

Essay

BUILDING THE SNOW CASTLE

Crone Chronicles #20, Summer Solstice 1994

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Once, on a sunny winter afternoon playing with children on the lawn of the park nearby, I encountered an experience that prefigured what would later become a more conscious longing.

The air is clear, crisp and cold. Blue sky sparkles with ice crystals. The voices of children laughing, seriously discussing, squealing with delight. I help another girl roll one of the massive snowballs we are using to make the wall. When it gets too big, one of the big boys joins us in rolling, and then he and another even taller boy lift the ball to the top of the wall. The castle is growing, wall by wall, room by room. I am astonished and amazed, flooded with feeling— for this day, this snow, this communion. I'm so happy I could burst.

This magical afternoon struck an internal chord, one which has been strumming, as an undertone through all my experiences, ever since.

All my life I have been fascinated by the subject of community, and its relationship to the individual. I seek to understand how communities work and don't work, their tendency to become either too structured or to degenerate into chaos. I am also fascinated with the underlying invisible but very real dynamics which give each community its unique identity.

My own experiences with community have been diverse. I grew up as the model first-born in a large Catholic family, later turning rebellious. I have experimented with living in communes and other group situations. I have been married, several times, creating families with children and stepchildren. I have also lived for some years alone. For the last seven years, I have lived in my dream home, a 20-foot diameter yurt inside a small yurt community in the village of Kelly, Wyoming, directly across the valley from the Grand Teton. Four years ago, my partner and now husband, Jeffrey Joel, joined me in the yurt.

My connections with both Jeffrey and our little community are continuously evolving. Whatever the current situation, no matter how attached to my own ego position I sometimes become in conflicts, through it all that original undertone strums. The vision of children playing joyfully together has always served as an ideal standard. Increasingly, this vision is guiding my practice.

Sometimes my vision blurs, and I see myself living in a dream world. Reading the newspapers, I notice the shocking recent increase in overt greed, hatred and violence of individual, class, ethnic and racial oppression all over the world. I think that this “news” is what is really real. That I am merely escaping from this reality.

Then I remember the world I live in is what I have created, over a lifetime of thinking in a certain way. My reality is a manifestation of my vision. Intuitively, I know that there are many of us creating another, more peaceful reality in tiny pockets of the world, and that the seeds of this more sane and humane way of life are spreading and reseeding themselves everywhere.

I am a member of an entire generation for whom the vision of peace on earth is central. Without this vision, there is no meaning in our world. As an astrologer, I ascribe my generation’s longing for peaceful connection to “Neptune in Libra.” This is one of our two main generational signatures. (The other is Pluto in Leo, described later on.)

Those born between 1942 and 1957, when planet Neptune was traveling through the sign of Libra, carry the Neptune in Libra signature in their birth charts. In my case,

Neptune was also conjunct the Midheaven, which signifies the purpose for which one was born. For me, Neptune symbolizes a personal as well as a generational calling.

This is the generation which came of age during the '60s. Usually, our expression of the Neptunian energy is unconscious. We feel it in our continuous disappointments in love. We sense it in our tendency to become addicted — to love, to glamour, to liquor, marijuana, cocaine, prozac — all of which seem to take us out of our bodies and into a more ideal world. And yet there have been times when this generation has moved as one body in our inchoate gut responses to mass events: our work for racial equality in the civil rights movement, our repugnance over the war in Vietnam.

For reasons which remain inscrutable to the conscious mind, there are moments when the divine seems to draw near, and light up the heart. For those within whom the formerly unconscious movement of Neptune awakens, it is as if we have been visited by the Holy Spirit. A miracle occurs. We begin to release our addictions and awaken from the common cultural trance. Now, the serenity and compassion of Neptune becomes an ideal for which we are consciously longing. Some of us become transformed by this energy; we give our lives to make it real.

Even when the energy remains unconscious, it inspires leaders to create institutions which reflect its value: the United Nations, founded in 1945, is a collective symbol of the vision of a peaceful world. And our generational myth, given national significance in John F. Kennedy's public love of "Camelot," is that of the Quest for the Holy Grail.

We long for peace on earth, and we long for personal love, the one who would be our "soul mate." No matter how bitter, how cynical our experience has been, our eyes still mist over whenever someone mentions this common longing, our secret hope. It's as if we see into the distant future, or back to a utopian past. Like in the novel, *Mists of Avalon* (the story of Camelot told from the female point of view), so memorable especially to the women of this generation, some ancient part of ourselves remembers how it was, and wants to recreate that sense of original unity, with someone, somehow, somewhere.

