

## CROSSING THE BRIDGE: My Journey through Menopause

by Ann Kreilkamp

*This essay was first published in Crone Chronicles, #12, Summer Solstice 1992.*

When my last period finally came it was six weeks late. Waiting for it, I found myself in an unusual mood. Unlike other times during these past few years when my period has floated around utterly unconnected to the Moon, this time I waited for it patiently. I did not feel bloated, as if a dam were ready to burst. Nor did I feel excessively bitchy. This newfound equanimity was the source of quiet pride.

I was also pleased to note that my period began within hours of the new moon, as it had for many years when I was younger; as it would, were I a member of an aboriginal female tribe.

The conjunction of these two pleasures--my pride in nothing a newly won patience with my body's wayward ways, and my body's re-attunement with the Moon's monthly renewal--set off an internal alarm. These feelings were at odds with one another. They did not compute.

Now, four weeks later, I again begin the long or short wait for my period. And the strangeness has not gone away. I still feel at odds with myself.

### **On the Bridge**

Having become conscious of this internal contradiction, I realize that I've been feeling deeply uneasy for a long time. It's as if I'm trying to go forwards (into menopause) and backwards (into eternal youth) at once. As if I am halfway across a bridge, and stalled there, over a deep chasm. My foundation in the old world is gone, and the new is an unknown country.

"Contradictions are growing points:" I seem to remember this from another time. Contradictions are like death. They stop us in our

tracks. We have to embrace this impossible situation in order to go on. We grow to become larger than the problem which confronts us. We absorb it. As we assimilate it, we are changed.

My difficulty with the menopausal process surprises me. I thought I would welcome it--and I do! (but I don't). Unlike most females, I've always known I would be happier in old age, that this would be the time of personal freedom. Even as a little girl, I would tell people I couldn't wait to be 65 years old. They would look shocked and ask why. I would tell them because maybe by that time I would be wise. What I did not tell them was more to the point: I was both terrified of and disgusted with the entire bag of tricks that being female in this culture entails. Disgusted with the idea of focusing on my "appearance" rather than reality. Disgusted with the idea of trying to manipulate men to get what I wanted.

I'm doubly surprised because I've been working for a long time on coming to terms with my aging body. I've had to. I've had no choice. Which is interesting. It reminds me of the first time I really tuned into my body. Again, back then, nearly 30 years ago, it also felt as if I had no choice.

### **In the Beginning**

I was a good Catholic girl. As my body began to change into womanhood, I slipped outside that body and hovered there, safe from feelings. Here's how my world looked then: "I" was on the inside, and everything else was outside. "I" was the thinker, the perceiver, the judge. Alone. Airy. Weightless. The sole source of meaning in the world. Everything else, including my own body, was objectified, an object, separate from me and subject, hopefully, to my control.

One can imagine my shock--and alarm--as I began to feel my "self" sink down into my body as a young pregnant woman. I recall being astonished by that same sense of inexorability then that I feel now, as I slowly work through menopause. I remember how my body felt like a vessel, through which nature was working. I was in awe at the discovery that how "I" felt about the process had nothing to do with it. That once the process had begun, and once I had made the initial decision not to terminate, then the pregnancy had its own laws. That these laws felt both mysterious and purposeful. That they were working according to a wisdom so ancient that it made me shudder

to really feel it, and which lay far, far deeper than my ability to comprehend. Especially do I remember the inexorability, how my body was being used, and how the entire process had its own time and intent, utterly superseding my own personal will.

And I remember my surprise to realize that I felt good when pregnant. Felt as good as I had felt running my horse bareback through the fields as a ten-year-old girl. Both my horse and my pregnancies grounded me, placed me at home in my body.

I hadn't wanted children. Yet I loved being pregnant. Loved the feeling of being here, in a body, a creature of instinct. Indeed, I used to say that the only times I felt *really real* were during my two pregnancies. Now I would say my Taurus Moon was activated. Otherwise I was Sagittarian, restless, frustrated, and hungry for meaning.

