her own shadow.” As she ages, she continues to unfold the complexity and vastness of her original nature by facing, embracing, and then consciously incorporating unknown aspects of herself as they rise from the depths to the light of conscious awareness. In this process she evolves, or individuates, grows towards wholeness.

These unknown aspects appear at first by projection: we recognize them in the face or manner of someone to whom we are greatly attracted — or repelled; we identify them as characters in novels, or movies; they appear as dream figures, or in a painting; as an odd song we suddenly begin to hum; as enigmatic words that shock, written by our own hand. Subtly, gradually, the realization dawns: all we perceive as apart from us is in reality a part of us.

Sometimes our discoveries delight us, when qualities, skills, talents, long forgotten or ignored, emerge; just as often what surfaces from the unconscious makes us cringe. We blush to

recognize the machinations of ego, those little pockets of mental justification that mask a stubborn, wounded pride, a refusal to embrace the Other as ourself.

In any case, no matter what “comes up,” the woman who aspires to full cronehood accepts and works to integrate any so-called foreign matter that her inner world reveals. And throughout this process, she knows that there is only one requirement: awareness.

Yet this requirement seems so simple, so elemental, as to be either obvious or absurd. When she tells others about her focus on “awareness” some look at her blankly. They stare — and look away. She shrugs. That’s okay. Sooner or later they too will encounter an insistent urge to know themselves, their own inner sanctum. Sooner or later, if we are lucky, we all will, and our cultural life will be immeasurably enriched.

In order to “eat her shadow,” the would-be crone endeavors to remain as conscious as she possibly can of whatever she is going through moment by moment by moment.

Of course this is impossible. What the meditator calls “monkey mind” always interferes. When we pay attention to the workings of this mind of ours, we discover that it cannot help but *think*, continuously drumming up images, nudges, admonitions, regrets, hopes — it hardly matters what about! Pay close attention, and we notice that as soon as an idea pops up, we become internally agitated. Ideas, it appears, are always accompanied by desire, whether subtle or blatant. In wanting to do something, or get something, or get rid of or avoid something or someone, we sense our muscles tense, coil for action.

Since we have lived for many decades, we have entertained lots of ideas — way too many to count! We have also begun to notice that ideas are linked to expectations, and that expectations either come true or they don’t.

When they do, we puff up; when they don’t, we crash. First up, then down, like yo-yos jerked by an invisible hand, we have dealt with the see-saw of triumph and disappointment so many times that eventually, if we are aware — if we can begin to catch ourselves in the act of thinking a certain (usually secret, shameful, worrisome and obsessive) thought — then we can also learn to interrupt the predictable patterns that thought triggers us to act out, dramas that frankly, have lost their luster and begun to “get old.”

In my observation, most people themselves, over time, just “get old.” They become predictable, rigid, stuck; locked into repeating idiosyncratic mental and emotional patterns, they ossify, petrify, crystallize out. Some few rare ones however, instead “grow old.” I would like to reserve the honorific title “crone” for the decidedly alive female members of this latter group. For even as their bodies lose energy, their spirits eagerly adapt to and digest any experience, no matter how wild or forbidding.

Without awareness, the first road, “getting older,” is easy, indeed inevitable. It’s the default mode. Gravity sets in, pulls us inexorably downward. Bodies decay at a more or less predictable rate. No matter how we kick and scream, no matter how much we deny or disguise or manage to temporarily delay or even reverse (we hope) the aging process, the road ahead does lead inexorably down, and we end up bitter, defeated, resentful or resigned. In this scenario, no matter how long our life, it feels nasty, brutish and short. Shit happens, and then you die.

The alternative, “growing older,” on the other hand, is difficult, because it requires great effort — not to *do* something, but to let go of our identification with changing surface conditions. Instead, we *witness* whatever we do, think, and feel. In other words, we aim to shift our awareness from what we are doing, thinking, feeling, to the mysterious realm behind and independent of the “ten thousand things” that entrain our attention and keep us riled up.

As we begin to practice awareness, training ourselves to wake up over and over again in the present moment, we unexpectedly discover that we also begin to enter into a different relationship with our own aging process.

Though we still find ourselves in resistance to gravity’s downward pull, we notice our resistance as natural, and accept ourselves in moments of resistance, too. That’s okay. It’s all okay. In the midst of witnessing our resistance we paradoxically begin to accept this and other facets of aging as inevitable while simultaneously aiming to increase our sensitivity not just to changes in the physical realm, but to changes in emotional, mental and spiritual realms as well. Furthermore, in our awareness of the various dimensions of aging, we aim to support and nourish the entire process, and share its fruits with others.

Unlike the one-dimensional linear awareness of past and future that our culture encourages us to experience, our practice of immersing ourselves in an accepting awareness of the present

moment begins to spread, to the point where it includes paradox, a bi-valent awareness and appreciation of opposites as equally real. In one stroke we break through the “logic” of systemic cultural fundamentalism, for which only one side of any “contradiction” can be “true.” For, as awareness widens, we begin to realize that it’s all true, all of it! Which means that there is nothing to judge, no one to blame. Yes/no, either/or, black/white, off/on dissolve into this, just this: our recognition that opposites merely pose as enemies in the drama of the whole.

