

Essay

REWORKING MEMORY, INVOKING CRONE

Reflections at 50

Crone Chronicles #16, Summer 1993

© Ann Kreilkamp

This past winter, over and over again, this feeling: I feel robbed.

Robbed of my maidenhood.

Robbed of my motherhood.

- As if I never truly experienced the full flowering, the glory of burgeoning life, that extraordinary upthrust of wild energy that is youth's hallmark.

- As if I never experienced the fruition of mothering, that excruciating bursting feeling of love and joy in holding one's own child close to one's steadily beating heart.

I am 50 years old, and like most women my age, full of memories. The older I become, the more my memories serve as a sort of goldmine, a rich vein for continuous reflection. Usually, I come away feeling ruefully ambivalent — there is a certain nostalgia in remembering "the good old days," and there is also the welcome sigh of relief: "I never have to go through that again!" This past winter I wasn't feeling that at

all. Nor was I, having made peace with my memories one more time, letting the past go and getting on with my life. Rather, this past winter I was feeling robbed! And in that feeling, I was stuck. I couldn't seem to get past it.

I knew I had to get past it. For how can I invoke the Crone unless these prior stages of life have first been fulfilled?

Four months have passed since December 19, 1992, my 50th birthday. It's as if in turning 50 an internal timer was activated, and I set about to rethink my memories again, this time to radically reorder them. So that I can become truly and finally comfortable with them, complete. So that, in feeling whole, I can be born again into a new life.

This process of reworking memory is a kind of alchemy. In remembering, I spiral down into the cauldron. My senses close down to the outside world and I am immersed in what used to be. Working at a level beneath language or interpretation, I am tasting, touching, probing . . . time slows down, as I feel my way into an old scene, slowly breathe into it, allow what has been lost to return, to speak to me from within its deep shadowy well of feeling . . . Each scene, when fully re-membered, releases . . . circling, circling, awareness settles into yet another old scene, hidden in the recesses, longing to release its pain . . . one after another, memories glide into view. I melt into their meaning, taste of what was, move on. Then, imperceptibly gliding out of self and into another — my father, my child, my mother, my friend, an old lover — I feel my way into his experience too, or hers, feel the pain there, the aching love . . . circling, gathering, immersing, filling up . . .

Bit by bit, I let go of interpretation, let go of thoughts about things and let the "things" memory has been based on, speak. Speak of themselves and how they have been ignored, or skewed in the interests of constructing fences which limit and define . . . In reworking memory, the very basis of my life alters. As if memory were a kaleidoscope, where each slight shift in perspective shatters the old pattern, restructures it. What had been highlighted before, recedes; what had been ignored, now looms large.

The result is an entirely new gestalt, a reconfiguration of the past, a fuller foundation for the future.

I've done this before, many times. But never with such a sense of finality as I felt this past winter. It was as if I was to now release my entire herstory.

How it began:

I've long known — and am constantly telling other people, in an effort to redefine the way that much-maligned word "Crone" is used in our culture — that the Crone is the third stage of being female, following the Maiden, and the Mother. Moreover, as an astrologer, I have been long accustomed to seeing our entire lives in terms of phases of a circle or cycle. For many years I have also been aware of the fact that I did not enjoy either my maidenhood or my motherhood during the times of my living them. I tell story after story about the comic and not-so-comic inhibitions of my Catholic girlhood. I have spent many years healing myself, and telling stories of this healing, from the tragedy of having been a mother who left her own children in the custody of their father while they were still young.

So all the elements of what was due to become the new understanding, the new memory gestalt, have been in place for a long time. Yet, it was only this past winter that I began to feel the actual sensation of having been *robbed*, or recognizing that these two earlier phases of life were, in a very real sense, stolen from me, and that because of this lack, I cannot fully embody Crone. Since each stage prepares for the next, which then includes it, in order for the third stage to be fulfilled, the first and second stages of the life-cycle of being a woman must first be fulfilled in their own ways, according to their own measure.

I am speaking here in a strictly chronological sense, as if Crone did not come in at all until these other stages were done. I realize this is an excessively linear view of both the structure and process of consciousness. In reality, it feels as if all three of these stages of being female are simultaneously present in all of us, whether our bodies are male or female. Structurally, the archetypes are always there in all of us. Which is why we can have moments of illumination proper to any of these archetypes which seem to come

from nowhere and which we don't know how to assimilate at the time they come. For it feels as if only in the process of our actual living experience, as a step by step process of gradually accumulating meaning as we reflect on events, do we recover these archetypes in their fullness, and are they thus truly embodied. The Crone, being the third stage, eventually incorporates the other two within Her more spacious presence.

So, when I first noticed the feeling of actually having been robbed of both Maiden and Mother, I was furious, I was bitter — and I was not seeing, at the time, that there was something which I could do about it. Though I have been in the alchemical business of reworking memory for most of my adult life, yet (as usual) at first I came up against a wall that seemed impossible to penetrate or move.

