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The Croning Ceremony

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My first experience with a croning ceremony occurred in October of 2004 at a women's conference in Cleveland, Ohio. At the conference, time was set aside during a general session for what was labeled a "crowning ceremony." All those who were age 56 or older were asked to come forward. They were pronounced "croners," and delicate woven strings were placed around their necks. The women who were performing the ceremony had given much thought to it, and it was obviously an important and meaningful ritual for them. But since the notion of the "crone" was not well enough explained or placed in a context, and since the word itself has such negative connotations in our culture, there was much inappropriate giggling from the less invested attendees. Meanwhile, the honorees wore a look that suggested they were unsure whether they were being honored or ridiculed. I thought it was a very moving notion and an important initiative that had perhaps fallen somewhat short in its execution.

Less than a year later, a member of my book club announced that she would be turning 60 in a few months. Our book club has been meeting for over ten years, and the friendships between some of the members go back for decades before that. We all left that meeting knowing that we would be celebrating with this member in a special way for this birthday milestone. It was then that I made the connection – we should celebrate with a croning ceremony. Fortunately, without knowing anything at all about croners or cronings except the meager information I could provide at the time, the members agreed unanimously.

Thus began my research into croning ceremonies and the development of what has become the Croning Ritual of The Ladies of Book Club. Since that first croning, we have had two more, and although the general outlines of the ritual have remained the same, I have been able to refine it with each new celebration. It is this journey that I will share in this essay.

Defining the Term

The first and most important thing I wanted to include in the ritual was an explanation of the word "crone" itself. Like many other words referring to women, such as "hag" and "feminist," the word crone has come to carry both sexist and ageist connotations. Croners are assumed to be old and therefore automatically ugly and probably ill-intentioned, if not downright malevolent.

Today's feminist spiritual tradition has rescued the word. Within this tradition, the Crone reclaims her ancient identity as one of the three aspects of the Goddess, along with the Maiden and the Mother. These three aspects also represent the three phases of a woman's life, as she moves from childhood, through puberty and her time of fertility, and then through maturity to old age. Traditionally, the third phase has always been as important and honored as the other two. Although Croners have reached menopause and have therefore left their childbearing years behind them, they are still honored and valued members of a society. They are the preservers of knowledge and the bearers of wisdom. They are the healers, mentors, and advisors. They are WISE WOMEN.

A croning ceremony therefore celebrates the woman who has reached this new stage of her life, honors the contributions she has made to her family, her friends, her co-workers and others, and welcomes her to the new role she will play as a wise, experienced, and valued elder. It is not about loss – loss of youth or attractiveness or fertility – but about gain and growth – in wisdom and experience and compassion and beauty that is both inward and outward.

Philosophy of the Ritual

But conceptualizing and creating the ritual itself was challenging in ways I had not anticipated. All of the Book Club members are Christian, and most of us are Catholic. Whatever we as individuals feel about the Catholic Church and our role as members, we have all been socialized in a tradition that sees ritual as male-initiated, male-celebrated, and male-centered. The notion of ritual created by women, celebrated by women, and honoring women, especially older women, was, therefore, a gigantic intellectual leap forward.

In my initial reading on the subject, I found relatively little specific information on croning rituals. Whatever ancient rites were performed in the distant past, they have almost surely been lost to us. This lack of specifics is both liberating and daunting. Without a preset ritual to use, the form and content of our rituals are ours to create. It is up to us to decide what we celebrate, and how, and when.

So I was led to consider questions regarding the nature and purpose of ritual: What are we celebrating? What makes us valuable as older women? What do I want members to take away from this experience? And what ritual elements do I want to include to make this happen?

I also needed to consider ritual form: How do I include everybody in the group without burdening members or forcing them outside their comfort zone? How do I make sure the ritual represents the feelings of the entire group and not just mine?

And finally, there were the questions that I didn't think to ask but that were made apparent to me anyway: What is the spiritual dimension of this ceremony? How will the Goddess take a hand, and how will we leave room for Her to do Her work? The answers to these last questions have been perhaps the most valuable lessons that we have taken from this experience.

