

Romance Fiction: Revival of the Feminine Mythic Journey



Graphic by Ben Stirling

What I'm about to share with you today began with a question and a dream. The question came from one of my romance writing students. We were on Week 7 of a 10-week course and had covered acres of terrain: dialogue, characterization, opening scenes. On that night, a cold dark November, evergreen branches tapping against the Gothic basement windows of University College, we were discussing plot. I had drawn a sprawling linear graph across the board to deliver what I thought was a profound expostulation of plotting the romance novel. You have your peaks and valleys, your scene layers, emotion, of course, and increasing dramatic tension. I went on and on, probably getting louder and louder.

Ruth, whose name means mercy, raised her hand. "Sorry for interrupting, Elaine, but could you speak to us about beginning, middle and end?"

I had one of those moments where the world stops. Everyone was staring with expectation. The clock on the wall juddered, the second hand jamming as though time had literally been suspended. And in that bleak, vacuous moment that every public speaker, every teacher fears, I scrambled through my mental files and found . . . nothing.

I panicked. I sweated and tried to think of something clever to say. No cleverness came. Finally I turned to the board, held out my arms and measured the linear graph roughly into thirds. "This part's the beginning, here's the middle,

and over here towards the end, is the end.” It was too late for anyone to withdraw from the course.

That night, I had a dream. Or rather, if I was dreaming, the dream was interrupted by a rude, insistent voice. “Draw circles.”

My eyes sprang open. “What?”

“Draw circles,” the voice said again.

I peered at the bedside clock. “It’s 1:30 in the friggin’ morning!”

The reply? “Draw circles.”

Wide awake now, grumbling, I threw off the covers, stomped out of bed, rummaged through my stationery supplies and found an old scribbler with big empty pages. I drew three circles.

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Now, let’s talk for a few minutes about the romance publishing industry. Statistics, they’re always a good place to start. Romance fiction generates more than \$1 billion in sales every year. Nearly half of all paperback fiction sold is romance. The major player, as I’m sure most of you know, is Harlequin. Her parent company is Torstar, but she began as a modest Canadian publishing venture launched some 60 years ago by Richard Bonnycastle in Winnipeg.

In those days, Harlequin, in addition to “nice little love stories with happy endings” as Mrs. Bonnycastle called them, published westerns, cookbooks and mysteries. Agatha Christie and Somerset Maugham were among their authors. In 1971, convinced of the solid popularity of the nice little love stories, Harlequin bought the British romance publishing house, Mills & Boon. In the early 90’s, Harlequin acquired the American Silhouette Books, making it the single largest publisher of romance fiction today.

The genre continues to thrive. Last year, 50 million women bought 160 million romance novels worldwide. Harlequins are sold in more than 100 countries. They are translated into 27 languages. I’ve been privileged to have ten of my own romance novels published with translations into 13 languages, including Japanese, Turkish, and Icelandic. It’s an extraordinary phenomenon, this love affair that women around the globe have with romance.

So let’s address the naysayers now. Let’s indulge for a moment in all the nasty, short-sighted clichés that abound regarding the romance genre. They’re formula fiction, escapist books read by low-income, ill-educated housewives. They’re not serious fiction; they’re not real books. I’ve had people say these things to my face; every romance author has. They are untrue, and they are deeply wounding.

After my last Harlequin was published in ’91, I went on to do other things. I continued to teach Creative Writing now and then, but I stayed away from romance fiction. I was burnt out, the romance in my soul depleted. A decade passed, during which I’d moved from British Columbia to Manitoba and back to Ontario.

On the advice of a friend, I approached the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies about teaching a Business Writing course. I had learned, you see, to do serious things. The director of the program, a poet by calling, looked at my resume and said, “I’d rather you teach Romance Fiction. We’ve never offered that course, and I think it’s time.”

I was horrified. I hadn't been near the romance shelves in ages; I'd lost contact with my fellow authors. I no longer told people what I used to do. But a job offer is a job offer, so I said yes. And that is how I came to be in a classroom at University College on the night that time stood still.