Though we have been the generation which destroyed the marriage vow as a commitment “‘til death do us part,” this destruction has always had a transcendent goal; we are searching for divinity, our Holy Grail, the perfect union with another, and until we find it, our search will continue.

These two Neptune in Libra ideals, human community and personal love, though not identical, are related. Both are difficult to achieve, and it feels as if each of them is necessary for the other to be possible. We do not form genuine communities unless we can also allow ourselves to love in a personal way. (One doesn’t love humanity without being capable of experiencing intimacy with real human beings. Thus the motto: “Think globally, act locally”). And we do not open to personal love without feeling the security of a genuine community context. (Those abandoned emotionally as children do not easily partner or parent as adults. Thus an entire industry was spawned: healing from childhood abuse.)

I notice that differences in community dynamics seem primarily to be a function of the varying relations between structure and process. This relationship establishes a certain proportion between permanence and change, stability and flow, knowledge and the search for it. We have to stand on something, but we’ve also got to keep moving. We need to be grounded, and yet we’re reaching for the stars. Too much of the first leads to conformity and stasis. Too much of the second, and context is lost. The actual tension between structure and process generates aliveness. It has been my experience that in a living community, structure and process are continuously rebalancing.

In my earliest experience of community, structure was stronger than process. Dad was the boss; Mom was his helper. We eight children were to obey him and help her. The burgeoning growth within us was contained within exacting spatial, temporal and moral guidelines. Dinner was at six. Children’s chores, posted on the refrigerator, rotated weekly. Bedtime was determined by age. We all memorized the ten commandments and dressed for church on Sunday. My experience as a child within a “nuclear family” echoes that of many in my generation. It was the ‘50s. Structure took precedence over process.

I can say now that the magic of that one sunny winter afternoon building the snow castle was the result of process and structure being in perfect dynamic balance. So perfect that the distinction between them dissolved. What we were creating and our joyful participation in creating it flowed from a common spring. Our castle was a fruit unfolding from the seed of our inner communion. No one was overseeing what we did. Like a flock of birds, we were turning, and turning again, to some hidden instruction.

During high school, I was connected to an unusual group of boys and girls. Like all of the communities I would be drawn to in the future, this one was very unlike my own family. Process reigned over structure. Unlike most social relations back in the '50s, our group experience was free-flowing and individualistic, the boundaries and rules elastic and in continuous evolution. We skied together, campaigned for each others' student body elections; we got together for heated arguments about the existence of God, and dared each other to outrageous stunts.

I was a teenager, "being socialized." The various associations I formed with others were in turn, forming me. The give and take (process) in each relationship left its residue in my personality (structure). I was a different person in each of my relationships, adjusting and blending who I was becoming to fit the contours of those with whom I was relating.

At that age, my identity was the sum total of all those qualities within myself called forth by all my different relationships. I avoided the space in between relationships. It was scary. It felt like a void.

Both my early marriages were schools in role-playing — as a wife, as mother, as step-mother. I slipped into these roles easily, the way prepared for me by the contours of invisible cultural forms molded and remolded through centuries. Then came the feelings of suffocation, followed by instinctive struggles to break free of roles, while remaining connected. This proved impossible, as neither my husbands nor I were authentic enough at the time to honor that in ourselves and each other.

During the late '60s and early '70s, I lived in four different communes, each of them full of “sex, drugs, rock’n roll” — and intense confusion. Our unconscious Neptune in Libra energy made us yearn for both true love and utopian community. And we were also acting out the dictates of our other, more overtly powerful, unconscious generational energy, “Pluto in Leo.”

The planet Pluto traveled through the sign of Leo from 1938 to 1958, its energy overlapping with that of Neptune in Libra. Our Pluto in Leo energy was intensely individualistic: we wanted to “express ourselves,” to “do our thing” — while damning the authorities and accusing each other of “power-trips” and “ego-trips.” With Pluto, we saw ourselves as anarchists. And yet, with Neptune, we loved the idea of living in community. Combining Neptune with Pluto, we trumpeted “free love,” pretending to give up our egos, and treat each other as equals — no attachment, no commitment, just NOW baby, BE HERE NOW. In reality, we came away from these experiences battered and bruised, as our intellectual ideologies bludgeoned our emotional sensitivities. Many more years would pass before I would admit to this, realizing that I had damaged myself by posing as a lover before my heart was opened.

To my knowledge, the few communities which did achieve some sort of stability during those years were either religious in nature, their beliefs serving as the glue which held them together, and/or, more likely, they were headed by a (strong religious or otherwise) father figure (or more rarely, a mother figure), recreating the hierarchically structured nuclear family.

