

TOUCH OF THE WITCH

by Michael Ventura

October 18, 1995

What witches are good at is transformation. At its highest level, witch-power is transformative power. But the word "power" is always a problem. When tribal people use it, they mean a force accessible to humans that comes directly from the non-human--from the Dreamtime, Australians call it. The Other World. Or from animals, plants, rocks, waters, clouds. To posit such a power is to imagine humanity as not entirely of this world, the world of daily life, or the Other; it is to imagine us, rather, as a living gate between this world and worlds beyond. As though humanity were the very membrane through which what we now call "information" passes between the worlds--information, in this case, being force, energy, a kind of wind, through which come messages, healings, destructions, visions, transformations. Witches, when they know they're witches (many don't), are people who can consciously place themselves at this gateway or passageway; take responsibility for being there; and never forget the great law or truth that makes transformation in this realm possible: that this world and the Other World are dependent upon each other.

That is one of the central messages of the old tales. The queen of the faerie realm is always standing by a well or a stream in need of someone from this world--sometimes a warrior, sometimes a tailor, sometimes a queen of this world, but someone with skills here that are needed in a world beyond. Or the journeyer--the princess of this world exiled from her kingdom, the boy whose stepmother tried to eat him--suddenly comes upon a bird with a human head, or a talking horse, because the journeyer is in need of a message from the Other World in order to get through the forest. The old tales trace an interlocking structure between the two worlds, and assume that the world we live in and the world beyond must freshen and restore each other.

Many of the religious practices of indigenous peoples (including the indigenous peoples of Europe) were rituals by which this world passed sustenance to the next, and called for sustenance in return. They were and are religions of constant give-and-take between the worlds. With a few, such as the Aztecs, this was done violently, but that was rare; for the most part, this exchange of sustenance was attempted simply, peacefully, reverently, though always with awe and alertness, for it can be a trembling moment, standing at the gateway between worlds. The means to do this is the "craft" of "witchcraft"--a word given a bad spin by those gradually dominant religions concerned more with dominance than religion (which killed millions of indigenous witches in homage to their own rather selfish gods).

The witch's bad image is not helped much by the old tales. As anyone who's read the Grimm collection (the most popular of these tales) knows, both their strength and weakness are their stark metaphors. The dark side of motherhood becomes the evil stepmother. The blind spots of love become the irrational, dangerous demands that lovers make of each other. Inner growth becomes the journey through the dark forest. And, to set them apart from others, those with witch-power become hairy, troll-like, have teeth like tusks or nails like claws--metaphors, verbal special-effects, for humans in a state of profound transformation, of this world and not of this world both. (I suspect one reason

for this is to avoid making witch-power seductive; to let folks know that transformation is serious business.)

The witch, as Robert Bly has pointed out, is crucial to the tale: The journeyer must go to the witch, the transformer, for instruction on transformation. He or she will then be given a task that seems crazy or impossible, and through that task will break through to another state of being. Again, the witch is portrayed as dangerous because transformation from one level of consciousness to another is not to be taken lightly, and can call for what seems crazy or even impossible. The weakness of the tales is that the starkness of their metaphors may be taken literally. As with the metaphors of the Bible, this leaves them open to misreadings and attacks. (For this reason, Buddha and the Taoists kept metaphors to a minimum.)

But leaving aside spiritual politics; leaving aside, too, the cartoon of the witch embedded in our imaginations by a parade of trivializations, propaganda against do-it-yourself spirituality; and leaving aside, ever so gingerly, the fear at the root of such trivializing, the fear that the gateway between this world and the Dreamtime is everywhere, and thus nothing may be what it seems--leaving all that aside, there remain the very human, all too human, people who are susceptible to, and have a talent for, this world of transformations: the witches themselves.

Many don't know they're witches--that is, don't know that they're more susceptible than others to the gateways between daily time and the Dreamtime; don't know that the extremes they feel within themselves are capacities for transformation. In other eras, in which these knowledges were more common--"Once upon a time, when wishing still helped," is how the first Grimm tale says that--the community was on the lookout for such people, knew their value as seers and healers and protectors, and when they saw what have been called "wild talents" in a young person, that person was set apart and apprenticed to an elder who knew the way of such things. But our high schools don't do this.

Instead, many go through life without taking responsibility for their spiritual powers, without even knowing they have them. This causes a lot of pain and confusion, their capacities ricochet through their own lives and others'; their powers of transformation, unused or misused, gradually diminish, and they look out at the world with desperate and steadily weaker eyes, feeling unfit, misfit, and somehow wrong at their core. Or (and this can be worse) they seek to be contained by some rigid form, become lawyers or ministers or activists of one sort or other, even gurus of a kind, or plant themselves in an unfruitful marriage, and wreak all sorts of havoc. Or go mad. (There is much insanity that is insanity; but there is also much that is transformation, misnamed, misguided, mistreated.) These are the dangers of living in what I term "the world that calls itself the world," the world that believes that its map is the only map.

Some, by luck or gift or teaching, trust their own experience more than "the world that calls itself the world." When these hear a voice, then--through innocence, instinct, or audacity--they don't assume they're crazy, at least not until they listen to what the voice is getting at. When they have a vision, they have it, they dwell on it, they don't immediately assume it's a hallucination, they take things a step at a time and see how it works out. (This is no more dangerous or destructive than installing yourself in the cage of a profession that you're not suited for.) When they sense how fragile and porous is the membrane between daily time and the Dreamtime, between this world and the Other,

they don't immediately assume they're losing their minds or that danger is near; they wait and see, take in the information, wait to know what to do with it, proceeding gently--sensing that gentleness is the only antidote, in these realms, to mistakes and fear.

They invent their own terms, and steer clear of the terms their culture supplies (or give those terms their own meanings). Often they find this leads them to others like themselves, so they don't feel so alone, and have somewhere to go for help and for comfort. Just as often, it never occurs to them to use words like "witch" or "power"--which is usually just as well. And they go on being housewives or shrinks or busboys or tax-preparers or carpenters, but with a growing resonance in their lives, in their presences. Animals react to them differently, with more familiarity. Strangers ask them directions, trusting them somehow. They are just as troubled by the things of this world, but their inner lives take on a kind of glow, and people wonder why odd things happen around them, "coincidences," little things, that somehow make moments richer. And they tend to feel elated around Halloween, when the ancients said that the worlds are closest together--so close, the pull so strong, that folks can't help but dress up in all manner of strange ways and play at transformation.

No one needs to read a book about any of this--and most of the books are so silly, it may be best not to. The people who have it are born with it. They need not to know books but to know themselves. And not to get too full of themselves. And to take responsibility for what they know. And not to try to exert power over anyone. And to proceed gently.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.