As I began to feel into the situation more fully, I realized that in place of a sense of the cycles of time, in which each phase of a cycle is experienced as itself a smaller cycle, with its own beginning (initiation) middle (fulfillment) and end (letting go), for most of my life I have suffered from an entirely different conception of time, what I would now call an "apocalyptic consciousness": both my maidenhood and motherhood were experienced against the backdrop of impending doom.

I saw the fire next time devouring the entire world.

This is not to say that I had no experience whatsoever of the beauty of fulfilled maidenhood or motherhood. I must have. Otherwise, I would have no recognition that there was something missing, no way to measure my loss.

My imagination, which should have been that of a bird, soaring to the heavens, was caught in flames by the age of two, when Fat Boy fell on Hiroshima and I, somehow, found out about it. Took it into me. Contracted into fear. As I got older, my conscious fears were of global annihilation. Looking back on it as an adult, I realize that the immediate source of fear for me then was the unconscious symbiosis with my war-widow mother's fear of abandonment, her anxiety that her husband would not make it home alive.

Then, when he did come home, and began to discipline me, his German military ways were unconsciously cruel and insensitive. In order to survive, I bottled up my fiery Sagittarian self and became like a pressure cooker, due to explode at some future date.

I was not consciously aware of any of this. All I knew was, growing up, I wondered how other kids could laugh and play as if they had not a care in the world. I played too, and sometimes my play would distract me. Usually it did not. I was pretending to play, and meanwhile, inside, reliving, always reliving the horror to come. I was Chicken-Little, and the sky was about to fall in. For I — and it seemed, I alone —*knew*: the Bomb was going to fall; the world was going to end in my lifetime.

I knew it, and I never said it. They would have locked me up. I knew that too.

Like most girls growing up during the '50s, what could have been my maiden beauty and freshness, a luxuriating in my own ripe bodied self, was experienced as shame and guilt. As a maiden teenager, I was so fearful of burgeoning feelings, my potential curves and blood flow, that I unconsciously stopped them from occurring at all, until I was 16 years old. Even then, I only had one period each year until I married at 20, and immediately produced a child.

Motherhood at 20 was, as I remember it, confusing, overwhelming and imprisoning. Since I had no real experience of the flowering of being a maiden, I resented, on an unconscious level, the fact that I was now expected to take on the characteristics of mother. The selflessness, the continuous generosity, the living for the other that this stage in life requires, when embraced in full consciousness, can be a source of joy and wonder which, for a woman, no other experience in life can give. This greatest gift of woman, and to woman, was to me a terrible and unrelenting burden. The sleepless nights, the feeling of being utterly drained by others' needs, the knowing I loved my children without being able to really feel that love — I remember all this with sadness, for myself, and especially for my children, who, in turn, were robbed from having a mother who could be truly present for them, nurture them, embrace them with an open heart.

Haunted by a sense of doom, I did not feel the cycles of things. Instead, each moment I was up against a wall. The next moment may be my last. Or the one after that. There was no sense of preparing for a future, or of living in the fullness of extended duration. I lived from moment-to-moment, experiencing each one as a bead on a string, each one just like the last one, and there may be no next one. Underneath this there was a sense of continuous low-lying anxiety, erupting easily into panic. My adrenals continuously pumping, I was in a constant state of alert, which of course, could not be maintained indefinitely. As time went on I became numb to whatever formerly alerted, and would succumb, briefly, to depression, where the world looked gray and flat. Then, when the life force within me erupted again, I needed even more stimulation to get the same effect as before.

It all sounds remarkably like the symptoms of addiction. And perhaps it is. Perhaps addictions in our age are a reflection of the apocalyptic consciousness which we all share, to some extent, at least insofar as we are all unconsciously or consciously participating in the zeitgeist of our time.

I feel — and this may seem excessively dramatic to some — that such an apocalyptic consciousness is an inevitable result, it is the end-point of, the final solution to, our addiction to clock-time. Clock time takes away the original sense of cyclical time with which nature bestowed us. Clock time is linear time, the endless string of moments, each of equal (no) value, a mere point on a line, itself alone, enjoying no context, no matrix, no meaningful connection with what lay before or what is to come.

I know that I am not the only one. Many of us — perhaps even most of us, perhaps this is the price we pay for living in western 20th century culture — while still small children, cathected out of our bodies and into our minds and then stayed there, unconnected to the world of our inner lives and feelings. In the absence of feeling the cyclical waves of currents moving through and within us, timed by the Moon and her changes, we substituted clock time as our way of being in time, and of measuring it.

Which came first, the tick-tock of our clocks or the shock of sudden cathexis? Which is cause and which effect in a world of cause-and-effect, each moment one more billiard

ball knocking into others. We were sensitive biological organisms, thrust into an increasingly mechanical world. In order to survive here, we had to leave our bodies and observe, from the outside, what was no longer ours.