Gradually our conscious awareness and embrace of paradox diversifies into a multi-faceted, multidimensional comprehension that expands into the vastness and has no discernable limits. Thus, while our bodies slide down hill, our spirits, on the other hand, begin to soar — a prime paradox of the aging process!

Another paradox; for we both acknowledge the aging process and work to slow or temporarily reverse its effects. Thus, though we aim to be consciously aware of the body’s downhill slide towards oblivion, we also nourish it with exercise and food so that it may remain lubricated, energized, and flexible for as long as possible.

We view our stewardship of our own bodies as fundamental. For unless we work to keep our bodies in relatively prime condition, we may become so distracted by pain and disability that our awareness of larger dimensions cannot fully flower. And without this flowering, we may neither appreciate the fullness of our own lives nor be able to participate in and, as elders, serve as mentors in the life of the larger culture.

Another paradox thus presents itself: for while it may appear that we are being selfish by focusing into our own bodies, we do so not only for own sake, but for the sake of others. Our aim is twofold: to both share the specific fruits that we have gained through our process of conscious aging, and to prevent becoming parasitic on society in our final years.

Given that the rate of decay of the body seems to increase the longer we live, the differential between being aware of what’s going on internally and not being aware continually widens, and the longer we wait to “wake up” to the reality of our situation as aging persons, the more painful it may be to allow in this awareness. So it behooves us to wake up sooner rather than later!

But in order to do so, we must break through our lifelong cultural conditioning. This is no small feat! We were encouraged from the time we were small children to “be brave,” to “put on a

happy face,” to “not cry” — in short, not to experience the very real feelings that are centered in our bodily awareness.

And yet here, another paradox comes to our aid: for the older we get, the more our culture ignores us, wants to be rid of us, and thus the less we have to lose by breaking through into a different way of experiencing reality. Outcasts already, we consciously choose to cast ourselves outside the cultural mold and begin to focus inward, through awareness, on the constantly changing situation within our own bodies.

And still another paradox: For though we deliberately narrow our focus to what is going on in the body, this focus actually alerts us not only to our physical, but to our emotional, mental and spiritual condition in any given moment as well! By narrowing, we widen. By focusing, we expand.

Say, for example, that our digestion isn’t working well. Rather than trying to ignore it, or “take something for it” to mask the condition, we pay attention to it. We focus on the discomfort in our abdomen and just sit there with it, at one with it. As we do this, we will at some point notice that not only do we not feel well physically, we also feel out of sorts emotionally, mentally, and even spiritually.

I notice this every time I “go home” to visit my original family. When in each other’s presence, we all start farting! There is simply way too much unprocessed stuff from the past flying around for us not to feel it in our guts.

When I pay close attention to my own experience, I notice that certain ideas in my mind and heart run parallel to my gassy, bloated, lethargic state. I “can’t digest” this or that parent or sibling attitude, so I judge internally and feel weird in their presence, fake; yet I don’t say what I really think and feel: it wouldn’t be “polite,” and would “upset” everyone. Through long conditioning, I’ve learned to prefer my “upset stomach” to any rupture in that social order.

Waking up to this kind of inner/outer awareness in the middle of daily life is not easy. At first we can only capture our attention and focus it momentarily. And it’s hard enough to do this alone, given the tendency of the mind to rush in with its incessant busyness. Add to this mix other people, especially those we grew up with, and the effort to focus deeply

into our own interior state in the maelstrom of that social scene feels near impossible. Why? Why is it so damned hard?

Well, that certainly is where our attention goes, from infancy on — to the outside. From our first breath we are genetically programmed to get our five outer senses operational and integrated in order to interact successfully with the outside world. So, at first, it's instinctive and necessary for survival.

But then, 21st century American culture takes over, amplifies and speeds up surface interactions with first toys, then more stuff, status, technology and media — distracting us utterly from the mysterious reaches within. Most of us born from the mid-20th century on have not learned to become conscious of our internal life while engaged in external life. Not only because it's so damned difficult, but also because nobody ever told us that this practice was interesting, much less instructive and possibly redemptive!

Indeed, one might say that the process of becoming crone by practicing awareness of the fullness of the present moment — whatever's happening on the outside and whatever comes up from the unconscious inside — *is* the process of de-conditioning oneself from the learned lack of awareness one has been taught since birth! — and that includes the culture's view of the aging process and ourselves as aging persons.

When we are born our original natures are full and present, though unconscious. Anyone who takes the time to “be” with a silent, attentive newborn child can feel the presence of an immense and mysterious capacity. Yet, from that moment on, the process of conditioning into western culture proceeds. Different cultures encourage certain qualities and repress others, and some remain closer, more in touch with nature than others; but in every case, once children reach adulthood they have more or less squeezed or truncated their original natures to fit the contours of the society into which they were born.

