
INTO THE DARK Paganism & Ageing

by

Shan

Her exquisitely lovely face glowed in the strange fire as if transmuted to another reality, revealing her as the goddess she was. A sheen of pearl enhanced her skin; her great eyes were even more brilliant than before. Slowly they closed and the subtle curves of her mouth softened further into bliss. A timeless moment circled her as she bathed in the source of her power and beauty.

Then a tiny ripple moved through the muscles of this wondrous face, and then another. Her eyes flew open as if at the peak of ecstasy. Her lips parted, and the stillness deepened. Her mouth opened wider, and her eyes, but suddenly eyes disappeared into shuttered flesh as the mouth squared into a grimace. A horribly high-pitched shriek rang sharp like breaking metal.

That soft, smooth face showed tiny lines and marks around eyes and mouth. The glossy hair that pulsed with her magnetism, now went dull. Her nose sharpened. Her cheeks hollowed. As I watched in disbelieving fear, the noble brow showed tracks of strain. Instinctively she put up her hands to protect her delicate face, but that only showed that their slender lines too were

marred by creases at the joints. After only a moment she let her hands fall again.

Round her jaw the sculpted line of bone blurred into slight pouches of flesh. Two hard folds appeared down each side of the mouth. And that mouth, that breathtaking invitation to delight, flattened, the sweetness evaporating into thin edges, Hair sprouted from a tiny mole that enlarged even as I watched.

Helpless, I saw the flesh discolouring beneath her eyes. I could hardly bring myself to look at these, the very gates of her magic. Yet somehow I must. The brow bone darkened its shadow as the folds hung lower over the outer edges. The magnificent rayed colour of the

iris circles was as yet undiminished. The arch of the eyebrows, once such perfect lines of artistry, now thinned. The eyelids, that entranced by their graceful delicacy, were now mere papery covers. The poor eyes seemed smaller as they sank into folds of flesh. And now at last the complexity of colour faded from the irises. But now the

hands showed ribs and knots, and there were brown spots on the backs. As the veil of her hair passed from grey hanks to wisps of grubby white, I began to chill with dread.

The shape of skull cut through the remaining hair. Her whole head had shrunk, except for the folds that depended from her chin. Her body stooped a little. Skinny shoulders and arms hunched as she tried hopelessly to comfort the weakness that saturated her. Dark blotches stained her skin. At last a kind of smoothness returned as the flesh thinned back against the bone. Pale eyes still hid in great hollows, and the face was no more than a mask covered with fine lines like old paper. From a mouth that was no more than a slit, she let out a childlike whimper, and then the jaw dropped as she sank to the ground.

My first reaction to writing as a Pagan about ageing, was to produce a cheerful essay about how it's not so bad really. Then I wondered about the tension that needed to be overcome by such brisk cheerfulness.

Pagans, I wanted to say, honour the old. I would tell you about preindustrial societies that do not reject the elderly, and instead respect the wisdom of elders. I would quote for you from Navajo, Keltic and other traditions. But for one thing what Pagans like me and my Clan aspire to, is in some matters such as this, still in potential. Some of us are looking at when our predominantly young

and middleage people grow older, what changes our community will need to make as a consequence. About inner attitudes for each one of us personally, there is also discussion.

For another thing I find it all a bit too cute to set up traditional kinds of society as an ideal. Traditional societies certainly do seem to make a better job of caring for older members, and give them more respect. I lived among mountain peasants for a while and saw how each age group and both genders fit into a very workable pattern in a structure that has changed little in thousands of years. But flagellating ourselves as we fall short or hankering after a lost dream-time doesn't help in a very different case. Those people I lived among only had to follow custom in safe stable situations. We have to cope with small, mobile family units, and radical differences in outlook between generations. Anyway. dotty grandmas cause sniggers wherever you go. And no one really wants wrinkles, brittle bones and false teeth, given a choice.

We invest an awful lot of time and trouble in denying ageing. Diet, exercise, cosmetics, hormone replacement, surgery, an open mind, determination, vitamins, courage, adaptability . . . why, with all these resources one can live at 70 pretty much as you do at 30. Except that you need quite a few of those resources, and you've got to work at it, oh dear yes, and no slacking, or the sag will show, and the secret's out.