That was in my twenties. During my 30s, as my periods gradually regularized, synchronizing with the phases of the Moon, they connected me, on a totally unconscious level, with the rhythms of physical reality. I was connected without realizing it. My body was functioning according to laws which harmonized human female bodies with Earth and its Moon, and I didn't know it. "I" was still floating "free"--I thought. I was identifying with my Sagittarian fire and ignoring my body entirely. My body let me go on thinking I was boss. I thank the Goddess for my sturdy Taurus Moon constitution, as during those years it was forced to withstand an enormous amount of substance abuse.

So, for the first 40 years, my body did what I asked of it without too much complaint. Except for that time in my early 20s when I almost died from peritonitis, and, as a result, discovered my path in life. I thought the exception proved the rule. Or rather, I didn't even think about that exception, about its deeper implication: the relevance of bodily changes to soul's earthly path. I didn't have to think about it--I thought. My body was my slave, indentured for life.

## **And Now**

Now my liver gets congested easily, disturbing the entire digestion. For the past four or five years I have become increasingly aware of how I feel inside. Indeed, I would say that at this point I am as aware of the inside of my body as formerly I was aware of the

outside. No longer is my body outside, a thing which I can do with as I will. My body is me, the environment through which I experience life.

I can no longer do drugs or coffee. I rarely drink. Fats are increasingly difficult to digest. The range of choices narrows with each passing year.

The ongoing physical transformation has been paralleled by a subtle emotional process. It began with denial (“my period is late again, I must have been stressed out; or maybe it’s the long trip I took--my Taurus Moon never was happy away from home.”) Denial lasted one or two years.

Meanwhile, I was learning about the phenomenon in Chinese medicine called “deficient yin.” What happens to women as we age. We become less juicy. The repellent phrase, “dried up old crone,” is no metaphor.

### **Towards Wholeness**

“Yin,” in a more universal context, has to do with the female principle. In astrology it is associated with the elements earth and water, and includes attitudes and values such as softness, receptivity, absorption, magnetism, responsiveness. Jung once said that as we age, men become more feminine and women more masculine. Especially, I would say is this the case in patriarchal culture, which wants its women to be feminine and its men, real men. So, in midlife, we begin the process of becoming whole. Of claiming the rejected parts of ourselves. “The “dried up old crone” then, is a woman who has given up her yin completely. Has transformed into a man.

Is this what is meant by becoming whole? Let us hope not.

Here we need to distinguish between the archetype Crone and the distortions of Her as perceived through the lens of patriarchal culture.

It appears that, within patriarchal culture, to “allow nature to take its course” as we age, is to end up, not whole, but having suffered a reversal: as we are taught to be “little women” in youth, so are we denigrated as mannish, dried up, etc., as we become old. I am not talking purely on a psychological level. It is important to understand

that. I am talking literally, on a physical level, the level at which our bodies manifest our spirits into the world.

For the past five or six years I have been working with acupuncture, Chinese and western herbs, many types of body work, and my own spiritual and psychological process, to recover lost yin. I want to become whole. Yin and yang together.

I realize that talking about “yin” may sound abstract to western ears. So let’s put it another way: during my 40s, like many others, I found that if I continued to ignore my body, I would become ill. I remember realizing with surprise--and humiliation--how often the subject of conversations with my friends had become our various aches and pains. We were beginning to sound like the crotchety old people in our parents’ generation!

## **Two Paths**

People in that generation, by and large, still spend their time complaining about how badly they feel and commiserating with each other. Many in our generation, however, are taking an entirely different route. Rather than complaining, we are doing something about it. However, this active response to aging seems to be taking two forms. And these forms, while they appear similar in their results are, in reality, radically different in both orientation and intent. The first form is in the majority and, while it looks new, is really just more of the same old thing. The second form is, I feel, while still uncommon, profoundly revolutionary and healing, for both the individual and the planet.

I talk about these options as if they are both clear and mutually exclusive. That’s my mind working, trying, as usual, to rise above it all and see things from afar. Actually, I am stuck inside my body right now and this article is extremely difficult to write. It’s as though I am groping in the dark with no flashlight; I identify things by bumping up against them, stumbling over them. Sometimes I feel myself in between two things which repel one another, pressing on me from opposite sides. That’s what I mean by “contradiction.” So, dear reader, please realize: to the extent that this article seems clear, it is a lie. To the extent that it feel muddy, it is real.

