

Crone Wisdom

Delivered to the Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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By Marcia Nehemiah

Omega-3s & Zinc May Slow Aging.

Get Rid of Forehead Furrows.

Aubrey de Grey Says Aging is Soon to be Cured.

Wrinkle Prevention With CoQ10.

As you can see from these links which I found on a web site, we live in a culture that views aging as a disease. Two years ago, influenced by this cultural attitude about growing old, I was afraid. I was 58 years old, and I was worried. I describe my fears in the prologue to my book, *Crone Age*, which I'd like to read to you now.

. . . without role models, I could conjure only negative stereotypes of old age. Left to my own imaginings, I feared, as do many of us, that I would become an old lady who shuffled through the last years of my life, from cane, to walker, to wheelchair. I would decline into decrepitude, my body ailing and failing, alone, poor, with no one to take care of me. I was convinced I would need taking care of because I would forget everything—I would put the frying pan in the refrigerator, my book in the medicine cabinet, my eyeglasses—well, they would simply disappear. Important papers would vanish along with memories. Bills would go unpaid. I would sit in the dark. I would not recognize once familiar faces and would spend my last years in a fluorescent-lit nursing home, unfazed by the maddening beep of monitors because I'd have completely lost my hearing. The rare visitor would want to leave—fast.

I had long, worried conversations with my friend Sally, commiserating on our desolate futures. We confirmed each other's projections that we'd be lonely old women in nursing homes. We'd be widows. Sally would nod empathically when I told her, and not just once, that I was terrified I'd run out of money, and that my DEXA scan indicated the onset of osteopenia. Would thinning bones bring broken hips, hospitals, surgeries, dementia? She would explain how she often woke in the middle of the night and painted her dread of Alzheimer's disease on the dark ceiling.

I've reached those euphemistic "Senior Years," and I'm flying without guides. There's only one model, the stereotypical "Active Senior" who plays golf, takes laxatives, has sex with a man who takes Viagra (if she has sex at all), winters in Florida and leaves behind substantial sums of money for her heirs. She "retires," a word with the following definitions: to depart, draw back, ebb, exit, recede, retreat, regress and withdraw. Our youth culture buries old people before they are dead. Can't we rename that stage of life, when we shed the responsibilities of career and family, in favor of more positive language? How about something like rejuvenate, renew, refresh, revise, revitalize, or jazz up?

Although I couldn't have articulated it when I reached my forties, that's when my uneasiness began. I was an accomplished, independent woman. I had just gotten married. I enjoyed rewarding friendships and an exciting, fulfilling life. But I was surrounded by media's relentless message: a woman is really good for only one thing. When her reproductive years end, she is useless. She becomes invisible, or if visible, she needs to be fixed with facelifts and anti-aging cream. Or she is pitied. This way of looking at old women is epitomized by a sentence that always has set

my teeth on edge: "She was beautiful when she was young," as if lost beauty is the entire measure of the worth of a woman's life.

As I approached menopause, I had the distinct feeling that I was passing into another stage of life, but I had no idea what that stage of life would feel like or look like.

Menopause itself was that dreaded state when my identity as a sexual being would forever cease. Menopause was a door that women passed through screaming and kicking because on one side of the door, the young side, women laughed and dressed up and had fun and had power and had men. On the other side of the door, or so I thought, women sat alone in the dark, scowling at each other and at the world, untouchable, useless, silent. Once I passed through that door, I too would become invisible, dispensible, unhappy.

Why didn't anyone tell me what was really on the other side of the door? Women laughing, wearing red sneakers and purple shawls, strong, vibrant women living full, meaningful lives? Why didn't I know the truth, what Jean Shinoda Bolen wrote in her book *Goddesses in Older Women*: "Women reaching fifty do not have many clues about who they might become . . .or understand that they are on the threshold of a phase of their lives in which they may become more themselves than at any other time before."

Why didn't I know that old women could be goddesses, powerful, wise, full beings?

I met the women I featured in *Crone Age* at Beverly Sterner's 70th birthday party and a few months later, decided that I needed to learn about their lives.