Tom Harpur, who writes for Torstar, expressed his frustration once in an article when he spoke of people's misconception of myth or mythos. Everywhere, the term is used as a synonym for lie, a fabrication, the unreal. If something is a myth, we dismiss it. We live in the real world. Joseph Campbell, preeminent mythologist and storyteller of our time, defined myth as "that which never was, yet always is." In other words, Tom Harpur says, a myth is a story containing a truth so infinitely precious that it can only be told by means of a story.

On the night that I drew three circles, the meaning of myth exploded within me. Hunched over that scribbler, the words "beginning, middle, and end" resounding like cathedral bells, I began a new journey, the heroine's journey, the mythos of romance.

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Our brain, the experts tell us, has two hemispheres, left and right. With the left brain, we balance our checkbook, fill the gas tank when the meter approaches empty; we organize our day, and we speak. The left brain manages our logical, literal world. It relies on language and has a fondness for the linear, the sequential.

The right brain, by contrast, prefers silence. It operates on the intuitive, the instinctive level and responds to the language of symbols. Corporate branding plugs directly into the right brain. Consider the famous NIKE swoosh. We see this image, and our mind is flooded with sensory data. Our neurotransmitters fire up with the subliminal memory of the Greek Goddess of Victory. We could be the world's greatest couch potato, but by wearing a pair of Air Jordans, we proudly embody the NIKE maxim: Just Do It.

What does all of this have to do with romance fiction? Well, it was my way of leading you into the right brain. We're going to take the heroine's journey together today, and to do that, we'll need symbolism.

The ancients, the original mythmakers, used the circle as a teaching or mnemonic device as in the yin/yang and the Tibetan mandala. First Nations people use the Medicine Wheel. They've understood the journey for millennia. I borrow their symbol with respect and gratitude.

So imagine, if you will, a circle. Mentally divide your circle into quadrants using a vertical and horizontal line, like four pieces of pie. If you have something to write on, feel free to draw the wheel and share it with a neighbor who doesn't.

Each of the four points of intersection on the circle represents a cardinal direction. Starting on the right is the East. At the bottom is the South, on the left, the West, and at the top of the circle sits North. Each of these directions has a deeper meaning, which we'll explore shortly.

Our romance heroine, not knowing she's about to embark on a journey, is nowhere near the Sacred Wheel. She's wandering somewhere in her Ordinary World, living a purposeless life. She may be wealthy and successful. She may be divorced and dating furiously, or eking a prim, safe existence as a never-married, small town librarian. The heroine may be aware that something

fundamental is missing in her life, or she might rip your ears off at the mere suggestion.

The opening line of Vicki Lewis Thompson's *Manhunting in Montana* will give you an idea. *Shooting gorgeous guys really turned her on.* The heroine, Cleo Griffin, is a Manhattan photographer who photographs scantily clad men for calendars. She thinks her life is perfect.

As Joseph Campbell used to say, the hero's not a hero until he receives the Call to Power, and the Call cannot be self-initiated. It must come from a Higher Source. In the heroine's journey, we call this moment The Invitation. Women, you see, do not respond as readily as men to the challenge of slaying dragons. An Invitation, on the other hand—now you have our interest.

Who, we might ask, is the Inviter? What does the Inviter want from us? Our hapless heroine is living a decent life. Why not just leave her alone?

In any discussion of the Great Spirit or Higher Powers, their reason for plucking heroes from our midst can only be alluded to. But Oriah Mountain Dreamer, a brilliant spiritual writer, gives us some breathtaking clues in her poem, *The Invitation*. Allow me to read you a few lines.

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.

This is not, as you can see, an invitation to a bridal shower, although the story may do exactly that. Spirit sometimes clothes Her Invitation in alluring garb. Other times, she'll devastate the would-be heroine's life with tragedy. The death of a best friend, a parent's terminal illness. Whatever the nature of the Invitation, its effect is to pull the woman into the gravitational orbit of her journey. She's no longer hovering in the formless void. She arrives at the entrance point of the Sacred Wheel, the East, where the sun rises and the first of her circular revolutions begins.

