

# The Old Woman

## *Three Jewels of the Heart*



From Michael Meade's Why The World Doesn't End

### Weaving the World

The old people of the tribes would tell of a special cave where knowledge of the wonders and workings of the world could be found. Even now, some of the native people say that the cave of knowledge exists and might be discovered again. They say it is tucked away in the side of a mountain. "Not too far to go," they say, yet no one seems to find it anymore. Despite all the highways and byways, all the thoroughfares and back roads that crosscut the face of the earth, despite all the maps that detail and try to define each area, no one seems to find that old cave. That's too bad, they say, because inside the cave can be found genuine knowledge about how to act when the dark times come around again and the balance of the world tips away from order and slips towards chaos.

Inside the cave, there lives an old woman who remains unaffected by the rush of time and the confusion and strife of daily life. She attends to other things; she has a longer sense of time and a deep capacity for vision. She spends most of her time weaving in the cave where light and shadows play.

She wants to fashion the most beautiful garment in the whole world. She has been at this weaving project for a long time and has reached the point of making a fringe for the edge of her exquisitely designed cloak. She wants that fringe to be special; wants it to be meaningful as well as elegant, so she weaves it with porcupine quills. She likes the idea of using something that could poke you as an element of beauty; she likes turning things around and seeing life from odd angles. In order to use the porcupine quills, she must flatten each one with her teeth. After years of biting hard on the quills, her teeth have become worn down to nubs that barely rise above her gums. Still, the old woman keeps biting down and she keeps weaving on.

The only time she interrupts her weaving work is when she goes to stir the soup that simmers in a great cauldron at the back of the cave. The old cauldron hangs over a fire that began a long time ago. The old woman cannot recall anything older than that fire; it just might be the oldest thing there is in this world. Occasionally, she does recall that she must stir the soup that simmers over those flames. For that simmering stew contains all the seeds and roots that become the grains and plants and herbs that sprout up all over the surface of the earth. If the old woman fails to stir the ancient stew once in a while, the fire will scorch the ingredients and there is no telling what troubles might result from that.

So the old woman divides her efforts between weaving the exquisite cloak and stirring the elemental soup. In a sense, she is responsible for weaving things together as well as for stirring everything up. She senses when the time has come to let the weaving go and stir things up again. Then, she leaves the weaving on the floor of the cave and turns to the task of stirring the soup. Because she is old and tired from her labors and because of relentless passage of time, she moves slowly and it takes a while for her to amble over to the cauldron.

As the old woman shuffles across the floor and makes her way to the of the ancient cave, a black dog watches her every move. The dog was there all along. Seemingly asleep, it awakens as soon as the old weaver turns her attention from one task to the other. As she begins stirring the soup in order to sustain the seeds, the black dog moves to where the weaving lies on the floor of the cave. The dog picks up a loose thread with its teeth and begins pulling on it. As the black dog pulls on the loose thread, the beautiful garment begins to unravel. Since each thread has been woven to another, pulling upon one begins to undo them all. As the great stew is being stirred up, the elegant garment comes apart and becomes a chaotic mess on the floor.

When the old woman returns to take up her handiwork again, she finds nothing but chaos where there had been a garment of great elegance and beauty. The cloak she has woven with such care has been pulled apart, the fringe all undone; the effort of creation has been turned to naught. The old woman sits and looks silently upon the remnants of her once-beautiful design. She ignores the presence of the black dog as she stares intently at the tangle of undone threads and distorted patterns.

After a while, she bends down, picks up a loose thread, and begins to weave the whole thing again. As she pulls thread after thread from the chaotic mess, she begins again to imagine the most beautiful garment in the whole world. As she weaves, new visions and elegant designs appear before her and her old hands begin to knowingly give them vibrant shape. Soon she has forgotten the cloak she was weaving before as she concentrates on capturing the new design and weaving it into the most beautiful garment ever seen in the world.