Creating the Ceremony

The more research I have done, the more ideas I have gleaned from the various sources I have consulted. Some of the advice has been contradictory, but I think this emphasizes that there is no one "right" way to create a croning ceremony. And sometimes, despite our most careful plans, the Goddess Herself will take a hand in our creations and guide us in the direction She wishes us to go.

Timing: Many sources suggest using a biological timetable; they choose the onset of menopause as an appropriate time to celebrate a croning. Others suggest using an astrological timetable and choose the years between ages 56 and 58. Sometime during these years of a woman's life, the planet Saturn, patron of old age, will begin its third revolution around the sun, and it therefore seems an appropriate time to celebrate a woman's entry into the third phase of her life. The Ladies of Book Club use the member's 60th birthday. This choice was fortuitous – it was the first "milestone" birthday that arose that was significant enough for the woman herself to mention it, and it fell well within the suggested guidelines. But other possibilities include using age 65 or when a woman retires from her job or celebrates another life-changing milestone, the birth of a grandchild, for example.

Some sources suggest that age alone is not enough to warrant a croning; we do not necessarily become wiser as we become older. But others assert that any woman who has lived past menopause has garnered enough experience and wisdom to justify one. In our case, the three women whom we have croned have amply deserved the honor, and suitability was not an issue.

The timing of the ceremony is another decision to be made. Some texts suggest October or November, around the Pagan celebration of Samhain (Halloween) on October 31. Some suggest holding the ceremony around or during a full moon, and others prefer a new moon. Our book club meets on Friday evenings, and our chief goal has always been to pick an evening when the majority of the members can attend. In our case, necessity becomes the mother of timing as well as invention.

Attendees: The question arose early on in the planning of who should be invited. Some cronings are large group rituals held as part of women's spirituality conferences or gatherings with many attendees. Ours of course is much smaller, and we all know each other well. And a woman alone, perhaps without an appropriate social network to join her and support her, may choose to crone herself in a solitary ritual.

We considered a number of options: keeping the ceremony for just the members; inviting female relatives and good friends of the woman to be celebrated; including mothers, sisters, and daughters of all the members; or including as well male relatives who we believed would be supportive. Not all of us are married or have children, and not all of us have sisters or mothers still living and close by. So in the end, we chose a members-only ceremony.

Elements: The sources I consulted included many ritual elements for the ceremony. Some I chose to include, while others didn't seem reflective of who we are. Appeals to the five senses were emphasized, and I tried to choose ritual aspects that would involve each one.

Space: Some sources suggest outdoor rituals, but this was not a feasible arrangement for our group. We hold the ritual in my dining room, which is where we meet for our regular book club sessions. I do a ritual cleansing of the space in the afternoon before the ladies arrive.

Colors: Traditional colors for the crone are purple and black. I use a purple tablecloth with a white lace topper.

Candles: Candles symbolize light and warmth. I use a set of three glass candleholders in graduated heights. The shortest holds a pink candle in honor of the Maiden, the middle holds a red candle for the Mother, and the tallest holds a purple candle for the Crone. In addition, crones find a purple candle at their place setting, and the other women find a red one. These individual candles will be used in the ceremony.

Incense: I use scented candles or incense in the room before and during the ritual. Since the ceremony ends with a feast, the aromas of cooking also permeate the room.

Music, Chanting, Drumming, and Dancing: These are suggested in many sources and would be wonderful elements of large outdoor group rituals. We have experimented with background music at some of our meetings but have found it too distracting. In our ritual, everyone has a speaking role to play, and we include movement around the table.

Food: We embrace most heartily the notion of the feast at the end of the ritual. Our regular book club meetings include a potluck dinner; but if the meeting includes a croning, we save the food for after the ceremony. It has become our custom to ask the honoree what her favorite foods are from past meetings and to prepare those. I also include wine and cheese, both foods that grow better with aging. Some sources caution against the use of alcohol out of respect for women who may be struggling with addictions, and the same caveat could apply to serving meat or to including foods that might trigger an allergic reaction. This is less of a problem in a small group where the members know each other well, but it is a useful point to keep in mind.

Gifts: Each crone receives a scarf, or stole, as part of the ritual, and this is my gift to her. Other members may bring other gifts, and these are as individual and as varied as the giver and the recipient. One member has always chosen a lovely and symbolic piece of jewelry as her gift. She Googles 'crone jewelry' and finds her sources online.

