

READING

THE WISE OLD WOMAN---by Beth Beurkens

She lives in the woods and in the sky, in the world's libraries and forests. She's old beyond imagining---bent walking with a cane, wearing all the world's colors on her skin.....Her names are endless as is her wisdom. She knows how to heal, how to gather herbs, how to plant and harvest, how to weave with flax , how to midwife a child and help her through life's passages, how to care for the sick and bury the dead. She is the face of all women, all our accumulated knowledge and wisdom—the one whose words and hands soothe, whose advice and counsel guides us back home.

THE GOOD WITCH

I grew up loving Halloween and Witches—they never scared me—never. They were magical and marvelous to me—and I still feel that way. I have a witch’s hat—(seen over there)—and it lives on a shelf in our clothes closet year round. A friend once walked into our closet saw the hat and exclaimed—“well, that explains SOOO much”.

Anyway, those of you who have heard other of my sermons know that my interests center around earth based spirituality, and sacred imagination. I constantly enjoy examining how Myth impacts our lives. Its importance lies in the psychological impact of a story. For as G.K. Chesterton tells us: “Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that Dragons exist, but because they tell us that Dragons can be beaten”! And myths can impact a society as well as an individual—and very often in a negative manner-- IE--- The story/myth of the Witch as an ugly, evil old woman. That’s a negative influence that has been partly responsible for the societal loss of honor and respect for our elders. We often don’t even honor and respect OURSELVES as we age. Old age is to be feared.

How, why and when did this negative mythology arrive? Let me whip you through some history of Halloween, ancient Goddess religions, the beginnings of the Christian Era, The Inquisition, the influence of the modern media, and probably a few other things along the way. Let’s begin with-----

HALLOWEEN

Around 2,000 years ago, the Celts, who lived in what is now the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Northern France, had a festival commemorating the end of the harvest season. It was called Samhain (sow-en). It was considered a magical

holiday—some believed that spirits of those who had died in the past year were unleashed at this time. And some of the folks dressed up in outlandish costumes to scare the spirits away. Other versions of this myth said that the spirits could come back to avenge themselves on living souls who had “done them wrong” and THOSE folks wore costumes so that the spirits wouldn’t recognize them. And then there was the belief that faeries were flitting about also during this period asking for food door to door. If you gave them food you got rewarded and if you didn’t you were punished. So—there’s at least a couple of versions of “why” the costumes for Halloween plus one version of “why” trick or treat.

And then along came the Christians and they decided to get rid of those pesky PAGAN Holidays by re-inventing them as CHRISTIAN Holidays. So in 835 A.D. Pope Gregory the fourth moved the All Saints Day from May to November 1st to replace Samhain in peoples minds and celebrations. All Saints Day was also known as All Hallows and since Samhain was celebrated the night before Nov. 1st, that celebration was known as All Hallows Eve—and later Halloween. By golly—folks just celebrated both the pagan AND the Christian holidays.

One of my favorite adaptations of these joint Holidays is what is celebrated in Mexico, Latin America, and Spain. They observe All Saints Day and All Souls Day with a three day celebration starting on the evening of Oct. 31st, through Nov. 2nd. In most areas of Mexico, Nov. 1st. is set aside to honor children who have died, and Nov. 2nd to honor those who died as adults. Day of Dead art and decorations are quite beautiful if macabre. Come up later and note my earrings—given to me by my sister.

The way that I personally celebrate all of this is by decorating my house with lots of Orange Fairy Lights and a witch figure or two. For me it is the closing of harvest and looking to winter. Also—Leif and I make an extra table setting on one of the nights to honor the departed members of our families. I think they enjoy it.

I'm not going to include the witch in all of this until I've done a history of witchery with you---so let's set off and first up take a look at---

THE CRONE

Well, to begin with the word "crone" didn't used to mean "ugly old woman"—crone used to mean "the wise older woman".

For thousands of years before the Christian Era many cultures worshipped a Female Deity. She was a Goddess and around the time of the birth of agriculture she became earth centered. In some of our western civilizations she was The Triple Goddess divided into Maiden, Mother, and Crone.