On the Medicine Wheel, we travel the perimeter, clockwise. So imagine your heroine moving from the eastern portal southward, propelled by The Invitation. South is known as the position of Trust and Innocence. It may not dawn on our innocent heroine yet—in fact, it probably doesn't—what's being asked of her, but at the first inkling, she will do what most of do when called upon to change. She refuses.

In Nancy Martin's romance, *Whirlwind*, the heroine is fired from her job as a project manager in Chicago. Now firing, admittedly, is a difficult Invitation to refuse, but we do very often dig our heels in when contemplating the next move. The woman who fires Nancy's heroine suggests that she take her skills to a smaller community where speed and efficiency don't matter so much. Now *that* is something that can be refused. To prove it, our incensed, unemployed heroine drives to her small hometown where she intends to hole away in her late

grandpa's abandoned fishing lodge, only to find an irascible, handsome male tenant already living there. She has refused The Invitation, and by doing so, has run smack into it.

The Refusal of the Call is an essential ingredient of the mythic journey. In Zen Buddhism, it's called the drawing back of the bow before the arrow is loosed. It is the receding shoreline before the tidal wave hits. Spirit expects us to go through the motions of refusal, but once we're on the journey, there is no turning back. When the Invitation strikes, we have to trust and move forward. If we don't . . . well, there's nothing unique in that, is there? The world is littered with people who have abandoned trust. They are not heroes.

On the Medicine Wheel, our heroine travels west to where the sun sets. It's known as the Place of Death and Resurrection. This is probably as good a time as any to inform you that men travel this circular journey too. How could they not? Man is the opposing and complementary force of woman, yang to yin, positive to negative, light to dark, active to receptive. But as the yin/yang teaches us, both sides contain a spark of the opposite. To the degree that we recognize our inner duality, left and right brain, life responds in kind.

JoAnn Ross wrote a romance called *A Woman's Heart*. Quinn Gallagher, her hero, writes horror novels for a living. Quinn grew up in a series of foster homes, running away at sixteen to join the navy. He's worked hard, dammit, for his success, and he isn't going to let Hollywood screw up anymore of his books. He's come to Ireland to write the screenplay and soak up the atmosphere of his alien Irish roots, while the movie is being filmed.

Quinn has rented a farmhouse, sight unseen, outside the quaint village of Castlelough. Hungry, thirsty and jetlagged, he spots a pub on the main street called The Irish Rose and decides to drop in.

Our hero has traveled from the west, the United States. If he'd stayed in the west, his heart shut tight, emotions suppressed, myth tells us he would've died. But because he agreed at the unconscious level to this journey, he's entitled to Meet His Mentor, the guide who prepares him for what lies ahead. Quinn's mentor takes the form of three elderly Irish men, pub regulars who buy him a pint and launch into spirited discussion of banshees, film making and the f-ing Yankee tourists who are buying up Ireland and destroying her traditions.

Whenever we set out into uncharted territory, the Universe provides a mentor. His, her or its job is to guide us from the deathlike darkness of our previous existence into the brighter, light-giving Wisdom of the North. Mentor stems from the Greek word for mind, *menos*. The mentor acts upon our mental state rather than the emotional. Setting out, girding one's loins, taking up arms, resolving not to look back as Lot's wife foolishly did—these are the actions of a mentored hero. From this place of wisdom in the north, the hero is ready to Cross The Threshold. Or at least, he believes he is.

On the Medicine Wheel, it's a slippery downward slope from north to east, during which a heroine's carefully constructed life can spin out of control.

