



The Academy of Integrative Health & Medicine (AIHM) Crone and Sage Schools

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AIHM is an interdisciplinary membership and education organization committed to the transformation of health care on a global level. The Academy's values include the belief that unconditional love is the premise of all healing.

The American Holistic Medical Association (AHMA) merged with the American Board of Integrative Holistic Medicine (ABIHM) to form the Academy of Integrative Health & Medicine, a membership and educational organization working to unite integrative practitioners of all modalities under a common goal -- to transform health care globally. The Academy, in the process of developing an advocacy arm to support integrative healthcare expansion, offers E-Learning for continuing education, publishes at least two articles in the AIHM Journal Club per week, has more than 10 regional chapters and continues to grow.

Two events that capture the heart of the Academy's approach are Crone and Sage School. These two gatherings that take place during the Academy annual conference are a special tradition, part of the Academy's legacy from one of its two predecessor organizations. During the events, the wisdom of the elders is honored as they lead a group of healers to share in reflection and come together to celebrate our shared humanity and holistic heritage.

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The Origin of Crone School

In 1970, women made up just 9.7 percent of the nation's Medical Doctors (MDs) and Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine (DOs), according to census data.¹ Female physicians who practiced holistic, integrative medicine were even rarer and inter-professional support was limited.

In 1978, the AHMA formed to unite holistic practitioners. The female practitioners who were part of the group needed more support, so they formed what they called Crone School.

Crone School began as informal gatherings over a few long dinners and eventually became a scheduled ceremony at each AHMA meeting where the women sat in circle and shared stories. All women at the conference were invited, including attendees, faculty and exhibitors.

"The need for Crone School was brought to us at a point in time when the hearts of many young women were hurt and even broken by the broken medical system," said Dr. Gladys McGarey, widely known as the "Mother of Holistic Medicine" and the founder of the Foundation for Living Medicine.

The word "crone" might conjure negative connotations, but the women chose it to reclaim the beauty



and strength of aging, according to Dr. McGarey. “We thought it was time to change the picture of the old woman from being an ugly, withered, wicked person and reclaim her as a crony or friend who may have wrinkles and not be young and beautiful, but who has wisdom and loving life experiences which need to be shared.”

Once a woman reached “cronehood,” she was done with child rearing, usually done with usual “work” and able to be a source of wisdom, solace and inspiration to others in the clan, according to Dr. Wendy Warner, a longtime member of the Academy’s predecessor organizations and 2015 AIHM Conference Co-Chair.

good hands! I regained my feet and my heart there that night.”

Sages Follow

A few years after Crone School began, several of the men of the AHMA observed the great benefit the women were reaping from their ceremony and determined to create their own special evening, said Dr. Bob Anderson, a founder of AHMA and ABIHM.

Though the word “sage” implies hubris, Dr. Anderson said nothing could be further from the truth. The

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“Those of us who have been on this planet for many years have our own scars,” Dr. McGarey said, “but also have lived through the pain and can share our own healing tools.”

Though the number of female physicians and surgeons has increased by 22.7 percent from 1970 to 2010² -- female practitioners are still the minority. “The system is still broken and the hearts of healers are in need of love, support and understanding,” according to Dr. McGarey. “We women know that we all need each other and Crone School is a wonderful place for this need to be met.”

Dr. Warner has attended Crone School for many years. She said her most profound experience was when she split with her conventional Obstetrics and Gynecology (OBGYN) practice 10 days before the annual Crone School gathering. “I was feeling cast adrift, unsure of the next step, totally alone and raw.” Even at the time she was splitting from her conventional practice, she was comforted by the fact that she would be with “her people” soon.

“Imagine a room full of women, mostly healers, many of whom had similar stories to mine. I was in such

term was used to convey that older physicians have more hindsight and life experience and can pass along what they have learned to physicians new to integrative health. The dictionary defines the term as “someone venerated for the possession of wisdom, judgment and experience.”

Though the elders are called upon to share knowledge, the sages “have no monopoly on the truth.” There appears to be no hierarchy in the Sage School circle. According to Dr. Anderson, “All need for pretense fades away. Judgment and competition, so embedded in the practice of medicine, are suspended in the Sage circle.”

Sage School is similar to Crone School: men form a circle and share the struggles and joys of being an integrative practitioner and a human. “Unrestrained sharing of sometimes-intimate information being met with unconditional acceptance was very helpful as I moved along my path of becoming a better and more caring healer, and a more fully alive person.”

Dr. Anderson especially enjoyed Sage School because it was a break from the usual brain-centered ap-



proach to medicine. Though the brain is a necessary part, putting the heart first is an integral component of holistic, whole-person care. He said, "The joy of finding and mingling with fellow physicians whose path is compatible or parallel to my own has been a great encouragement in dealing with the bumps in the road of life. Also, the number of 'ah-ha' experiences emerging from the deep sharing in the circle at Sage School is legendary."

Crone School Firsthand

I attended my first Crone School at AHMA's final conference in 2014 in Minneapolis. As I joined two long lines of women, who were peering over heads to see what was in front of us, I heard the sound of Tingshaw Tibetan Bells and singing bowls -- then saw the gatekeepers of the room moving the instruments around those waiting, sending them into the room with a cleansing blessing.

The door opened just a sliver as each new person entered the room. I tried to get a glimpse of what was behind that door, but all I could do was listen. I heard a woman's voice say, "She calls herself Jane." Then an echo of many others responding, "Welcome, Jane!" This was Crone School.

When it was my turn to enter, my heart was beating fast and my palms were sweating. I was given the blessing and then guided into the room. "What do you call yourself?" the gatekeeper asked. "Kelsey," I whispered. "She calls herself Kelsey," she said in a booming voice. "Welcome, Kelsey!" the room echoed back to me. She gently pushed me forward where I found a seat in the large circle of chairs. Only a few were left.

The energy in the room overtook me immediately, wrapping me in a swath of safety and warmth. I looked around the room and exchanged nervous smiles with some women I knew, and some whom I did not.

Others joined the circle until there were no seats left and we welcomed each with the same greeting. When

everyone was seated, the women in the four corners of the room played a song with various wind and drum instruments.

Next, we were encouraged to bring our spiritual tokens to the center of the circle. Some brought rings, some brought rocks. I was not sure what to put in the middle, until I felt the weight of my most beloved necklace hanging around my neck. It was my late Ota's (grandfather's) gold chain with a wrapped crystal adornment from my boyfriend. I unclasped the back and walked forward to add to the collection of prized possessions.

We began the ceremony by passing around a heart-shaped healing rock that Dr. McGarey brought with her. I watched as each person held the rock, reluctant to let go before passing it to the next person. I was nervous to hold it and planned to pass it quickly. However, when my neighbor passed it to me and I felt the heat and loving energy of so many people inside that rock -- I understood. It could not have weighed more than one pound, yet it felt like a ton. I immediately felt grounded and in a meditative state. Just as hesitantly as the others, I passed it to the next person.

When I returned to my hotel room after the ceremony, I felt a new energy coursing through me. I felt relief after sharing experiences in a room with so many like-minded individuals - and - I felt a renewed sense of pride in my womanhood.

The tradition of the Crone and Sage Schools will continue at AIHM's October 20-25, 2015 conference—People, Planet, Purpose: Global Practitioners United in Health & Healing in San Diego. €

References

1. Josh Mitchell, "Women Notch Progress." The Wall Street Journal online, Dec. 4, 2012.
2. Ibid.