Between 1974 and 1980 I lived in my old home town in Idaho, intentionally attempting to create a sense of “community” there, an alternative to the social forms of organized religions. I was gifted a house to live in, which I transformed into a community center with soup on the stove and free loaves of homemade bread for the first two people to walk in the door. I also founded and published a community magazine, *OpenSpace*, in which individuals who had been closeted forever in that small conservative town were invited to “open up space” by speaking their truths. Our spirit of sharing and adventure was exciting. It was also short-lived, due to my own unconscious

Pluto in Leo and Neptune in Libra energies. Neptune was making me utterly desperate for a perfect mate; and Pluto had set me up as “guru” for our tiny community.

My hubris was abruptly knocked off its pedestal by a man who walked in the door and psychically seduced me, dragging me off into his Plutonian realm. The Neptunian hook was perfect too: he was sick, in body, mind and soul. I would heal his body, change his mind, and save his soul. I would become the guru again, this time for one other.

The next year was hell. Our power struggle was covert, intense, and relentless. So was my unacknowledged feeling of being victimized by him, a prisoner of his latent violence. Finally, late one night, he came home drunk and belligerent. I was awakened by an inner voice. “*Center yourself,*” it said. “*You have one minute.*”

By the time he walked into the bedroom one minute later, I was ready. His arrival catalyzed my own Plutonian empowerment process. Over a four or five hour period, in order to physically survive, I had to psychically meet him with my own power. I did this, staring him down until he broke. Stepping over his guns, I walked out the door. For two more years I lived in fear of him stalking me. The day I heard of his death (from complications of alcoholism) my spirit soared — for him, for me. His death freed us both — and sobered me up from my addiction to saving another.

That was when I was 37 years old. Since then my fascination with community has not dulled, though my personal experiments with it have been outwardly much more subdued. My longing for a soul mate, however, did not abate. I spent my 40s learning to accept my loneliness, and to recognize its source, by uncovering the abandoned child within. She was one member of an entire community of inner selves with whom I am still working to bring into harmony.

I thought this work with my inner child and all her friends and relations would take oh, maybe six months. After a while I revised it to two years . . . Instead, this inner work took top priority for seven long years. I gave myself over to it, viewing my outer work as professional astrologer as a mere byproduct. The journal which I had already kept for 20 years became my constant companion. My dreams provided me with images, instruction, and mystery. I began to emotionally process each remembered event in my

life, undertaking to learn its significance and place in the whole. In 1986, I wrote a 300-page autobiography of my first 30 years, looking at my life from the point of view of the soul and its journey.

While I was undergoing this great internal transformation, I wondered if it would ever end, and what it would mean if it did. My inner universe became so familiar and so inherently fascinating, that it came as a shock, a few years ago, to realize that this work no longer automatically took priority. I was beginning to reconnect with the outer world.

In my early years, I was socialized, to adapt myself to others. I felt “real” only in relationship. Later on, I played out the expected roles to the point where they became imprisoning, and escaped, over and over again, while still needing others to enact my own destiny. I was running from the void.

In order to release my addiction to cigarettes, I had to face and embrace the indefinite lengthening of the terrifying empty spaces which loomed between puffs. Likewise, in order to release relationships with others, I had to deliberately step into the void, and *feel* it. I had to learn to live precisely there. What I discovered was that the void was full! — of ghosts from long ago. My ghosts had imprisoned me in certain roles — with them! Some ghosts were carping critics. Others were more subtly undermining. One by one, circling round and round, dipping down into full feeling and soaring up into insight, I gradually acknowledged them, embraced them, released them. I was letting go of others so that I could feel myself.

As the void emptied out, what I began to notice was that “I” did not exist! My ego was a function of my relationship with others! The whole question of the tension between individual and society, which had preoccupied me all my life, began to dissolve into a larger understanding. In emptying out others, I became the void, a vast internal space which includes everything and is in itself, nothing.

Now, at 51, this vast internal space is the still tentative, still easily lost, Crone aspect of myself. Crone is the area “in between” events, people, places, words; She is the space which includes the particular dynamics of all human connections, and yet does not attach to any of them. The Crone lives in the void, which She experiences as full. The

void as womb of the world. In occupying this sacred space She embraces all the worlds, free both to connect with and to detach from others. Insofar as I embody Crone, I remain myself, no matter what the dynamics of my associations. Insofar as the Crone lives within me, I can remain myself and live in community, building snow castles.