Attire: Previously croned members wear their scarves. Besides that, we don't have strict expectations about what members wear since some of us attend meetings either right before or right after work. Our most recent crone decided to dress up a bit, and she requested that those members who could choose their attire wear "floaty skirts." She herself came in a marvelous huge straw hat bedecked with flowers and looked wonderful. At the other end of the spectrum, some

sources suggest full or partial nudity for the ceremony. Although I knew our members wouldn't be comfortable with nudity, it would be a feasible alternative for a woman conducting a solitary croning.

Life Changes: Some women use the croning ceremony as an opportunity to mark their passage into a new life stage with some personal changes. For example, they may choose a new name for themselves. They may dedicate themselves to a particular goddess, or patron saint, or another revered figure or role model. They may set goals for themselves or resolve to fulfill a long-cherished dream. The strong positive energy from the ritual itself, along with the burst of confidence and self-esteem that it brings, can galvanize a woman to tackle new projects or take on new challenges. It may also be the impetus she needs to rid herself of negative influences or disharmonies in her life.

Ritual: The current version of our ceremony begins with the Introduction I wrote to explain the meaning of crones and croning.

Next comes the croning itself. The honoree is pronounced Crone by the group and is invested with her stole. It is a curious coincidence within our group that, with only one exception, the person sitting to the left of the honoree is the next in line to be croned. So it has become our tradition for the "crone-in-training" to be the person to drape the stole.

After that, each member of the group shares something special about the new crone – a favorite memory, perhaps, or something she has learned from or especially values about the crone. This is one of the most meaningful parts of the ceremony because it gives the honoree a very clear sense of the difference she has made in people's lives and how much the group values her.

Next, the previous crones light their purple candles from the centerpiece candles and then light the new crone's candle with theirs. This action symbolizes their welcoming her into their special membership. And after that the new crone goes around the table, lighting the other members' red candles with hers, to symbolize her sharing her wisdom with them. Previous crones have the opportunity to read an article, essay, or poem that they feel is appropriate to the occasion or of special application to the honoree, or simply to share their thoughts on becoming an older woman or their responses to having been croned themselves.

With the candles still lit, the Blessing is read. This is a poem or reading chosen specifically with the new crone in mind, so it is different for each ceremony.

Finally, with the candles extinguished, we end the celebration with the feast. Along with the wine and cheese and whatever other dishes the members bring, someone provides a decorated cake to end the festivities.

I have gone into some detail describing our ceremony, not to suggest that this is the only or even the best way to perform one, but to emphasize the multiplicity of choices to be made and the variety of options to consider. To my mind, the most important aspect of a croning ceremony is how well it speaks to the values of the group and how successfully it honors the woman to be croned.

The Goddess at Work

One aspect of ritual that we struggle with is the attempt to balance tradition with growth. On the one hand, part of the force and comfort of ritual is our sense of knowing how it goes and what to expect. On the other hand, ritual is organic; it grows and changes and transforms itself at each new performance. So the conflict involves retaining enough of the ritual so that it stays recognizable but allowing it to change and develop in ways that seem appropriate and right. For me in particular, since I developed the ritual, I knew that developing too much "ownership" might become a problem and a hindrance. I would need to be able to let go of the process enough to let it become what it should be. And in every instance where we have changed the ceremony, even in those cases where

the change has seemed to be out of necessity or not especially significant, the change has been to something better, more appropriate, or more meaningful. We have come to refer to this phenomenon as “the Goddess at work.” It is evidence to us that a larger spiritual force is at work through our ceremony, perfecting and blessing our efforts.

The story of the stoles is a good illustration. From our first croning, I wanted to purchase the stole myself. The Ladies had agreed to the ceremony, but I didn’t want to burden them with an unanticipated expense. So I found myself one day wandering through a department store looking for something that I wasn’t even sure I would recognize when I saw it. I went home discouraged, having found nothing that seemed quite right. Later in the week I went to Ten Thousand Villages, a church-sponsored fair-trade organization featuring beautiful handcrafted items from around the globe. There I found the perfect scarf – a delicate deep purple fabric. And it seemed even more appropriate to celebrate a croning by purchasing the handiwork of another woman somewhere else in the world, a woman who would benefit from our support. Now, we wouldn’t even consider a scarf from anyplace else. The symbolism is too perfect, and I believe there is a reason why I didn’t find what I wanted right away.

