



THE
RECOVERY
OF *love*

PAPER FIVE

*Voices of Women:
The Wrong Turning*

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Of all the representations of the integration of the feminine and masculine energies or qualities, the one that has most intrigued me has been the stories of the threefold nature of Woman and Man – Maiden, Queen and Crone, and Young Knight, King and Old Man. In these stories it is always the Old Man and the Crone, who are the most interesting and powerful. They both bring wisdom, and in the case of the Crone, it is she who transforms; it is she who begins and ends all adventures.

She appears in this form in two of my own stories (written under the name of William Blyghton). In *The Great Queen and the Gatekeeper's Son*,¹ she appears at the beginning of the story as the woman that forces into action the bereft courtiers that have lost both their Queen and then their King. And in *The King Who Lost His Memory*,² she terrifies the King into action, and is then there at the end to bring him home. In Celtic mythology she is Ceridwen, the mother of the poet, Taliesin; she is the goddess of change, transformation, wisdom and rebirth. Her threefold nature is seen in the waxing and waning of the moon, followed by her time in the period of darkness before the next new moon rises, Darkness and then renewal. And yet it is the Crone whom men, especially powerful men, have most feared, treating wise women as if they were witches to be burnt and drowned, and not much of her is said in our time. We admire both the Maiden and the Queen, fecundity and motherhood, but we have almost nothing to say about the Crone. But, for me, it is the Crone who is most important, the most intriguing

Here she is in another of my stories (written in the name of William Blyghton), 'The Wrong Turning',³ which speaks of the foolishness of Kings and their Advisors and of the wisdom of the Old Woman. It is a fable for our time and for these papers:

The King was sitting in his chamber and standing in front of him was a forlorn looking man, the King's Senior Advisor on Calamities and Things to Worry About.

He was carrying a thick book, which he had opened at a particular page, and he had begun to address the King. "I am sorry to have to say this, Your Majesty," he said, "but the findings of our latest report on 'What is Happening', that is

the report prepared by your Majesty's Men in White Coats Who Know Everything, the findings of this report do not offer much comfort. It appears, Sir, that we took a wrong turning."

"A wrong turning," said the King, "whatever do you mean, a wrong turning?"

"Well, Sir," said the forlorn looking man, closing the book and placing it upon a table beside him, "your Men in White Coats are not sure when it was or how it came about, but they now see that some while ago, well, some while ago we took the wrong turning."

"There you go again," said the King, his voice rising with impatience. "There you go, you have said it again. That 'turning' thing, you have said it again. What do you mean, wrong turning?"

The Senior Advisor was now beginning to perspire and took from his pocket a large blue and white spotted handkerchief, with which he wiped his brow. He had begun to feel unwell. "Your Majesty," he said in a voice that was beginning to creak, "Would Your Majesty permit me to sit down for a moment."

"Sit down?" said the King, "Yes of course you can sit down. Why on earth would I worry if you were standing up or sitting down? Sit down. Sit down."

So the forlorn man, the Senior Advisor on Calamities and Things to Worry About, sat down and tried to recover himself. "Might I trouble Your Majesty," he said, "for a glass of water?"

"Glass of water?" said the King, "Yes of course you can have a glass of water." And he rang a bell, which summoned a servant in blue stockings and a yellow tunic, who bowed low and asked the King what he would like.

"Bring this man a glass of water," said the King. "And while you are about it, bring me one, too. In fact bring a jug of water and two glasses."

The servant bowed again and left the room, returning shortly with a tray upon which was a crystal jug of water and two glasses. He poured out a glass for the King and then, as was of course right, he poured a slightly smaller one for the Senior Advisor on Calamities and Things to Worry About.

For a minute or two neither the Senior Advisor nor the King said anything. The Advisor picked up his book and began to look at one or two of the pages, and the King, with a growing sense that things were not at all as they should be, stared at his shoes, noticing a scuffed patch on one of them.

“So,” said the King looking once more at his Senior Advisor, “so what is this ‘wrong turning’ thing about?”

“Well Sir,” said the Advisor now regaining his sense of importance and authority, “we thought it was all for the best. We thought that the more we could make and do, the better it would be for everyone. We thought that all the astonishing things we invented would make life better, richer, more completely wonderful. But I am sorry to say, Sir, very sorry to say, that this latest report by the Men in White Coats is saying that there were things that we didn’t take account of. It seems to suggest that we didn’t even think about them; that we were not even aware that we might have had to think about them. It was as if they were invisible to us. Not there at all.”