The Maiden was the young Virgin—innocent and pure—all about beginnings and hope. The Mother was the mature sexually fulfilled woman in her prime of caretaking and strength. And the Crone was the ending of life and the passing over to the next existence. She also represented the wisdom of age and experience and the healing power that emerged from that wisdom.

And so it was that, prior to the Christian Era, women could look to older age knowing that they were needed and respected. And since the Goddess was a symbol for all women to emulate ---maiden, mother and crone were viewed as personal and helpful guides for living a life. There was no stigma attached to becoming older—in fact it was quite the reverse.

So now we come to:

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

The following quote is by Jungian psychologist Vivianne Crowley. For the word “sophisticated” read urban as opposed to rural.

“The more sophisticated interpretations of Paganism continued throughout Europe and the Near East, alongside the more traditional rural forms of worship of the Triple Mother Goddess and the Dual god of light and darkness, ... They existed until the imposition of Christianity on the Roman Empire by the Emperor Constantine in about ad 324. Christianity, true to its Judaic parent, was an intolerant masculine monotheism and there could be no question of co-existence alongside the older religions” end Quote. There was no more Mother, Maiden, Crone. It was now Father, Son, and Holy Ghost or Spirit.

And here’s a little story from my recovering Catholic past. When I was in probably the 6th or 7thth grade I got worried about the Trinity ideology. I mean Father, Son, and Holy Ghost just didn’t make any sense to me. So I asked Sister if perhaps the Holy Ghost wasn’t perhaps a woman. I was hauled out into the hallway so FAST—and Sister began spluttering: “Elizabeth—never, ever think of such a thing—it is heresy—do you hear—HERESY. If you persist you are risking eternal damnation.” I dutifully burst into tears and promised to stop thinking. But the promise only lasted for a very few more years.

And back to the history of the development of Christianity-----it became apparent, as the centuries went whizzing past, that some folks just were NOT going to give up their love of a female Deity and various hybrid religions sprung up utilizing both Pagan and Christian entities. So finally, I bet in desperation, in the 5th century, the Christian Church authorized the veneration of the Virgin Mary—not as a Goddess—but not entirely human either—she was the MOTHER of God. Women were to emulate her as a role model and oh boy, was she SANITIZED. Which meant that women had to be either saint like or they were probably whores—or worse “instruments of the Devil”.

So women were left with no juicy, vibrant mid-life image; or any useful image of a respected elder. You went to a man as very young “unsoiled woman”—he used you as he wished. You birthed and raised as many children as God “gave you”—which, if they or you didn’t die in the process, could get to be a count around 14 or 15. After that you were expected to head out to pasture. Not as a WISE OLD WOMAN, but just an old lump.

And with that—I’m going to take you to----

THE INQUISITION

The development of culture and religion is almost always complex and multi-layered. And so it was that early Christianity didn’t entirely wipe out the myth of the crone as role model. It simply got INCLUDED into the Christian traditions. So-

During the Middle Ages the rural life at the time almost always included a Wise Old Woman or Cunning Man who would create natural medications, care for the sick, help with childbirth—and bury the dead. Well----the Roman Catholic Church had long been consolidating its power of dictatorship over ALL of life and ways of thinking. Jews and Heretics had been bullied and burned for a couple of centuries and then the Church added witchcraft as its prime burning target. Anything that smelled of pre-Christian pagan was deemed connected to the Devil and the caring village crone became a WITCH. The added advantage of killing off the “evil” witches was that the Church could take possession of all lands of these “witches”. This all took place after the bible of the Inquisition—HAMMER OF THE WITCHES--- was published in the 15th Century. Thousands and thousands of people were tortured and killed during this time. It is estimated that 80% of them were women.

The cooking cauldron, the house broom, and the household cat became symbols-- not of domesticity-- but of the witches’ tools of evil. And the Wise Woman

became seen as twisted and ugly because as a “Witch” she was evil and evil was “ugly”. I was given a card picturing Billie Burke as the good witch in THE WIZARD OF OZ. She is saying—if you happen to remember Billie’s wonderful funny voice: “Only BAD WITCHES are ugly”. Oh dear.

And so it was that the film industry helped create more images of ugly, old women as witches—sometimes they were even GREEN!