Back to my story. I am not the first to notice that each passing year narrows my range of options. In my 30s I could indulge in any

manner of food and drink and smoke; now a single cup of coffee will waken me in the middle of the night with strange nerve pains in my wrists.

After tolerating these “aches and pains” for a couple of years--thinking, or saying, as my mother does, “that’s all part of getting older, dear”--I decided to do something about it. For the past five or six years I have been committed to the process of forging a conscious alliance with my body, focused with ever-deepening intent on the care and nurture of this, my own particular portion of Earth substance, during its long slow inexorable transformation from the Mother archetype to the Crone.

Anyone who has ever focused on nutrition and exercise to balance the body recognizes sooner or later that the more purified one’s system becomes, the less tolerance there is for error. The bodies of practicing alcoholics, my age, seem to be able to take any amount of abuse. For me, now, I feel a single glass of wine in my liver. And yet, there’s no question I do feel better than I did five years ago: clearer, more energized, more balanced.

In a very real sense then, one could say I have been “getting younger and younger” over the last few years. And noticing the internal changes, I am grateful to my body for its subtle, but insistent guidance. As the range of options narrows, so does my personal discipline--for holding a focus, for becoming whole, integrated--grow. As the one narrows, so does the other expand. My body is my mentor, it puts me on my path and then keeps me there, telling me, in no uncertain terms, when I am “out of line,” i.e., unaligned, with itself. This new alliance with my body has changed my relationship with the natural world--or, I should say, has put me back in touch with the original relationship I had with nature as a child. The more I feel myself at one within my body, the more I allow myself to truly *be*, the more I feel my cells soaring in the wind, thrumming into the ground, pulsing with each bird’s cry. My own body, as my personal portion of Earth substance, is my antenna into Her whole body. And when I think this way, I realize my present personal feeling of uneasiness may be Earth as a whole speaking.

This changed relationship to my own body has yielded a new understanding, a new ethics: *to the extent that I am at one with my physical substance, I am able to learn how to live rightly on planet Earth.* In changing my relationship to the process of aging, I am allied

with many of my peers, who are refusing to grow older in the same way their parents did. On the other hand I think this point is also where I begin to diverge radically from many of these same peers. My way--moving into bodily feelings, accepting and honoring them--is in the minority. The vast majority approaches active engagement with the aging process with a headset that is still Newtonian.

As we change our diets and our habits we begin to feel better. As we begin to feel better the way diverges. Some of us become more embodied; we begin to experience life within our bodies the way I did when pregnant. We realize our bodies operate according to laws which are very mysterious and meaningful, and which lie much deeper, and are much more ancient, than our ability to consciously comprehend. *To live within a body is to be present within mystery.*

Others in our generation, as they begin to change their diets and habits and feel better, remain disembodied. They look upon a systematic regimen of diet and exercise as the key to preventing the aging process altogether, or at least to slow it way down. Towards this end, they treat their bodies as Cartesian machines, which they then keep tuned, in good repair. (The enormous popularity of cosmetic surgical procedures is an extreme indication of this trend, where bodies become bionic.) In Jackson Hole we call these people "hard bodies," and they seem to be the ones who are also stuck in the eternal puer or puella syndrome. They fuse never wanting to grow old with never wanting to grow up.

Fitness fanatics treat their bodies as tools which they use and manipulate to achieve their personal will. A much smaller group in my generation resides within our bodies; we honor and appreciate them as expression of mysterious physical law. Learning to listen to the subtle voices within our own cells, we attune to Earth's body being.

### **Questions, and More Questions**

And what my body is telling me now is that it feels uneasy, out of sorts with itself. Why? How much of this feeling is merely personal? And if it is, why do I feel stalled on the bridge? Am I deceiving myself? Is it because I want to stay in place, want to be a "hard body" after all and arrest the aging process?

A more insidious form of what may be the same thing is a certain strain of “new age” thinking which assumes that “aging is just a belief system.” The implication? Change your beliefs and you can live forever. Now I must admit, a part of me is very intrigued by this idea. What if it’s true? *What if energy does follow thought, and what if bodies, as condensations of energy, are totally malleable?* This question fascinates because it questions one of humanity’s rock-bottom beliefs, that all creatures must die. Even asking the question sends shock waves through the conceptual and emotional foundation upon which we base our lives on Earth.