The King was beginning to feel rather confused with all the things that apparently had not been taken into account or not even been thought of, things which might have been invisible; and he was also beginning to fear that he was about to be told something very disagreeable, very disagreeable indeed. He took a drink from his glass and looked directly at his Advisor.

“You see,” said the Advisor, “we had no idea how warm it might get and how stormy and wet, too.”

“So is all this ‘wrong turning’ stuff and the things that you haven’t thought of just about a little warmth and bit of rain?” said the King, now rather irritated that all his uneasiness might just have been caused by the possibility of a mere thunderstorm or two. “Heavens man, I know we had some flooding in the Autumn and that the Spring this year seems somewhat askew, but surely you are not suggesting that this amounts to one of your Calamities and Things to Worry About?”

“Well Sir,” said the Advisor, “there was a time when we all thought that his was just as you have described it. Just some oddity in the weather. But...,” and here he, too, took a drink

from his glass, “but it seems, Sir, we were wrong.”

“Wrong!” exclaimed the King, “Do you think I appoint people like you and the Men in White Coats that Know Everything to be wrong?”

“Well, you see, Sir,” said the Advisor, now wishing he had not agreed to take on the task of reporting to the King, “there was a time when we, that is when the Men in White Coats, thought that the changes in our weather could just be kept within the limit of what they used to call Plus Two, but now,” and he stopped, once more to drink from his glass, his hand shaking and spilling a little of the water on the floor, “but now, well now we know it will be, shall we say, somewhat worse than this. In fact, Sir, it could be, well it could be much worse. Some people, some of the men in White Coats that Know Everything, are now talking about what they call Plus Six.”

The King was now listening with complete attention. His face was pale and his throat was dry. He could not move or speak. It was as if he had taken a thudding blow to his chest. He was not as ill informed as he sometimes pretended to be. And he had heard of this Plus Six, and he knew it was not at all good.

Not much more was said that day. The Senior Advisor departed leaving the King sitting in silence, his face set in a grim stare and his eyes fixed upon the thick book that the Advisor had left behind. He knew what he had to do. And he was not looking forward to it.



Early the next day before anyone else had woken, the King went out of his castle by a side door and set off for the forest beyond the castle grounds, following a path he had taken before. He was going to see the Old Woman who lived in a small and rather dark cottage in the middle of the forest. He was not looking forward to seeing her, but he knew he must.

He knew the path well and walked with his head down,

not looking to the right or the left, deep in thought and with a growing sense of foreboding. He entered the forest and the path narrowed, twisting and turning its way to the middle. There he stopped. In front of him was the cottage of the Old Woman. A thin and turning spiral of smoke rising from the chimney suggested she was at home.

Reluctantly, the King walked up to the cottage door and knocked. No reply. He knocked again, and then saw the Old Woman, dressed in what appeared to be a tattered eiderdown, coming towards him from the back of the cottage carrying a large bucket of water.

“Well are you going to help me carry this bucket or not?” she said in a voice that was both ancient and sharp. “Could you for once in your stupid life not just stand about looking regal, but do something useful – like helping me carry this bucket? I am only carrying it because I knew you would come and see me, and would need some tea; although I may not be able to find my kettle and I doubt I can tell you anything that will help you.”

With that the Old Woman dropped the bucket to the ground, the water splashing onto what might have been shoes, but looked more like the husks of some kind of spiky animal.

The King hurried forward, taking up the bucket. It was surprisingly heavy, as if the water in it had come from somewhere deep in the ground. Carrying the bucket with both hands, he followed the Old Woman into her cottage, bending to pass through the low doorway. The room was as he remembered it, dark and with an earthen floor and an open fire, and with furniture covered with jars, tins, piles of old leaves and fruits, and with not just one but several cats draped asleep on shelves and sofas. One twitched an ear and opened one eye as the King came in.

“Put the bucket in the kitchen,” commanded the Old Woman, “whilst I see if I can find a kettle.” And with that she disappeared into a large cupboard from which came the sound of pots and pans being thrown this way and that, some of them falling to the ground with a great clatter. Eventually, the Old Woman reappeared clutching a large kettle covered with

cobwebs. It had obviously not been used for a long time.

