

SageWoman

Celebrating the Goddess in Every Woman

Renewal & Rebirth

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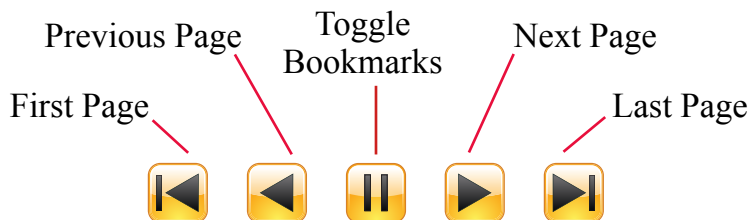


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By HOLLY CEDAR

DRAWING BY JAINE ROSE

POEMS BY RUMI



I am fortunate: my mother held tight to the Quaker ideals of her father's lineage during my childhood. Though I had never stepped into a Friend's Meetinghouse until I was twenty-eight, I knew instantly there was a goodness and holiness there; a sacred center that became a lifeboat when my life fell apart. The meeting was "un-programmed," which means Friends gathered together in silence, setting aside restless thoughts and listening for "that of God to speak to one's condition." According to tradition, attenders arise and deliver messages when led by an inner nudge. Often there is much silence, with a few insightful streams of messages scattered throughout the hour.

The quietude of Friends is unlike any other silence you will experience. There is an opening within it for amazingly deep places of self and Spirit to be touched and seen. Entering these openings with a gathered group focused on what is transforming and healing is akin to drinking a tall glass of cool water on a hot and stressful day.



In 2004, my life spiraled relentlessly into a reality that no amount of prayer or faith could change. The forced amputation of divorce was taking its toll. I reached out, I hoped, and I believed — but my children fought with each other constantly, my bank account was empty, and I felt excruciating alone.

The meeting room was still; the quiet stretched out before us. The smell of the wooden benches receded into the distance.

My thoughts slowed down.

It is time to be still and let light heal me.

I needed to carry this peace to my children.

Longing.

Nothing.

Shared Spirit.

Bliss.

Nothing.

The horrible pain of loss and fear.

A heavy weight upon my shoulders threatened to wear me down to the ground.

Then an incredible sense of peacefulness filled me. It felt as though my body slipped away; I became the whole room. The lull of this timeless feeling built and swelled until it turned into a surge of power. I felt as though I might burst or pass out; my attachment to my mind and body was all that restrained me, drawing me back every breath or so to my trembling body. I longed to be completely free from any awareness of my physical body. My eyes were closed, and I saw a vivid scene.

a Hull of Ripened Fruit

A woman wearing a long white dress stands in front of the chicken coop in my backyard. Long blades of yellowing grass bounce gently in the breeze all around her.

Hair hanging unbraided to her elbows with strands blowing lightly across her face, she waves me toward her with her hand. I follow as she goes into the coop.

Make an altar for me here, she says, pointing to the northwest corner. There is already a crudely constructed shelf in place, a square piece of wood hammered asymmetrically on two sideboards.

Take the hull of a ripened fruit, and fill it with cedar and sage. She shows me half of a hollowed cantaloupe, with small bits of plants in it. Leave it on the altar for me, and I will return to tell you more. She sets the fruit on the altar.

The scene vanished. Aware of my body sitting on the bench, I let the quiet stillness of meeting fill me.



I could not stop thinking about what I had seen. The chicken coop was in-between uses: I had cleaned it out the year before and now used it as a prayer place. Its open windows looked out over a beautiful hill and it was a perfect place for a retreat. Was this vision only my imagination working overtime? Contemplating that my vision might be real — that it might lead somewhere, anywhere away from my pain — gave me hope.

These two conflicting thoughts — doubt versus hope — pulled at me. The voice of doubt told me to interpret it as an interesting daydream and leave it at that. After all, I had always gotten into trouble at school for daydreaming. Following one's wandering mind is a good way to escape reality, and it made sense I would be doing this as I struggled with my messy life. The other voice said I should do what the woman asked me to do. Why not follow my dreams a little?

I decided to follow my vision, which turned out to be harder than I expected. I knew what sage was; I had some in a drawer that I used for smudging. But cedar? Obviously, a tree. I knew cedar for its aromatic wood. Was I supposed to use the wood?

I didn't want anyone to know about what I had experienced in meeting. Even though my doubt was present, there was something about the experience that was too important to say out loud. An urgency to act led me to call a friend of mine who had been taught by a Lakota elder, and I divulged the story.

"You had a full-blown vision," he said to me over the phone,
"I did?"