For the second croning I went directly to Ten Thousand Villages. I was hoping to find a similar scarf in perhaps a different color, but I didn’t. However, a few days later, when I went back with two book club members and one of my daughters, we found the perfect choice – a scarf in filmy deep teal blue, a scarf that hadn’t even been there when I had come in a few days earlier. To me, this experience emphasized the group element of the croning ceremony; the ideal scarf appeared when several of us were together and the time was right.

The story of the third stole is perhaps my favorite. Our third crone is a special friend, and I wanted her scarf to be special also. Since we had already given a purple scarf and a teal one, I had my heart set on finding a scarf in deep green, which would honor her Irish heritage. I envisioned an eventual rainbow of colors around the table as we croned more and more members. But I found nothing even remotely resembling what I wanted. What I did find was a lovely silk scarf in a deep maroon, which I left there because it wasn’t the green scarf I wanted. It was the Ladies who gently reminded me not to get too hung up on everything matching. When I returned for the maroon scarf, I was told it was a sample and the only one of its kind. That was all I needed to hear; it was the perfect gift because the person who received it is also one of a kind. The lesson I learned from this scarf is to let go of my plans and allow the Goddess to reveal hers. The rainbow of scarves around the table was my vision; the Goddess had another and better one, and I needed to get out of Her way.

Croning Rituals within a Spiritual Tradition:

With the growth and development of the feminist spiritual tradition in the 1970’s came a corresponding interest in, and development of, ritual celebrations designed by and for women. In these cases, ritual is an outgrowth, and an expression, of spirituality, and the purpose and practices of the ritual are framed by the tradition that informs them. Rituals that are described in the sources written from this tradition tend to be more specific and more elaborate in their suggestions.

Our ritual developed differently and from an opposite direction. It grew out of our desire to honor each other and value ourselves in ways that the larger culture has yet to accept. For us, the spiritual dimension came later and was to a certain extent unanticipated. In addition, some of us are still comfortable to varying degrees within our own religious denomination or within the Christian tradition in general. For this reason, our ceremony does not reference the Goddess by name. We speak of “the Goddess at work” in our preparations, but most of us would not describe the ceremony itself as “Goddess worship” or as existing within that tradition.

However, the issue of situating croning ceremonies within an existing patriarchal religious tradition does raise some interesting questions. Although worshippers on either side of this issue may certainly disagree, I personally believe that it is possible to create a croning ritual within a

Christian context. For inspiration, I look to my own Catholic upbringing and consider the figure of Mary.

Even as a young girl, I felt a special devotion to Mary. Although I would not have phrased it this way as a child, it seemed much more natural and comforting to develop a spiritual relationship with a woman. I prayed to her more easily, and I felt her protection around me. Of course, we were reminded by religious authority figures that we were not “worshipping” Mary, only praying to her and perhaps “venerating” her. Worship was reserved for God. But it seems to me now that the special kinship that many Catholics, both women and men, have felt toward Mary is a recognition and an acknowledgement of the importance of her feminine qualities and values for all of us. It also suggests that a spiritual tradition which recognizes only one-half of one of the great dualities of our existence – namely, male and female – is not spiritually satisfying or complete. So a Christian crowning ceremony, for example, with ample references to Mary or other strong Biblical women, seems to me to be a legitimate approach.

Conclusion

Through developing our ceremony, I have come to realize what is perhaps the most important value and the greatest gift of the crowning ritual, not only our group’s ceremony, but all the other ceremonies celebrating women that have been developed, and that will continue to develop in the future. As we learn to value and celebrate ourselves as older women, we claim that value for all women. We assert that our value is not limited to youth or fertility, and it does not diminish as we become stronger and wiser with age. As we reclaim our legitimate power and celebrate publicly our accomplishments and our hard-won wisdom, we provide a model for those younger women who follow us. From the most ancient times, this has been the role of the Croners, the Wise Women, among us. We show them their future, and we encourage them to anticipate it with pride and respect. And we bestow that legacy on our daughters and granddaughters and generations of women yet to be born.

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