But there's nothing wrong with wanting to live a full and vigorous life at 70, 80 or 90. Of course not.

There's no need to relinquish sex either. As most problem pages hasten to reassure us, sex is our right for as long as we want it. Perhaps the vagina is a little dry; the penis perks up slowly if at all; and arthritic hips cannot slip into position quite so readily as before. Never mind. With a little patience, courage, inventiveness, hormone cream, vitamins, playful aids, determination, we can make it, fake it, almost like before.

Long ago, when I was very young, I read 'Brave New World' (Huxley) Everyone lived totally healthy, free, comfortable lives - until they were about 40. Then they died, comfortably, hygienically, fading neatly out within a few days. Those people lived full vigorous lives right up to the end.

When I was young. 'What do you mean?', people scoff, 'you're still young.' With my smooth skin and long hair, I do look younger than I am. I'm so lucky they tell me. It runs in the family. But inside, I'm not young. At 38 I am in my middle years, definitely no longer a girl. My upper arms and hips are heavier, and the flesh is less firm. Late nights take a toll I used not to notice. The memories stretch back.

1959 Countryside, England. I examined the plump smoothness of my child's hands, comparing them in my mind to images of grown-ups' hands. Ugh! Mine were much nicer.

1969 New York. At college, living in campus for a month, I began to notice the ghetto of youth it was. All the faces and bodies around me were young. Even the lecturers were fairly young, and only there for part of the day. Older people became aliens.

Home again, I watched my mother at her mirror. She found new lines on her face, and we laughed about it. If I'd been living in that ghetto, I'd have missed that.

1970 New York. My escort waited as I put on lipstick in the hall mirror. In wonderment I traced the first lines across my forehead. A sign of age! "Look" I breathed, "my first lines." My excitement froze as he hastily reassured me that they could barely be seen.

1974 London. The women's movement allowed me and encouraged me to delight in my menstruation. Now I'm dreading the time when I must lose it.

1975 Spain. I watched the different patterns of mountain people. The woman who ran the village bar was very kind to me. Once she asked me to guess her age. I tried, putting her several years younger than my grandmother, to flatter her a little. She was the same age as my mother. Embarrassment!

1980 London. My grandmother died. Suddenly I'm shunted up a generation. I talked to someone ten years younger - and she was

an adult. That much younger, yet still a full adult person. Shock -

1985 London. Massive loss. Destruction of a whole lifestyle, of faith, of hope, home, livelihood, friendships feeling slow, suspended in pain. Able to do so little each day, nursing my strength like - like a little old lady. Each small ordinary act a triumph. Such incredibly slow healing. Feeling old. Feeling weary. because I know i will survive; I know that debt, heartbreak, cold and loneliness aren't enough to destroy me. But knowing it will take long years.

As Pagans we venerate the Goddess, the great Matrix of all energy, the web that binds it all together. We speak of her as Maiden Mother and Crone. Triple Goddess

Modern society has its own versions of these: - Sweet Young Girl, Harrassed Housewife, and Little Old Lady. Not the same at all!

Maiden , Mother and Crone each wield their own kinds of power. A woman (and therefore men connected to her) passes through transitions from Maiden to Mother at about 28, and from Mother to Crone around 56. As she carries the previous self on with her to the next, the Crone includes both Mother and Maiden powers, and the choices about using them.

Different Pagans have their individual interpretations of the Triple One. For me, the Maiden is curious, intelligent, questing,

unpossessed, ambitious, hopeful, passionate, restless, innovative, careless, unpredictable, frustrated, unsure, extreme.

For me, the Mother is connected, involved, birthing, building, loving, angry, protective, defensive, knowledgeable, creating, sensual, dominant, producing, compromising, exhausted, resentful, confused.

The Crone is the least recognised and the least understood by our society, the most feared. This is probably due to patriarchal motives which need some of the services of Maiden and Mother, but believe the Crone is irrelevant, though scary. But she is returning fast, surging up from suppression at last.

For me she is formidable, silent, wise, tricky, oracular, consoling, cruel, comforting, healing, mystical, difficult, challenging, sexy, painful, relentless, hard, hidden, destructive, cleansing, freeing, self-possessed, contradictory, disintegrating, crazy, dying.

CRONE CRONOS
CHRONOLOGY TIME

A Crone is a being who is moving beyond time.