"Do you know how many people would give anything to experience what's happened to you? You have a choice: to follow the vision or to not follow the vision. If you choose to follow it, don't question it."

"But where do I get cedar? Do I use the wood?"

"No, just use the greenery. They're on the side of the road, all over the place here. Cedar trees are part of the juniper family and they have flat leaves. The way you can tell if it's a cedar or not, is to pull a little wood off the trunk — make sure you ask the tree for permission and offer tobacco first — but the wood will be reddish and have that distinctive cedar smell."

Flat leaves? What was he talking about? I had a tree identification book so I looked up junipers. There were some evergreens on the property where I lived, so I tested them.

Holding tobacco to the sky, I said a prayer and thanked each tree for allowing me to take a part of it, but each bit of bark I pulled was aroma-free and not reddish.

I didn't know what else to do but look for cedars on the sides of the road, but every tree I tested turned out to not be a cedar. It seemed to me that if I was following Spirit, then things would begin to fit together; since I was having no luck, I began to lose hope and started to wonder if I was on a fool's quest.

In desperation I turned to my most trusted confidant: my mother. To my surprise, she was both enthusiastic and encouraging; she even told me that she had some cedar in a drawer that I could have! I wasn't very encouraged, however: what she had was only a small sprig, and I had seen many more herbs in my vision. Although my mother assured me it was cedar, it had very little scent. What's more, she couldn't remember where she had gotten it, and I highly doubted any tobacco or prayers had been given for it.

Leave the fruit for me.

I could almost hear the woman speaking to me, and her form was vivid in my mind's eye. I wanted to do what she had asked, but I didn't want to do something wrong. Beyond that worry was an entirely different problem. What if I did as she asked — and nothing happened? Still hurting from my recent divorce, I feared putting my faith in something and being disappointed once again. I felt very fragile, and wasn't sure I could take another letdown.

A couple of days later I went to the grocery store, and was faced with a new dilemma: should I buy the cantaloupe. Was I really ready? Was the cedar right?

Take the hull
of a ripened
fruit and fill
it with cedar and sage.
Leave it on the altar for
me, and I will return to
tell you more.

As I pondered, I rolled my cart over to the dairy section. Idly musing about whether to trust my vision — and myself — I reached for a carton of 2% milk. A blue-and-white deli sticker on the milk carton caught my eye. “Cantaloupe Half: \$.45” it read. That seemed odd, but odder still was what I noticed next: every single milk carton in the dairy case had an identical sticker.

Time stopped.

Am I awake? I thought, stunned.

Slowly I realized that *yes* I was awake, and *yes* I was in the grocery, and *yes* there really were cantaloupe stickers on the milk cartons. *All* of the milk cartons.

I looked around. There was no one else visible anywhere. It was just me, the milk, and the blue-and-white stickers.

Up until now, all my experiences with Spirit had been profound, but subtle.

This experience was something I could actually point to with my finger. Was I looking directly at the Creator’s face? What were the chances of cantaloupe stickers from the deli landing on an entire case of milk cartons?

Here, in the dairy section, was the sign I had prayed for. I had doubted and stumbled and done things I had regretted. But Spirit had responded with a message that I simply could no longer ignore.

I wheeled my cart directly over to the deli, found a cantaloupe half, and put it into my cart.



When I got home, I smudged the cantaloupe with sage and scooped the orange flesh out with a spoon. I filled the empty half with my mother’s cedar and sage from my dresser, and took it to the top of the rocky hill behind the old chicken coop.

Standing on a large rock where I could see for miles in every direction, I held the fruit up to the six directions: east, south, west, north, sky, and earth. I carried it carefully back down the hill and put it on the shelf inside the chicken coop/prayer lodge. I sat there in the still silence of the shelter and waited.

I was giddy with excitement. *If Spirit could make cantaloupe stickers appear, what else is possible? Am I ready for something even more startling?*

Time slowly ticked by and nothing happened. My thoughts began to wander. Boredom turned to anxiety. Anxiety turned to tears. I had focused my prayer using all of my suffering and enfolding all my desires into a single plea for release. *Am I too damaged for Spirit to listen to?* I thought. *Have I done something to make Spirit turn away? What has gone wrong this time?*

More time passed, and I strained to push disappointment away and keep my composure. *Patience and faith*, I reminded myself. I looked out at the blue sky through the tiny windows and my restlessness began to settle.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw something float by. Had I imagined it? Something silver reflecting the sun. What was it?