## Black Dog Times

Upon hearing the tale, most people feel great sympathy for the old woman who labors so long and hard only to wind up having everything reduced to chaos. What a shame that she cannot finish her work; how unfair and punishing this world can be. Most people feel that if the black dog would just stop causing trouble and undoing everything, the old woman could complete her weaving. Then this world would be a proper place; things would be in order and the old woman could finally rest. Then it would be "her time," and she could stop her labors and enjoy the fruits of her work.

Of course, the old people of the tribe tended to see the story differently. They took solace in the strange tale of the cave where things unravel; they saw wisdom in the way the old woman faces the mess and deals with disaster. This is the story they recalled whenever times turned hard, when the world seemed to become a darker place and everyone became disoriented. This is the tale they told to remind themselves and instruct others how to deal with chaos, when the ends of creation seem to fray and unravel.

The old people call the persistent weaver the *Old Woman of the World Herself*, the original weaver handling the threads of existence. They identified the ancient stew of seeds and roots as the living soup of creation that needs to be stirred up again and again or else it stagnates and spoils or overheats and boils over. They pointed out that trouble and turmoil are part of the way that this world changes, the exact process through which life alters itself and thereby renews. They considered how Nature is always cooking something up and continually shape-shifting, both devolving and evolving at the same time. They tried to remind everyone that nature means change, that change is the essence of life, and that in this old world, whatever fails to change will soon dissipate or die.

Since the old people have an instinctive grasp of symbolism, they followed the metaphorical levels of the tale and knew that the cave where the great cloak unravels and becomes woven again is the world itself, the wondrous earth with its bold creations and shining garments that slip over the naked presence of life in its many forms. The old people said that the fire in the cave reflects the necessary yet unseen fire that ever burns at the center of this green-garmented earth. They recognized the cauldron as the alchemical vessel of creation with its stew of living seeds, its troubles boiling and bubbling away, and its ancient, sacred fire hidden at the very core.

The old people had known trouble, and they saw the problems and uncertainties of this world from a different angle. Being older, they had lived through tragedies and survived many disasters. They related to the struggles of the old woman, especially how she must face the mess that remains after all her best efforts have been thoroughly undone. They saw how quickly things can unravel, how life can be wasted, and how blood can be foolishly spilled on the earth.

They liked that a little story could be used to consider such big things; they liked how it brings out many issues using only a few narrative threads. They liked the economy of that, and the way it could save time and get right to the core of the issue. They remind us that the nature of this world requires that the beauty of life be lost, that it be rediscovered only to be lost again. They said that each generation must discover the eternal patterns and that the designs of life must be recast over and over again. They knew that completion signifies death and that life keeps falling apart only to begin again from the remnants of the past and the loose threads of the present. They made the point that, should the old woman ever complete the design, the whole world would come to an end.

"Be thankful for the trouble you find in this world," the old people would say. "Be thankful for the black dog that occasionally unravels the whole thing." For the black dog acts out the role of chaos, which eventually undoes and dismantles everything made manifest in this world. They knew that the dog is black in order to remind people that this world must be repeatedly re woven from darkness as well as light, that those are the enduring threads of existence that were separated at the beginning of creation and that must be handled again each time re-creation is required.

The old knowers knew that the black dog, so dedicated to undoing things, belongs to the Old Woman of the World just as much as the elegant garment she has woven with beauty and care. Having survived and reflected upon the trouble of their own lives, they learned to see life with a "darkened eye." They knew that prolonged innocence creates a huge shadow and that the desire for perfection causes untold damage. They were not so foolish as to think that the world could just be positive or only made of light. Yet they were not so cynical as to deny the ongoing wonder of creation. When the dark times come and the end seems near again, a darker knowledge of the world is needed if creative ways of reweaving the threads of existence are to be found again.

The old people knew that the "black dog times" come around as the world goes through its endless cycling and re-cycling. They knew that the return of the dark times means that the living people have to find a new vision for life or else become undone when the threads of nature loosen and the designs of culture start to collapse. In the midst of trouble, they would try to emulate the old woman who is also the world itself. They would try to tolerate the mess and find genuine visions of new designs and ways of being that appeared at the edges of life and on the fringe of being.