Cleo Griffin, the Manhattan photographer, has flown to Montana to commence work on a sexy cowboys calendar. Tom McBride, owner of the ranch/guesthouse, picks her up at the airport, and Cleo's first thought upon seeing him is, *God, he's magnificent. He'd make the perfect cover shot.*

Tom McBride, although his ranch is on the verge of bankruptcy, would never stoop so low as to pose for some sleazy calendar. But he hasn't been with a woman since his bitter divorce, and Cleo is a fine-looking woman. Tom has a long-standing policy of not getting involved with guests, but this might be the time to make an exception.

Cleo, on the other hand, believes that if she gets involved with the men she photographs, she'll lose her artistic edge. Both she and Tom are poised on the precipice of their respective thresholds, and all it will take is one well-placed nudge—a brush of skin, a kiss—to push them over the edge.

I am now going to divulge an essential feminine mythic secret. When we arrive at the threshold of an emotional unknown, we are all virgins, men and women alike. Our minds may be prepared, our bodies etched with experience, but our hearts are innocent. We don't know what lies ahead. Quinn Gallagher, the American fellow working in Ireland, has kissed many women in his day; it's no big deal.

Nora Fitzpatrick, hair bright as peat fire, eyes of soft, mystical green, is a young Irish widow. Her family owns the guesthouse that Quinn's rented for the season, and it was Nora's intention to give him a simple peck on the cheek in reward for a heroic intervention with her headstrong younger sister. But Quinn, poor virgin, turns his head and captures Nora's mouth instead.

Oh, Lord! The taste of her was as potent as Irish whiskey, slamming into him like a fist in the gut, then hitting his bloodstream with a force that sent his head reeling and nearly buckled his knees.

He tangled one hand in her hair while the other skimmed down her back, cupped her bottom, clad again in those snug blue jeans, and lifted her off her feet.

As he deepened the kiss, Quinn heard a faint ragged moan and wondered if it had escaped her throat or his; he felt trembling and wasn't certain which of them it was. It had to be her, he told himself as he nipped at her satiny lower lip and drew a sound remarkably like a purr.

Women had made him ache; they'd made him burn. But no woman had ever made his body pulse with a need so strong it made him feel as weak and powerless as the "before" guys in those bodybuilding ads in the back of the comic books he'd filched when he was a kid.

Her hands were in his hair. Beneath the onslaught of his mouth her lips opened like pink rosebuds to the sun. Her breasts were crushed against his chest so tightly there was no way a single raindrop could slip between them.

Quinn couldn't think. Could barely breathe. When he realized he was actually considering ripping the car door open and taking her on the leather seat, where anyone—her father, her grandmother, a passing neighbor—could see them, he knew it was time to back away.

He lowered her feet to the ground, but unwilling to release her just yet, skimmed his mouth up her cheek. "You taste like rain."

"So do you." She sounded every bit as shell-shocked as Quinn felt.

To the men in the audience, just for the record, yes, this is how women sometimes like to be kissed.

In this brief but catastrophic encounter, Nora Fitzpatrick and Quinn Gallagher have crossed the threshold and Surrendered their Innocence. They have completed the first of three revolutions of the journey wheel.

In the myth of the Triple Goddess or the female Trinity, this first leg of the journey is called the Virgin. The hero and heroine who have come this far are now entitled to embark upon the second revolution, the middle of the story.

The three circles of the feminine myth do not lie side by side. They are superimposed, indivisible, three circles in one. Our right brain has no problem with this abstract concept. Our left brain, however, prefers the concrete, so we have various ways of illustrating the circular feminine.

One is the shamrock—three round leaves joined in a triangular shape by a central stem. The other is the spiral, a symbol found throughout Neolithic cultures including Babylonia, ancient Crete, the Celtic culture and the Navajo. The spiral represents the circular journey inward. We have just traveled the first spiral.

In daily life, we surrender our innocence in big and small ways all the time. It's that excruciating moment when we receive knowledge that we don't know what to do with. Your best friend at work confesses that she's stealing from the company. Your son has dropped out of engineering to work with his girlfriend in an Afghan refugee camp. Scream, rage, plunge your head in the sand; it won't do any good. The feminine myth moves in one direction only. Girl becomes woman at the sight of first blood; truths are non-refundable.