I lack vision of what is the corresponding masculine experience.

As Pagans we frequently chant repetitive chants as a kind of voice meditation. They typically have a hypnotic quality that switches us into focussed awareness, a suggestible state.

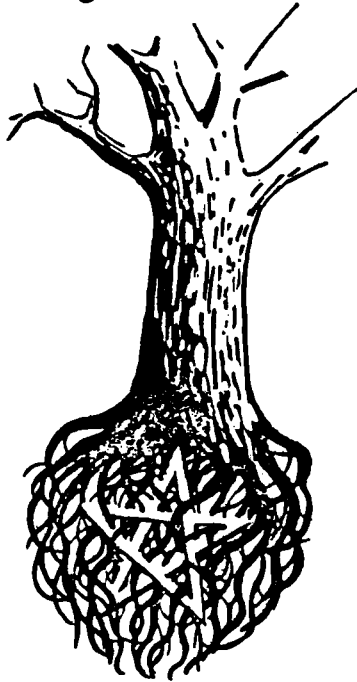
Hecate, Hecate
Welcome among us.
Dark Moon
Crone

Mother of Magic
Share with us your secrets.
Teach us to reach our heart's desire.
Aid us through the lessons of suffering
To win your tools

Of cunning
Anger
Silence
And selfishness.
for we too are becoming
Crones.

Through the patterns of time
We too are becoming
Self-willed
Sexy
formidable
And fascinating.
Hecate, Hecate
Welcome among us.
Dark Moon
Crone
Mother of Magic.

Hecate



What the chants say to us while we permit ourselves to be in that state is significant.

'We all come from the Goddess . .
Corn and grain, corn and grain.
All that falls shall rise again'

'The river it is flowing,
flowing and growing, down to the
sea.
Oh Mother carry me, back to the
sea.'

'We are the Witches who will
never be burned . . .
Live the day and dance the night.
Love the Dark and love the Light.'

'Lady spin your Circle bright.
Weave your Web of Dark and
Light. . .'

'We are the flow and we are the
ebb . . .'

'Light is returning, although this
seems the darkest hour.
No one can hold back the dawn.'

These bear messages below the
level of thought. They impress a
sense of polarity, growing /
letting go. Dark / Light. flow /
ebb. Over and over and over
again we sing, and the cycle
images print deeper and deeper in
us.

Some of the chants emphasise the
positive part of the cycle (. . .rise
again/ . . .No one can hold back
the dawn) but only in the context
of the sun or grain cycle, and so
the other part is implicit.

Twenty years ago my whole
generation surged in rebellion to

the sound of 'The Times They are
A-Changin'. The call, the thrill
of it, was pure joy, a promise of
a new age. Out of the way, this
is OUR time, our changes are
coming ! And still the song says
the same, so that soon we too
must get out of the way for
another set of changers.

Heraclitos (Pagan Philosopher) 'All
is flux'. And 'You can never step
twice into the same river.

Our faith puts great emphasis on the
seasons of the year, the Wheel. We
construct elaborate rituals to mark
and enact the appropriate
experiencing of eight points of the
passage of the year. Imbolc (Feb 2)
Eostra (March 21) are about
dreaming and hoping and awakening
and welcoming new vigour
respectively. Beltaine (May Eve) .
Midsummer (June 21) are about
sex, views, acceleration, and power
celebration Clan gathering. Then
come the festivals of the waning or
ageing year.

Lammas (Aug 2) is about the harvest
of the green, and so about sacrifice,
giving, consenting to the descent
into the dark.

Kore / Mabon (Sept 21) tells of the
Descent of the Goddess, the quest-
ing self going down to face fear,
darkness and death. We mourn the
loss of summer brightness.

Samhain / Halloween (Oct 31)
Cleansing, chaos, disintegration,
Remembering the Dead. New Year.

And finally Yule (Dec 21) shows us
the Dark and the light in their
perpetual struggle, the new against

the old, and the new goes forward. The source of power, the Goddess, renews herself in order that this may happen,

As we pass through each of these gates, we are helped to match the climatic and vegetation changes on the outside, with reflected shifts in our state of mind within. As we expand and contract with the forces of the year, we learn what both kinds of process feel like, and that both occur within us. We get used to them as practising Pagans.

