

feature

RECOGNIZING AGE

Four Croning Ceremonies Kindle an Inner Light. By Judith Ruskin

As we are going more and more into the dark of the year, I find myself revisiting in my mind an event last summer that warmed me with light and cheer. At HOWL (Huntington Open Women's Land), where it took place, the sun broke through a threatening cloud mass to the West. Some elders joked with the wind, asking it for respite just for the time of the ceremony. Respite we got.

The event unfolded in the back garden, by a temporary altar of dead wood branches braced in a sturdy tall bush and interwoven with summer flowers. A woman was weaving a crown of wildflowers and herbs. Another had given the older woman a beautifully carved and decorated stick with symbols especially for her. This was the Croning ceremony for one of the elder lesbians of northern Vermont. She had gathered women from all of her many communities and her young grandson as well. We were witness to her commitment to live a rich good life and speak out against ageism.

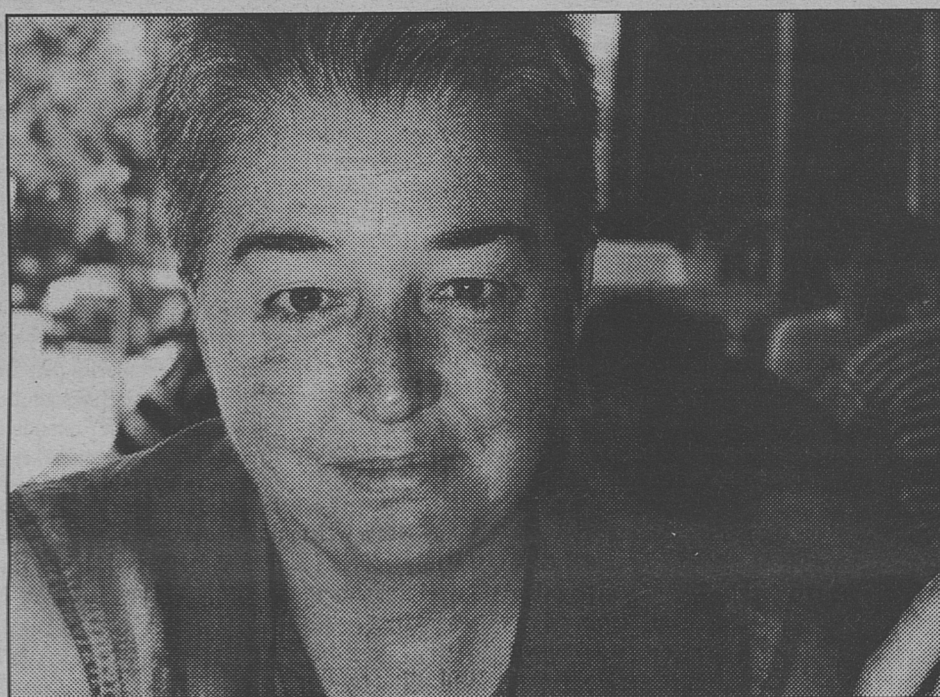
We danced a serpentine dance up a hill in age order. I could see ahead to the women in their 60s and 70s and someone almost 80. For a moment, I could imagine envying those ahead like I did in grade school. I was so glad to be part of this process, I decided to interview women who had Croning ceremonies. I spoke with four women, all of whom have achieved and accomplished much with their lives and each one a visionary in her way.

I first interviewed Alverta Perkins, one of the elders of our community. This June she'll be turning 80. She was active in the early lesbian-feminist movements of the 1970s and is still active as an athlete competing in track and field in the Senior Games and Olympics. She's also doing workshops on ageism, visiting schools, keeping the Crones group that she began going, and more.

What was your Croning ceremony like?

"I went to a multiple Croning event in Maine with my then-partner. I remember how happy I was that they put us into order according to our age — eldest first. There's not too many times eldest goes first in our culture. Then we all walked up a hill. I was so touched. I was being honored just for being old!"

Do you think ageism is alive and well in our culture?



"We should have more older women's groups. Women should be in the public sphere more. I'd love to see women in their power. We've got to be at least half of who sits at the decision-making tables." Peggy Luhrs

"I'm ageist myself! How could I help being otherwise? My culture won't look me in the eye. Younger people have no desire to hang out. It's as if I had nothing to say ... or was a reminder of what would happen to them."

"When I first started the Crones

group, it was meant to be a political organization as well as a social one for older women. Now it's primarily a social organization where older lesbians can meet older lesbians."

What was it like for you in the '70s?

"In the 70s I was active as a lesbian-feminist. However, this didn't happen until I went to UVM. I was still married then. I took an ethics course and read many books that changed my life — *Sexual Politics* for one. I worked with Women Helping Battered Women, and the Rape Crisis Center. I talked to social workers and at hospitals and went to many demonstrations. I learned my politics back then. We raised issues that women never thought of before."

And are you still raising them?

"I try. Now I am part of a study with UVM on the difference in aging for lesbian and heterosexual women. I confront people on ageism. I sometimes do workshops on ageing and once a year on Fitness Day at a public elementary school. I'm invited to talk about fitness. I show the children my medals and talk to them about competing against themselves. I get them to throw the shot after I demonstrate. Because of my age and weight, I throw about the same as these fourth-grade children. I try and encourage the girls to be strong when they shy away from it. One smart-assed boy once challenged me to a sprint race. Luckily I beat him. I get comments from the children like: 'Oh my grandmother couldn't ever do what you do!'"

"I feel like recognition of the different passages in women's lives is very important. For example, recognition and congratulations of young women who begin to bleed is very important, I think. My own menstruation was greeted with pity and even disgust. Motherhood, partnership and old age milestones are such very important times to come together and celebrate with people from our communities. Being acknowledged and appreciated as an older woman was very healing."

Did you make a commitment as a Crone?

"No, but I do have one for myself, besides getting closer to my family again. I gave them up to do this work, and now I miss them. I also am committed to do whatever I can to combat ageism. There's no way we really can understand the oppression that exists. I never could feel how old people feel until I got here. I intend to talk when I can, to keep the Crones group going. You know because we're old doesn't always mean we are wise. Our wisdom isn't always accessible. I need my anger. Otherwise I feel powerless. I'll always try to change things."