Well, phooey on that---here’s a quote from an on-line sight “First, something that needs to be made clear is the word ‘witch’ is derived from the old English word ‘Wicce’ (meaning wise one) –and ‘Wicca” (meaning healer). The witch was considered a wise-woman who lived in harmony with nature and it’s seasons. They were skilled in the use of herbs and were often called upon to cure the ill” end quote.---- However, another source gave the meaning of the Old English word ‘wicca’ as Sorcerer. I like that—and you can see the progression—if you can heal you are a sorcerer. So if you put them all together you have witch meaning “Wise and Healing Sorcerer”. And there was indeed a pagan sect that was deemed the “witches” religion. And All Hallows eve being one of the “high Holidays” of pagan celebrations the witch supposedly rode her broom about to observe the goings on—but they didn’t become demonized until after the Inquisition. And very, very few of the hideous number of women and men tortured and killed during the witch craze were indeed actual pagan witch practitioners.

There is a modern day New Age religion of Wicca. It is dedicated to caring for the earth and developing the spiritually intuitive powers of coven members. It rests in goodness—but I personally find it too heavily ritualized. I do, though, very much admire the writing of one of Wicca’s prominent members. Her spirit name is Starhawk and she is an ardent environmentalist. I’m going to read you an excerpt from the book entitled WITCH: FROM WICKED TO WICCA By Candace Savage. She says:

“As some Wiccans see it, the world today is threatened by the same malevolent spirit of domination that caused the witch craze (of the Inquisition). The

devaluation of women has implied a devaluation of life, and western culture literally needs to be revitalized.” She then quotes Starhawk: “Whether our immediate needs are for food, health care, jobs, childcare, housing, or open spaces, our ultimate interest is the same—restoring a sense of the sacred to the world, and so restoring value to our own lives and to the community of beings—human, plant and animal—that share life with us.”

So there we are-----The good woman was named a witch and was demonized and reviled. We as a present day culture have worked to reverse that image—however our solution is mostly based in our “rational rejection of magic”---witches simply don’t exist. But you see a further damaging image of the “witch” has persisted---that being that “old men and women are weak and useless—they are drain on society.” For present day society worships youth in its attempt to deny death; but as the Baby boomers age they are attacking that image of the weak, helpless, old fogey. We humans are living longer and we are learning to get to the gym or walk or ride that bike well into older age. This new older generation is indeed gaining in health, strength and stamina.

However there is another part to this—we need to continue to contribute to society as we age—and we need to find our own path to do this. It may be connected to our past lives as working people—or it may not. And society needs to understand that it NEEDS the wisdom of our elders—and to reach with respect for guidance. Mary Catherine Bateson has this to say about the subject in her book *COMPOSING A FUTURE LIFE*: “Part of the challenge, then, in growing older, is to discover the ways, arising from a lifetime of experience, and in spite of reduced strength and stamina, in which it continues to be possible to contribute. The corresponding challenge to society is to recognize that contribution and to benefit from it instead of dismissing it.” She calls this “The Age of Active Wisdom”.

And I would hope that our contributions would help to restore that “sense of the Sacred” that Starhawk referred to. And that as UU’s--- we will act on our recognition of how important it is to help younger generations stay in touch with

“Sacred Work” even as they struggle to make sense of life in these most difficult times. That Sacred Work could be---working for Marriage Equality or--- pacifism-- - conservation—caring for children--or helping to find care and employment for the hungry and the homeless. Or that work may reside in the creative power of the artistic endeavor. I happen to fall into that last category.

And-- now I'd like to close this by going back to Halloween and Witchery and myth. So- we have looked at length at counteracting the negativity of the Witch myth. But what's the positive side of the myth that I have sensed since I was a little girl. As usual, I find it in my own Earth Based Spirituality.

During the Fall we let go of summer and the sun and think back through the days of light and give thanks. It is a time to remember our past and thank our ancestors---and the old Holiday of Halloween reminds me to do that. As I mentioned before we like to set an extra place at table for our dearly remembered' family members. I sometimes think we have quite a crowd hovering about. My costume is always that of a witch because she still resides in my imagination, vibrantly alive---brewing healing herbs in her cauldron and using her broom to sweep away the dead leaves of fall. She is the wise, good, giving, older woman. And she is magical—because with her wisdom she can help translate “fear and hatred” into “giving and loving”. She is THE GOOD WITCH.