So of course I am intrigued. As a flaming Sagittarian, I assume that the more profound our questioning, the more freedom we attain from our own conceptual blinkers, and the more we amplify our own continuous transformational process. And yet I ask myself: what is the difference between truly believing that our bodies can live forever and being in a state of denial--of aging, of death, of any transformational process? Can it be that this same belief can signify either total transformation or its opposite, total denial?

I don’t know the answers to these questions. I have a hard time even formulating them. They reside deep within my muscles and bones and nervous system. Hard to differentiate from the mass. Hard to pull out and up for conscious review. These questions live and breathe inside me. I am caught up in them. I feel my insides to be one huge messy knotted tangled ball of wax. A swamp. What used to be various levels of me are now all mixed up, chaotic. This is new. The sheer extent of my current internal biological confusion feels new. I have never been here before.

### **Body as Archeological Site**

During my 40s, I became aware of my body as a sort of archeological site. A site with many layers, each the repository of artifacts from the many different personalities which have lived and evolved from one into another. As the years go by, layers pile on layers, the most recent compressing all those below. The deeper the layer, the more compressed, the more dense, the more stubborn and recalcitrant.

And yet each layer, each personality evolving through the continuous processing of experience, colors all the others with the imprint of its changing self. The imprint seeps down through the layers, moving more and more slowly as it moves deeper, into density. It’s as if the

top layer is the flowers, the next one the planets from those those flowers grow, the next the soil within which the plants take root, and even deeper lies the rock. Bedrock. The point of total security, stability.

At any point I am aware of the flower currently budding into bloom. Only rarely am I aware of the plant. I can just barely imagine the soil. The rock is a total unknown.

That rock was once a blooming flower, light, changeable, moving quickly into and out of being. Over time the imprint of this flower seeped down to the bottom layer and became rock, hard, intractable, the foundation upon which everything else can rest, and the place from which I move.

It is the rock which is fracturing now, pulverizing, turning into a gelatinous mass which is slowly, slowly oozing towards the surface.

### **From Maiden to Mother--to Crone**

The fundamental difference between this transformation from Mother to Crone and the earlier transformation from Maiden to Mother seems to be this: the body of the Maiden undergoes a long process of preparation for her motherhood. The mysterious physical laws according to which she is developing are integrated within her prior to conception. Pregnancy is the fruit of this long process. The body of the Mother, on the other hand, in passing into Crone, is undergoing a process of disintegration. The physical laws which upheld her being are the rock which is pulverizing within her. *In going from Mother to Crone we are beginning the dying process.*

It is no wonder the Crone is said to be the guide through the process of death and rebirth. She is one who has been there--and survived, her eyes wide open, facing the inevitable.

I've wanted to be a crone since I was a little girl. Intuitively, even then, I realized it had something to do with wisdom. And wisdom, we say, has something to do with detachment. Detachment, I am now beginning to realize, from the Moon's cycles. There is no other set of biological laws which we are being prepared for. There is only what lies beyond biology.

To participate in Crone is to enter another realm. No longer is She submerged within her living and her dying. *To participate in Crone is to enter a larger timeless dimension, within which the processes of living and dying are occurring.* This dimension is a space which is continuously opening. All embracing. Beyond fear.

So my period came six weeks late last time, and I was glad. Glad that I hadn't gone through the usual process of expecting it to come every day for two weeks prior. Glad that perhaps my body was becoming more comfortable with the changes it was undergoing.

And I was glad that it recycled in tune with the Moon. So that I could continue crossing the bridge. I realize now: to cross from the middle to the other side I must re-member myself, and my Motherhood, and her connection to beloved Earth; so that I can begin to truly mourn the loss of what I have held so dearly for so many hundreds of moons. As I began that process of embracing the loss, the confusion, the deep unease, so does my body know that I am honoring it during its time of profound change. As my body moves into the open space of wisdom, I pray that Earth will do the same, her living and her dying embraced by the creatures upon Her.