The second revolution begins again in the east, a new dawn. Bethany Grey, the heroine in my first novel *Unsuspected Conduct*, has been invited to Rio de Janeiro by her eccentric, recently widowed aunt. Aunt Zoe is her father's sister, a black sheep long estranged from the prominent Boston family. Bethany is a junior corporate lawyer in her father's firm. At thirty, she prides herself on her success and independence, unaware that she's still squashed firmly beneath her father's patriarchal thumb.

Aunt Zoe's late husband owned the seventh largest gemstone business in the world, and Zoe fears that he might have been involved in something unethical. She wants Bethany to review the company's records.

Paulo, Zoe's stepson, three years younger than Bethany, doesn't want some gold-digging, relative by marriage sifting through his father's business. Paulo intends to employ his full Carioca charm to ensure that Bethany finds nothing.

In the hero myth, we call this stage the Road of Tests and Trials. Enemies and allies come forth, and the hero must learn to distinguish one from the other. Being a warrior hero, of course, he slays his enemies with a magic sword and embraces—though not literally—his allies.

The feminine mythos handles this very differently. In Riane Eisler's seminal book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, she speaks of Neolithic cultures unearthed throughout Europe and Asia Minor in which there were no military fortifications and no evidence of thrusting weapons. The settlements appeared to have been chosen for the beauty and lushness of their surroundings. These were the Goddess cultures. These men and women prized creation and abundance above destruction and defense. They sought relatedness and the linking of humanity rather than supremacy, one over the other. Archeologists

estimate that these peace-loving, egalitarian societies flourished for some 1500 years.

Thus, our romance heroine doesn't slog down the Road of Tests and Trials. Instead, she travels south to the Garden of Delights and Daemons. Bethany doesn't know that Paulo mistrusts her. She thinks he's gorgeous—a bit shallow, perhaps—but shallow is perfect for a harmless beachside flirtation.

On the matter of flirtation, they both agree. A little fun never hurt anyone. Until Aunt Zoe's car is tampered with, and the woman nearly dies. Until Bethany is threatened by a low-life thug, formerly employed by Paulo's Dad. Paulo suddenly realizes that he's nearly lost the two most important women in his life. The garden daemons become demons, and our two protagonists are pushed westward on the Wheel.

West, you may recall, is the place of Death and Resurrection, where the sun sets. In the hero's myth, we've reached the Belly of the Beast. This is where Jonah refused God and was subsequently swallowed by a giant fish. If God had asked a woman, she'd have gone to Nineveh, no problem, but then you'd have no story.

In the feminine myth, this critical middle portion is called Descent to the Womb. The heroine doesn't have to travel anywhere except deep within herself. Woman is the vessel, the carrier of the Holy of Holies. The womb is her creative center and it is her underworld, a place of strange dark tides and mysteries. As a child, she had no knowledge of the womb's existence; she is no longer a child.

Bethany Grey completes her task without further incident; she's found nothing amiss in Paulo's father's company. Aunt Zoe's fears were unfounded. Now Bethany is spending a few days with her aunt at her mountain retreat in Ouro Preto, site of the company's emerald mines. Bethany has put a firm stop to her romance with Paulo. Falling in love wasn't on either of their agendas, and they're both convinced that saying no is enough.

Then one day during a stroll, Bethany stumbles upon an altar of santería, the Brazilian folk religion. She's frightened, repelled. Zoe's housekeeper, a practitioner of santería, is obliged to admit to Bethany that Zoe's husband isn't dead. He ought to be, which is why she's engaged in this bit of dark magic, but he is alive, hiding from his sins. The *Senhora* must never know, the housekeeper pleads. It would break *Senhora's* heart. The housekeeper refuses to divulge more, promising only to disengage her nefarious spell.