*Drumsound rises on the air,
its throb, my heart.*

*A voice inside the beat
says, “I know you’re tired,
but come. This is the way.”*

I jumped up and raced outside. Floating on the wind was a child’s balloon. I chased it up the hill, where I found it stuck in a huge oak tree. Looking up at it, I remembered a dream I’d had just the night before, and began to climb. *Sitting high in a tree, I notice a bird out on a limb. A voice tells me to get a feather from it. I can barely reach it. As I touch it, both wings slip off, and I fall, holding onto them. The voice tells me to have faith, and I’d survive.*

*Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.*

*How do they learn it?
They fall, and falling,
they’re given wings.*

But as soon as I started climbing, I lost track of the balloon. Not too good at tree-climbing in the first place, I





stopped, considering: whatever I was doing, it wasn't worth falling and breaking my neck. Instead, I settled on one of the lower branches and looked down across the hill to the valley below. The wind blew across my hair, pushing it back like a gentle hand, and peace grew within me. I hadn't found the Gate of Heaven, nor a note from the Goddess, but what did I expect?

What I did see were two doves, one white and one black, fly out of a barn far below me. From my perch in the tree, I was soaring as high as the birds flying above the valley; the world hadn't looked this beautiful in a long, long time. As I set aside my thoughts, the wind picked up force, and called out to me.

*Spring overall. But inside us
there's another unity.
Behind each eye here,
one glowing weather.
Every forest branch moves differently
in the breeze, but as they sway
they connect at the roots.*

Several days later, I sat in my ex-chicken coop again, a new cantaloupe on the altar. In my my mind's eye I saw the woman from my vision and heard her voice say, *Follow me.*

She led me to the south-eastern corner of the property. We went down into a ravine, then back up to a small circle of oak trees. She told me to build a lodge. Then came rush of information: I saw a tipi or maybe a sweat lodge and lots of people; something was happening; I witnessed praying and healing, but it came in a torrent, all at once, and I became confused.

I couldn't even get the dishes and laundry done: how could I build a lodge? How would all of these people know to come here? Whatever it seemed Spirit was asking me to do, I did not have capacity to do it.



Time went on. I continued working and doing the daily chores that a mother does. On days when I was tempted to give up hope, I trekked out to the circle of oaks with my prayers and offerings. I often curled up in a hollow on the ground, holding the fragrant offering gingerly as the earth held me. The end of summer finally came, and I needed a new name. Now officially divorced, I felt the need to remove my ex-husband's surname from my own name. There was my maiden name, but I didn't want to use it, to go back to using the name of the person I had been before getting married. I needed a name that represented who I was now, a name which honored what I had been through and who I was becoming.

I thought of using my maternal grandmother's name. She had been a Quaker, and I was Quaker now. Yet, even her name was really the name of her father, a named that followed the male line. I wanted to manifest the wisdom of my female predecessors, but I had no lineage of purely female names to draw from.

Suddenly, I remembered the woman in white, and her message: *Leave the hull of a ripened fruit filled with cedar and sage.* Finding that cedar — which my mother had unexpectedly supplied — had taken faith. Cedar symbolized an offering to all that had guided me and brought me companionship when I was lost, and scared, and hopeless. I had watched my old self burn completely to ash in the purifying fire of change, and a new identity was being born, like the sweet smoke of cedar rising from the flames.

I thought about the lady in white, and made my own offering: *I give myself to you as an offering. May my life be blessed and may I do well in serving You.*

In the fall, I went to court, paid a fee, and changed my name. Life was still difficult, but my new name became a sign of what I had seen, how a miracle had emerged through the silence of meeting, the aisles of the grocery, and from a humble ex-chicken coop in my yard.



Seasons passed, and eventually I became acquainted with a man who *just happened* to have a tipi. I told him what I had seen and he agreed to put it in the circle of oaks. Not long after, a small group, mostly made up of women, erected a lodge there, and two ceremonies were held there in the oak grove, rituals that were life-affirming and even transformative to many of those who participated in them.

All this happened over a decade ago. I do not perform my ritual with the cantaloupe as often as I used to, but the memory of that tiny miracle sits quietly with me at all times. At difficult times — like the day my mother suddenly died — it still brings me solace. Occasionally I prepare the offering, not because I am in pain or in need, but just to say *thank you* to Spirit.

I try my hardest to not question or ruminate on what happened to me, though the mystery of it still fills my heart with wonder. Instead of demanding answers, I let the memory of my experience remind me that we are never truly alone, and that reality is not as fixed and immutable as we are led to believe. *Namaste.* ☺



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