Some of us are more “successful” at this “untimely” conversion from biology to mechanics than others. Men more than women, usually. And girls who wanted to become men rather than women — like me. From the beginning I didn’t want to feel my feelings, and so, from the beginning, I was guarding against the cataclysm sure to come, were I to allow even the tiniest iota of feeling to peep forth. As within, so without. On the outside, we had the Bomb to represent those buried feelings, and significantly enough, the explosions of test Bombs were preceded by clocktime countdowns. Countdown to one. Boom goes the gun. Well done, son.

In some uncanny manner, as the wider world wakes up to the impending slow- or fast-moving apocalypse, I begin to release it. Why? Why should I be given the grace to move beyond it now? It feels to me that this change is evidence of the gradual recovery of the Crone archetype within myself.

As this transformation occurs within me, I see that, despite my apocalyptic consciousness, I must have been feeling in tune with the cycles of my life all along. Otherwise, how could I now feel myself detaching from them? It’s as if that linear sense of time, which all my life formed the mechanical matrix of my experience, was instead, a superficial layer, imposed by a culture which — despite its attempt to lock meaning into isolated bits, facts, microchips — proved in the end to be *merely* mechanical. Nonregenerative. Dead. I am reminded of old pieces of machinery sitting out in fertile fields, gradually rusting away. It takes time for nature to overcome mechanics, but in the end, she always does. What remains of a culture gradually disappears under the sands of time and we are left, once more, with that awesome sense of unlimited space within which all things take place, a feeling of mystery as we participate in an interpenetrating continuum of nature’s ongoing cyclical processes.

So, while clock-time may be what we consciously identify with to be able to live in this culture, we women are fortunate in that this surface layer is thinner than it is for

men. Both our monthly cycles of the burgeoning Maiden and the gravid pregnancies of the fertile Mother keep us in nature's time. Keep us, at a primal level, embodied.

As we begin to move out of our monthly regularity, we begin to see these cycles from afar for the first time. Even when I do (rarely) get my period now, it feels different. I am almost nostalgic for what is soon not to be. Each blood-flow may be my last. My connection to the primacy of biological necessity is ending and I am in a reflective state, mourning what is dying, and in that process, remembering it in a new way. Neither clock-time nor menstrual-time has me in its grip anymore. I am floating free. Life opens wide. I begin to see/feel cycles of any length, and to enter them — and to disengage from them — at any point.

This freedom is new. With this new awareness I look back and see the cycles of my life with a different perspective.

I dived down into the cauldron of memory this past winter, and this is the result: I now see that form, the apocalyptic consciousness, was for me, bottom line, the foundation. It lay beneath my maidenhood, beneath my motherhood, and informed them both — or I should say, robbed them both of their particular types of fruition, of the glory that was theirs.

This spring I took a trip to Boston to visit my two “boys,” now 27 and 29 years old. It has been 21 years since I left them with their father. In the past seven years the three of us have been graced with a great healing of the terrible wound which resulted when my own inner Bomb exploded — and tore me apart from them. Our healing, I should say, is ongoing. Will it ever be done? I look at pictures of them now, taken at ages when I did not know them, and I cry. I dream about them, as young children, as pre-teens, or as they are now, fully adult. I do not dream of them as teenagers. Even my dreams have holes in them.

I notice my younger son's almost jaunty courage, his determination to take full responsibility for his life, and I sense, underneath, a yawning primal hunger which was never filled when young, and which he resolutely refuses to blame me for not being able

to fill. I wish he could tell me. I wish he could give me that blast of anger — or of terror, of wrenching pain — which he *must* feel, and which I would gladly receive and honor.

I look at my older son's stiff body, an unlived love stuffed deep inside him, the dignity and seriousness with which he goes about his life, and I cry. I feel my own inner child's stiffness, my stiffness in him . . . Despite his stiffness, I feel his generosity of spirit, his deep caring. How, I think, did they manage to become such wonderful adults when their childhood was filled with pain?

Then, the slow spreading of wonder, as I realize both my sons, despite their physical and emotional abandonment, were not abandoned spiritually. I was always with them. I could not forget them. They remained there, like stones, mute and made of the ages, in my heart, for all those years. They were a weight I carried around with me and could not allow myself to feel or to put down. Both of them have grown to be beautiful, ethical, generous beings. I can be proud of my motherhood. They received something of me. I was there in spirit. I was there.

Reworking memory. Invoking Crone. Learning to accept and embrace and ultimately release memory, rather than cringe from it, or dwell on it . . . Learning to look back on myself with love, with a sense of appreciation for how well I did — given these chaotic, evolutionary times, given my early sensitivity to the central terror of this civilization, given the consequent difficulty of my life as I sought, at first, in vain, and as time went on, with more and more success, a way out, a way through into the building of a new world. I focus on the moments of sheer wonder, of miracle. I feel utterly and unutterably grateful to have been given these moments, and these other lessons, and to have survived, and continued to grow, and to be coming into my own now, at last, wiser, stronger, the aching heart a prelude to its opening.