The greatest danger in descending to the womb is not what we will find there, but rather what we choose to do with it. When we make the wrong choice—which is usually denying what we've seen—we call up the next portion of the journey. We create for ourselves The Supreme Ordeal.

Our heroine struggles northward toward wisdom, believing, as most of us do, that she's done all she can. Bethany flies home to Boston in time for a warm and cozy family Christmas. She didn't tell Aunt Zoe that her beloved husband might be alive. Everyone, apparently, had seen the body; the housekeeper had to have been delusional. Besides, the gemstone company's records were sound, and Bethany's quite proud of herself. She accomplished what her father thought she couldn't do: got the job done without getting her heart caught up in it.

Then one evening, there's a knock on Bethany's door. It's Paulo. She is utterly thrilled. He comes bearing gifts and words of adoration. With the audit and all that nasty business behind them, they make love. In the hero's myth, such a pivotal event is called Seizing the Treasure. In the heroine's, we call it Embracing the Gift. Male and female come together, the fusion of opposites. The downward slide from north to east is effortless just as falling in love is effortless. By embracing the gift, the hero and heroine complete the second circle of their journey. The first was called the Virgin; this second circle is the Mother, the Matrix, goddess of the material world. The root of the word material is *mater*, Latin for mother. To have arrived here is, indeed, a divine gift.

The feminine myth teaches us that by surrendering, we gain; by letting go, we receive. This is not an intellectual decision, and it cannot be faked. The goddess prohibits us from continuing the journey if our surrender is not total, our embracing of the gift insincere.

We, as humanity, are poised at this juncture now. To put it more bluntly, we're stuck in the material realm, piled up against the locked eastern gate like crazed soccer fans, beating and pounding one another, screaming, "More! More!", the greedy mantra of our age. From a mythical perspective, we've convinced ourselves that two aspects of the Goddess are enough. Virgin, mother—what more do we need?

But there is a third revolution, a third face to the right brain of God, and She can only be approached one way. That is the way of the open heart. All weapons from this point on must be laid down, all grievances set aside. If we don't do this, the treasures that we've gained, the gifts we've been given, will rust and corrupt. We will lose the powers of the Matrix, the Mother God, and our world will inexorably be destroyed through famine, flood, war and pandemics. At the deepest level, every romance reader knows this; every woman knows this. So does every man. And so the heroine, as our model and prototype, opens her heart. She allows the love to flood through her, and from this great sunrise, she moves into the third revolution.

The feminine mythos calls the beginning of this final stage The False Dawn. It's also known as the Honeymoon. This is where the light of our passion is so bright, we can't see, where we fall for gooey love songs, believing they were written just for us. This is when the slot machines pay big, and every traffic light turns green in our favor.

While Bethany is basking in the attentions of her exquisite Brazilian lover, Paulo drops a bomb. He has learned since Bethany's visit that the emerald mines are running low. His father, unbeknownst to anyone, was desperate to sell the company before the dearth of gems became apparent. A buyer was found, a Scandinavian consortium. Paulo has brought a copy of the sales agreement wherein the value of the assets is clearly exaggerated. The creator of the document, a secret shareholder himself, was Bethany Grey's father.

Awakened to her false dawn, our heroine is swept from the southernmost place of trust to the west once again, this time to face her Ultimate Test. Here, the greater vision of the Matrix is essential because the challenge of the Invitation has broken wide open. Great Spirit is waiting to see what sustains us from the inside, now that all else has fallen away.

Bethany finds the courage to confront her father. He denies everything, placing any and all blame smoothly on his recalcitrant sister. Bethany watches the lies pour from her father's mouth and sees her own complicity. Not in the cover-up but in her commitment to victimhood, the collective lie in which we convince ourselves we are powerless. We had no choice but to do the lesser thing. It was her fault, his fault—they started it.

With Paulo's help, Bethany finds the hidden file that implicates her father, thereby spiraling Paulo into his Ultimate Test, facing the man he thought was incorruptible . . . and dead.