These eight women, Cecily Fortescue, Grace Johansen, Christine San Jose, Carol Rocklin, Vera B. Williams, Phyllis Bilick, Barbara Yeaman and Rusty Myers, became my mentors. They were the guides I had been searching for. They showed me, contrary to those relentless media messages, that aging is a gift. That crone-dom is a rich and varied time of life. That after fulfilling the roles of mother and caregiver, crones have the freedom and opportunity to express their newly found selves. I learned that old women laugh loudly and frequently. They experience deep and profound gratitude for their lives. They love deeply: themselves, their intimates, and their communities. They know that creativity is essential to their full lives. They're not afraid to venture into unknown territories. And they continue to find meaning and purpose.

Writing this book was a process of reassessing my negative views about aging and understanding that womanhood, like life itself, is a rich, varied experience that will continue until the day I die. The crones taught me that one never, ever stops metamorphosing into new lives. To illustrate this I'll read from the chapter about Barbara Yeaman. Many of us know Barbara as the founder of the Delaware Highlands Conservancy.

I gather up my tape recorder, pad and pen, readying to leave, but as Barbara and I head for the front door, stacks of plastic containers near the wood stove divert my attention. She lifts the lid of one container and points to a tiny white dot—a Monarch butterfly egg—attached to a milkweed leaf. Other containers hold chrysalises or caterpillars. Five butterflies, waiting to be set free once their wings dry, hang from the mesh inside a butterfly tent.

Barbara explains that, once free, these Monarchs will begin their migration to a spot in Mexico 2,500 miles away. Only some of them will reach their destination, where they will winter with other Monarchs before setting off north to reproduce. They will breed in Texas: the females will deposit their eggs, which will become caterpillars and then butterflies that will make the journey north. Barbara and Ed will nurture those that return to Peace Farm so that the cycle can continue.

It seems appropriate that at the conclusion of my visit Barbara talks about this miraculous creature that epitomizes new life, resilience, reinvention. She, like the Monarchs, and like the other crones I've interviewed, has

been willing to shed one Self when she heard a new Self call. Her life has exemplified the power of letting go of one life to metamorphose into the next.

All the crones have provided me with inspiring examples of women who, once they raised their families and once their formal paying jobs ended, widened their scope, creating and bringing to fruition projects to enhance community. These women's choices about how to spend their remaining years were at once intuitive and deliberate, unlike the choices we make in youth when we blindly search for a path we can only hope will enhance our lives. Barbara founded the land preservation organization, Grace gave birth to the library and historical society, Christine engages children with her storytelling, Cecily hosts her popular weekly radio show, Phyllis helps install art shows for public viewing, Vera has never abandoned her activism, and Carol contributes to the success of the Unitarian fellowship. Each woman is dynamically involved in the world and engaged in a purpose beyond herself. Each is dedicated to her far-reaching pursuits. With skills accumulated over a lifetime, self-knowledge, freedom from the obligations and responsibilities of youth and middle age, and newfound power, each has discovered authentic commitments to serve and support her community, broadening her social interactions beyond friends and family.

That book is a very personal account. But in writing it has sent my mind in a direction I didn't anticipate. I've begun to think on a deeper and wider level about what it means to be a 60-year-old woman. Around the time I finished writing the book, my husband told me that at the 2009 Peace Summit in Vancouver the Dalai Lama stated: "The world will be saved by the western woman." Wow. What a burden and honor, I thought. And when people began to mistakenly refer to my book as "The Crone Age," I began to think, what would this "Crone Age" look like? Could it be possible that women, like the crones I interviewed, might become a positive force in healing our world?

First, let's define our terms. The crone, a post-menopausal woman, was a central figure in many ancient cultures. She enjoyed a special, revered status. She was viewed as the embodiment of wisdom, law, healing skills, and moral leadership; her presence was treasured at every significant tribal ceremony and each personal occasion from birth to death.

Why did the revered crone disappear from Western civilization? The male-dominated Roman Catholic Church in Europe systematically obliterated crone power by recasting old women as witches in league with the devil.

The Oxford English Dictionary says "crone" derives from the early Modern Dutch word meaning "old ewe" and was used to denote a cantankerous or mischievous woman. In Middle Dutch, the word meant "carcass," and in French it derived from a word meaning "carrion." The crone was the decrepit, withered helpmeet of Satan. The words "hag" and "witch," often used synonymously with crone, have similar sinister associations and were first used in English during the sixteenth century, the height of Church-led "witch hunts," often referred to as the Women's Holocaust.