I must say I have a lot of sympathy with people who ask what on earth we do it for. At Kore in September about thirty of us trundled down to a deserted beach in Kent. Transport, catering, site finding, connecting people, building the fire and checking necessary equipment was a hefty job. Then as I stumbled around in a web of black thread in sandy darkness with all those other halfknown people, I could see how odd we were. All that trouble. Not something that can be explained really. Except that the results are like a myriad tendrils of strength that grow through my life.

Our myths help too. Some faerie ladies entrance strangers met by night with enchanting smiles, only to pass on and reveal the ugly hag face on the back of their pretty heads. Or ugly old women change into lovely maidens, freed from a spell by kindness. The Goddess is the bountiful Earth Mother. She is also the ravening Destroyer.

In India, Tantric initiates are advised to contemplate the gradual decay of corpse meat, watching day

by day. Or to meditate before a dish of shit. The meaning is to face the dark, to befriend your own disintegration and death. In Europe, Witches were tained to dissect small animals, and accustomed themselves to ingredients such as urine, shit, blood, herbal poisons, fungi, mould and aborted fetuses for their spells.

What actually are the markers of ageing? What indicates when I have begun it? It is true of course that we are ageing at all times of life. But we commonly mean the later part of life when we speak of ageing.

One important divider is the death of a parent. Perhaps this is heralded by other deaths. But this one is unlike any other. For most of us this loved/hated insitution has always been there; so it's the loss of one of our greatest securities. Before 30 we can be orphaned. After that, we're just bereaved.

Another divider, for women, and so indirectly for men too, is menopause. The body relinquishes, loses fertility. Welcomed or dreaded, the time arrives regardless.

Retirement releases us from routine employment. Often more acute for men, this can either be a loss of money or status, or a relief from drudgery, sometimes both.

Sooner or later, vigour and faculties begin to go. Pain and discomfort are more frequent companions. As outlined earlier, much can be done to delay and alleviate this pattern.

Nothing can stop it completely.
The cycle is contracting.

One by one, we are forced to let go our our properties. And at the core of it is death. The other markers are all endings too, little deaths. My sharpness earlier speaking of the efforts to 'stay young' comes from this. Sooner or later we cannot 'stay young' 'you're as young as you feel'. . 'age doesn't matter' . . . 'a bra that will hold you like firm young muscles.' . . . 'hang gliding at 72' . . . 'there's life in the old dog yet' . . . This doesn't prepare us for descent! It teaches us nothing except to hold on, try harder.

Our counsellors promote a lot of stuff about relationships beginning and expanding, about renewing and sustaining. We hear a good deal less about endings. This prepares us badly for the period of life which is about letting go.

Medicine still mainly sees its job as a combat with the enemy, death. Not to cure is to fail. This teaches only fear and inadequacy in the face of declining, contracting.

Some faiths teach a born-again result of death. 'There you are, good as new, for ever and ever.' This reinforces contempt of ageing and death, as at best, an unpleasant interlude between first taste of vigorous youth, and the later delivery of the supergrade article. This is not good enough, for we certainly do need help to face the realities.

Eventually, all the efforts and clever tricks, all the positive thinking in the world, it all falls away. The self is left to struggle with less and less outer resources. No more jogging/ dancing. No more hard foods, even if you do believe in high fibre. No more sex. . . no more. . . no more. . .

We cannot approach this other that in dread if we approach it through the mind and body alone. Even everyday feelings will only focus on fear if unaided. The conscious self can only scream in horror at its own annihilation - as I quaked in horror at the disintegration of 'She' (Rider Haggard) I recalled at the beginning of this piece.

Yet the deeper, intuitive self, can understand and bring us to harbour. But this Underworld self works in symbols, in colours, shapes, images, sensations, movements and gestures. So this Self needs to have the opportunity to study circles, practise the cycle of the year, listen to / sing the cyclic litanies, absorb the rhythm of life's ebb and flow, flow and ebb.

Each can only reach it in their own self. It cannot be explained. Neither can it be given by gift, persuasion or dominance. It can only be woven within the feeling of the rightness that makes someone say 'This is a good day to die.'

C Shan. House of the Goddess.
Yule 1987.

* Some Pagans are working on a Goddess of four aspects, following the four Moon phases.