Hearing this old story, some people ask: "Is the cave real or something made up?" The old people might answer: "Yes." For everything real in this world is also made up; everything is made from "whole cloth," and all of it has been hanging by a thread all along. Those arguments about creation versus evolution miss the point; creation is ongoing, not something that simply happened in the past, and evolution happens alongside devolution as the whole world is beginning and ending all the time. Those who insist on having it one way or the other are setting the stage for a visit from the black dog that keeps bringing a little chaos into our best-laid plans, especially those of us who insist on seeing it all one way.

The mess of life is all around us and everyone contributes something to it. Forget about good intentions; the junkyard dog of chaos faithfully follows order wherever it goes, and it visits everyone. People may pretend they don't own a black dog, yet inside their lives, things repeatedly become torn and frayed. The black dog appears in the inner limp we cannot fully disguise, the loss that remains with us, the tragedy that won't release us, and the shadow that shades all knowing. Everyone has an inner shadow and the black dog knows how to undo things whenever we become pretentious or think that we are in charge of our world.

The black dog demonstrates how all notions of reality and all claims about the facts of life can one day become bare threads that unravel right before our eyes. It may be good enough to stick to the facts when things are running smoothly, but in the black dog times it becomes necessary to see past the obvious, it becomes important to glimpse behind the scenes where the issues of life get stirred up and where destruction and creation are forever changing places. After all, a hurricane can toss buildings and flatten whole towns; a sandstorm can obliterate an entire landscape; someone decides to start a war and life begins fighting with death and everything begins falling apart. The world as we know it ends all the time. The whole thing is ever on the point of re-creation, always on the edge of unraveling and slipping back into chaos. This is the world we all live in.

To be alive at this time means to be caught in the troubling mess and mass disillusionment found between the unraveling of the world as we know it and the as yet unseen revelation of new designs for life on earth. It means to be feeling what the old weaver feels when she finds her beautiful creation reduced to chaos and confusion. It means to feel the great uncertainty of the timeless moment between one world and the next. For the moment between loss and renewal, betwixt collapse and re-creation, is a span of indeterminate duration. To be alive at this time means to be caught on the threshold and trapped in the liminal space where one thing turns into another in a rhythm not of our choosing. At the cosmic level, it is but a moment among many moments of ruin and regeneration; for us, it can be a lifetime of uncertainty and radical change.

Things can seem desperate, despairing, and doomed if we look at all the losses and seemingly pointless tragedies; great institutions have become hollow and the teeth of chaos pull at the patterns of social order. In the great drama of betwixt and between, we can feel tossed back and forth as the middle ground of creation churns and often turns upside down. To be alive at this time means to be caught in a great unraveling that strands us near all the loose threads of creation; but it also means to be close to the revelation of the new design and the next paradigm. The old knowers say that the cave of knowledge can be found in the depths of the human soul, that each soul is threaded with inner qualities intended to be woven into the world and added to the garment of creation. They say that the creative energies of each soul become more important when the dark times come round again. In facing up to the enormous problems of the world and accepting the troubles that knock on our doors, we can better learn what hidden resources, deep resolves, and surprising designs we have hidden within us.

The old story depicts this process of acceptance as a matter of shifting from one task to another, yet a cosmic turn is also implied. In the cave of knowledge, we can peek in on the "routines of eternity" and see the three step dance of the manifest world. In the existential cave where knowledge can be found, there are three essential motions that make up the cosmic rhythm of life. Creation and destruction appear as opposing and necessary poles of existence. Between them is the middle ground of sustaining life. We may experience them sequentially, but when they are perceived in their mythic proportions and their mystical reach, all three are manifested in the world at once. "Create, Maintain, Destroy<sup>1</sup>," goes the song of life; it takes three to do the tango of existence. Nature and culture both dance to these steps and share in these eternal motions. Life is a constant re-creation at the edges of conflict and loss, and it all happens within the great mystery of continuance.

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<sup>1</sup> In other words; Invite, Appreciate, Release – Three Jewels of the Heart