When we accomplish what the Ultimate Test demands of us, we die to our former selves and reach the penultimate step of our journey from west to north. This step is called Resurrection.

Resurrection is a bewildering event, a geotropic shift in which our gravitational attraction moves from a previously held—and ultimately flawed—set of external values to an inner truth. We gain autonomy. Jung called it individuation. In romance fiction, we are doubly blessed because our Beloved, our opposite, has done the same.

At the end of the hero's journey, Joseph Campbell tells us, the hero returns with a treasure that he shares with his people. He is usually crowned for his efforts, his kingship recognized or restored. In the feminine myth, the treasure is equal partnership, the authentic wholeness and reconciliation of opposites. But not only does the heroine return with the gift, she embodies it. We call this the happy ending, and as Mrs. Bonnycastle, cofounder of Harlequin observed, happy endings sell.

But there is one vital piece of the feminine myth that has yet to be addressed, and that is the identity of the final circle. Humankind knows She's there, but we are reluctant to name Her. Exiled at the eastern gate, we can't quite see Her visage, and what we *think* we see scares us. The goddess of the third revolution is the Wise One, the Creatrix, also known as Crone.

An immediate picture, sadly, springs to our collective minds when we think of Crone. Yet she is the third aspect, whether we accept her or not, of the Triple Goddess. Following Virgin and Mother, she has something extraordinary to offer, something we're refusing to look at.

Let's consider the etymology of the word crone. It may have come from the Greek *chronios*, which means long-lasting. As an elder, the crone has lived a long life, so she would know much. Or it may come from the old Norse word, *krone*, meaning crown. Here, we see regal implications, not unlike the kingship of the hero's journey. Another option is the Latin *corona*, the circle of light that surrounds a luminous body. But Webster's, one of our most trusted authorities, informs us that crone originates with the old north French, *carrogne*, meaning carrion, putrefied flesh, unfit for consumption. And their current definition of crone reads: *a withered old woman, especially in humble circumstances; an old man, useless or womanish from senility*. Compare this to Webster's definition of sage: *a mature or venerable man rich in experience and sound in judgment*. The feminine, apparently, has no equivalent.

Eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, the explosive growth of the anti-aging industry, all of these are symptomatic of women's terror of the Crone. Men show their fear by divorcing their wives in mid-life and chasing younger women. But

who is the Crone, really? Is she a disempowered old hag, doomed to senility and a miserable death? Let's return once more to the Medicine Wheel . . . and our romance novel.

The hero and heroine, in this final juncture, have resurrected. They have triumphed over their adversities and in so doing, have embodied their gifts. Justice has been brought to bear, all mistakes forgiven. In the hero's myth, the hero returns to his ordinary world to claim his crown. But in the feminine journey, the ordinary world no longer exists. It has been transcended. With every revolution, our protagonists have climbed higher and, paradoxically, deeper. A throne awaits them, but it's found in the center of the circle, the center of the cross where the heart beats. As co-creators, they have created a new world, formerly unimaginable, a Universe founded and sustained by Love.

This New World would have remained forever inaccessible if our two protagonists had tried to reach it alone. And that's the secret, the priceless jewel, of the feminine myth. We can't travel the journey alone. We absolutely need each other, every one of us—the wise, the foolish, the able and the lame. The feminine myth excludes no one.

Here, in this revelation, the mask falls away. The Crone lets drop her Halloween grotesquerie to reveal her True Self. She is Sophia, Radiant Wisdom, the embodiment of Innocence, unconditional Mother-Love, and the highest Knowledge. She is the formless void and the Creatrix. She is Beginning, Middle, and End. But until we recognize Her disguises in the world, until we fully open our hearts to all of Her distressing aspects, we remain, self-exiled, at Her eastern gate.

On the other side of that gate, a wedding feast awaits. The wedding is the culmination of every romance novel and, hearts willing, it is the promise of our own collective destiny: marriage of the Sacred Bridegroom to His Bride, Holy Union, Paradise. Together, hand in hand, they await us.

Thank you.

The End