This quotation from 1552, cited in the OED, illustrates just how frightened medieval men were of old women: "Hegges or nyght furyes, or wytyches like unto old women . . . which do sucke the bloude of children in the nyght." And in 1590 Edmund Spenser, the English poet, summed up the stereotype in his epic poem, *The Faerie Queen*: "A loathly wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old." I've always held that men in that era demonized and then executed old women, many of them healers and midwives, because they feared and envied crone power.

By demonizing women who practiced nature-based religions, the church sought to discredit these religions and recast them in Christian theology, thereby gaining power and in many cases land and money of the executed

women (and men). If crops withered, if animals died, if people were stricken with mysterious illnesses, the crone was to blame. Sexual desire and enjoyment were signs of the devil. During the Church-led witch hunts, from 15th to 16th century, thousands women were hanged or burned at the stake.

Even after the European patriarchy stopped killing women, for centuries it has continued to suppress female power in the political, social and economic systems created by male supremacy. In the patriarchy that we live under, a few powerful men on top maintain their power by exploiting the many at the bottom. The patriarchy is a system that clings to power by means of aggression, war, injustice, and exploitation of the planet. This system operates from fear and alienation and separation from the whole.

During these centuries of patriarchy, women have been taught that their value rests in their identity as sexual beings and consumers. But in the 1970s, things began to change. I came of age as a woman during the women's liberation movement. I went to an all-women's college where I learned that I could be powerful, that I had choices, that I was no different from men. Many women my age entered the male world of power by imitating men, even dressing in their navy blue power suits with bows in place of ties. They repressed the characteristics particular to women and adopted characteristics of the patriarchy that dominate our global society--competition, dominance, intimidation, control, cold rationality, self at the expense of others. Other women rejected totally the characteristics of patriarchy and found value only in the feminine, negating the importance of intellect and rationality.

What must happen now? What is my vision for The Crone Age? If the world is ever to heal, if we are to end violence and the decimation of the natural resources that sustain us, the dominance of the patriarchy at the expense of women's wisdom must be rejected, and a balance must be restored that honors both male and female.

Compassion, generosity, empathy, love, creativity, connection, spirituality—these feminine characteristics must be honored if our species is to survive on Earth. The heart must be revered as much as the mind. All of us must recognize that showing emotion is not weakness. That intuitive knowing is a kind of intelligence. That compassion and love for the beings that share our planet is the only way we can survive.

The 2012 election illustrates that women have already begun to exercise their influence after centuries of being controlled by men. Issues of rape, abortion, birth control and women's health may well have driven the vote against male-dominated repression of women's rights. Women were the majority of voters, about 54 percent of the electorate. The 113th Congress will have 20 female senators, the most ever in U.S. history. The House of Representatives will also hold a record number of women this term, 81.

It is not only in the political arena where women are using their unique world-views to challenge the patriarchy. Women like eco-feminist Vandana Shiva, social activist Naomi Klein, urban activist Majora Carter, the women in Peru who succeeded in banning GMOs from their country for 10 years, the women in Bolivia who fought the privatization of their country's water, give me hope that we are shifting the existing paradigm.

Another powerful way to change the world is on a very personal level, by questioning and withdrawing support from the dominant cultural mores, specifically by withdrawing support wherever possible from the existing capitalistic system that reduces us to consumers at the expense of our spirits and souls as well as our environment. We can counteract the incessant messages of the consumer culture by turning off our televisions, a drug more powerful than the strongest opiate in appropriating our minds and our thoughts and reinforcing stereotypes that marginalize human potential.

We can teach our sons that power doesn't mean violence, and make sure that our daughters don't know more about Juicy Couture than they know about Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

We can question: What do I really need? For me, the answer is that I don't need another material object. Like the crones in my book, I need strong friendships. I need art and beauty; I need poetry. I need nature. I need a spiritual connection. I need time for solitude and time for community.

Writing this book has made me acutely aware of how special our community is here in the UDR valley. We've established local networks that reflect our deepest values, and interwoven those networks to serve and support our families and neighbors. We have local farms that feed us, a vibrant arts community, community kitchens, activist organizations, environmental organizations, spiritual organizations--many of them conceived by and run by women, some of whom are sitting in the room with us today.

The crones have taught me that living a full and meaningful life involves acting authentically and with love in both our personal relationships and in our communities. In doing so, each crone is a positive force in her world. By balancing male and female energy within our own natures as well as within our wider communities, we may be able to achieve a rich and sustaining Crone Age in which all beings thrive.