“I haven’t used this kettle since you were last here with another one of your pitiful questions,” said the Old Woman taking off the lid and waiting for the King to pour in some water. This done, the kettle was hung over the open fire to boil, whilst the Old Woman went off in search of a tin of tea, which she found tucked away under a pile of rags beside the sink.

“Now,” said the Old Woman, “why don’t we just sit down so that you can tell me all about the weather. I assume that is what you have come for.” And with that she pushed one of the cats off the sofa and offered the seat to the King, whilst she sat upon a rocking chair beside the fire, setting it to rock slowly to and fro.

“Well”, said the King, dreading what the Old Woman might say to him, “the Men in White Coats...”

But before he could continue, the Old Woman interrupted him. “Good grief,” she said, increasing the rocking of her chair, “don’t tell me that these dullards have at last woken up to what anyone with half a brain could have seen ages ago! Don’t tell me they have actually come to see what was staring them in the face.”

“Well,” continued the King, “it would seem that they have.”

“Seem?” said the Old Woman, now rocking at a great pace, “What do you mean ‘seem’. They either have or they haven’t. Which is it?”

“Well,” said the King, somewhat flustered and alarmed at the rocking of the Old Woman’s chair, “they have now seen that some while ago and for reasons that no-one quite knows, well that some while ago, we took a wrong turning.”

“Wrong turning?” exclaimed the Old Woman with a crackling laugh, “Is that what they call it. Wrong turning, wrong turning!” And she leapt out of the rocking chair and disappeared into the kitchen, from which there was again a great deal of clattering of china until she returned with a tray upon which was a large cream and crazed teapot and two mugs. She took the kettle from the fire and poured the hot water into the teapot. Then, having let it settle for a minute or two, she poured the tea into the two mugs, taking the large one

for herself, and giving the smaller one to the King. She was still chuckling to herself and repeating again and again the words, “wrong turning, wrong turning.”

Once the mugs were filled with tea, or what might have been some brew of dubious and unknown provenance, the Old Woman climbed back into her rocking chair. But this time she stopped its rocking and leaning forward looked straight into the eyes of the King. “Now listen to me,” she said, “I shall say this once and only once, since I am tired of giving you advice that you ignore.”

The King, too, sat forward and listened.

“You and your people have so disrupted this world with your selfishness, your hatred and your greed that what you call ‘the weather’ will never again be settled. Not in your lifetime, not in your children’s lifetime, not in your grandchildren’s lifetime and not in the lifetime of your grandchildren’s grandchildren. Do you understand this?”

The King nodded his head, but said nothing.

“There will be dreadful storms of wind and rain, and the seas will rise to a great height. Many of you will not survive. Do you understand this?”

Again, the King nodded his head and said nothing.

“Now,” said the Old Woman, “there is only one thing you can do. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” said the King.

But what he heard took him by surprise.

“The only thing for you to do,” said the Old Woman, “is to care for each other and to care for the Earth as if she was our Mother. Tenderness, kindness and care. These are the qualities that you will need both to limit as much as you can the catastrophe that will come, and then to look after each other when the storms have swept many of you away.”

She paused for a moment and set her eyes so deeply upon the King that he felt himself sinking into a deep and dark place, a place that at one and the same time both took away his breath and made him feel as if he had come home.

“I know,” said the Old Woman, “that your Men in White Coats, your Bankers and your Advisors, will tell you this is

nonsense and that all will be well with a slight change to business as usual, but then it was their advice that brought us to where we are; and you must remember that they can no longer hear the voice of the Earth. It's up to you."

And with that, the Old Woman got up from her chair, picked up the tray with the teapot and mugs, and disappeared into her kitchen, leaving the King staring into her fire.

The ending of this story is for you to decide upon. Do you think that the King took the advice of the Old Woman or do you think that he just kept silent and let the Men in White Coats, the Bankers and the Advisors do as they wished? Do you think the storms and the rain came? Do you think the seas rose to a great height? Or do you think these were just the ramblings of an Old Woman who couldn't find her kettle? Do you think the people of the King's realm learnt the lessons of love and a care for each other and the Earth, or do you think they, too, thought this was mere nonsense and just went on as usual?

Endnotes

1. William Blyghton, *Finding Elsewhere*, Panacea Books, 2018, 59 et seq.
2. Ibid. 37 et seq.
3. Ibid. 7 et seq.