Human growth, at any age, is not linear. We don't just “add” previously unknown characteristics of ourselves to an already familiar repertoire. Rather, each significant learning alters the whole, and this again, is most evident in children, who seem to change on a daily, if not hour-by-hour basis. We marvel at the way children incorporate both the culture's expectations and their own previously unrecognized talents.

In our materialistic culture, we usually think of growth in physical terms, and assume that whereas children grow, adults do not! Rather than grow, adults accumulate — experience, knowledge, weight, children, stuff, property, money, reputation.

Again, due to our limited, materialistic framework, we endure a limited, negative picture of old age, viewing life's final act as a time when physical processes reverse; when the body and usually the mind deteriorate over time. In other words, when we lose what we have accumulated.

Thus, in our culture, most people *do* just “get older,” and resent it, try to stop, disguise, or slow down time, experienced as a straight line that begins in birth and ends in death.

On the other hand, we who experience ourselves as “growing older” sense our entire life as a cycle, and old age as a time when we feel the circle of our life both looping back and opening further. This experience of time as a spiraling line creates an evolving awareness of the entire space that our life-cycle is to eventually inhabit, and we experience a desire to consciously comprehend that space, that life-cycle, as a whole. Death, for one growing older, rather than just getting older, is looked forward to as closure, completion, fulfillment — and gateway to renewed life beyond.

As we investigate, through awareness, the space that our extending life in this body is creating, we find ourselves returning to the feeling of constant discovery that we experienced as a child, for whom the whole world was new! Rather than, like many adults, spending most of our time living-for-or-dreading-the-future and/or living-in-or-regretting-the-past, we begin to sense future and past as establishing an initial 360° horizon of the now. We move from clock time to present time, sensing ourselves at the very center of an enormous space that opens in every direction and melts us into the heart of being.

As we relax into the presence of this mysterious reality that exists below the surface turbulence of mind's mental gyrations, its obsessive focus on expectations that have or have not been met, long-suppressed qualities and tendencies that were present originally begin to surface into our expanded awareness. Each new incorporation of a previously suppressed, and seemingly alien element within us alters our being, so that, over and over again we surprise ourselves — and others — with the de-light-ful person that we are becoming. Over and over

again, like children, we crones change, and are reborn. There is no end to this process. Our lives renew themselves with every breath.

Ideally, and if we are very, very fortunate, once we reach the crone stage of life we don't have as many responsibilities and can enjoy regular time-outs where we recapitulate the entire space of our lives so far, and catch up to ourselves. In other words, *the life-review that usually, if at all, occurs only on one's death-bed can become an aspect of our daily practice.*

This practice not only serves to further unfold the promise of one's original nature, but in fact this very personal, interior activity can be of immense public benefit. Younger women hunger for crone wisdom. Children and those who suffer need our unconditionally loving arms and gaze. Corporate boards and public officials need us to compassionately witness their deliberations as they make decisions affecting future generations. As we increase awareness of the mysterious and seemingly unfathomable fullness of our own inner lives, the promise of our original natures becomes freely available. As crones, we present a model of and a perspective on the whole of life for all those with whom we come in contact.

Most people have taken on so many responsibilities that they are way too busy or distracted or desperate to even realize that this kind of inner activity is possible, much less recognize its gifts. The ravenous global capitalistic consumer culture narrows the focus of all but a tiny elite to sheer survival; and we are all schooled into an addictive, competitive grasping for social riches, status and power that keeps us estranged from our original natures. In addition, many people as they get older have lived so long in an unconscious mental state, and/or have for so long ignored or not been able to afford good nutrition and daily exercise, that at this advanced stage in life they become increasingly overwhelmed by exhaustion and eventually, illness and death — experienced then, not as closure, but as failure.

I consider myself extremely fortunate in that I have kept my physical vehicle in relatively prime condition, that I have long been a seeker of expanded awareness, and that I now have the time, energy, resources and drive to engage in this daily practice of self-remembering.

In the process I have discovered that as I plunge into the depths of my own small personal self, as I begin to inhabit the full space of my own personal life-cycle by becoming fully present to this one moment, the trajectory of my life dissolves and I am suddenly or imperceptibly immersed in a reality so vast as to be utterly incomprehensible. Another paradox. Limited

personal awareness surrenders, in fits and starts, scared and thrilled, to this vast being, a universal awareness that spans the heavens and obliterates time.

I cannot escape growing intimations of a living presence that breathes through us as a single organism, a unity, the Oneness of which mystics of every culture and every religion speak. And I cannot help but feel that this new, wondrous, still tentative, hesitant, vulnerable sense of feeling utterly at home in a light-drenched harmonic universe is what we all long for. That when we do begin to burrow underneath the thick encrustations of personality, habit, family and cultural conditioning, the physical, emotional, and ideological isolations that separate us — when we do begin to jerk ourselves awake over and over again, no matter how arduous, or how long and painful the journey, that we will finally re-member our origins and find our purpose as elderwomen at the beginning of the 21st century: to serve as healers in a world gone mad.

I, for one, as I accept the mantle of *crone*, ask that through cultivating an abiding awareness I may evolve into an open channel for the larger presence that silently holds all of creation in Love's open arms.