

LESSONS FROM THE FIRE

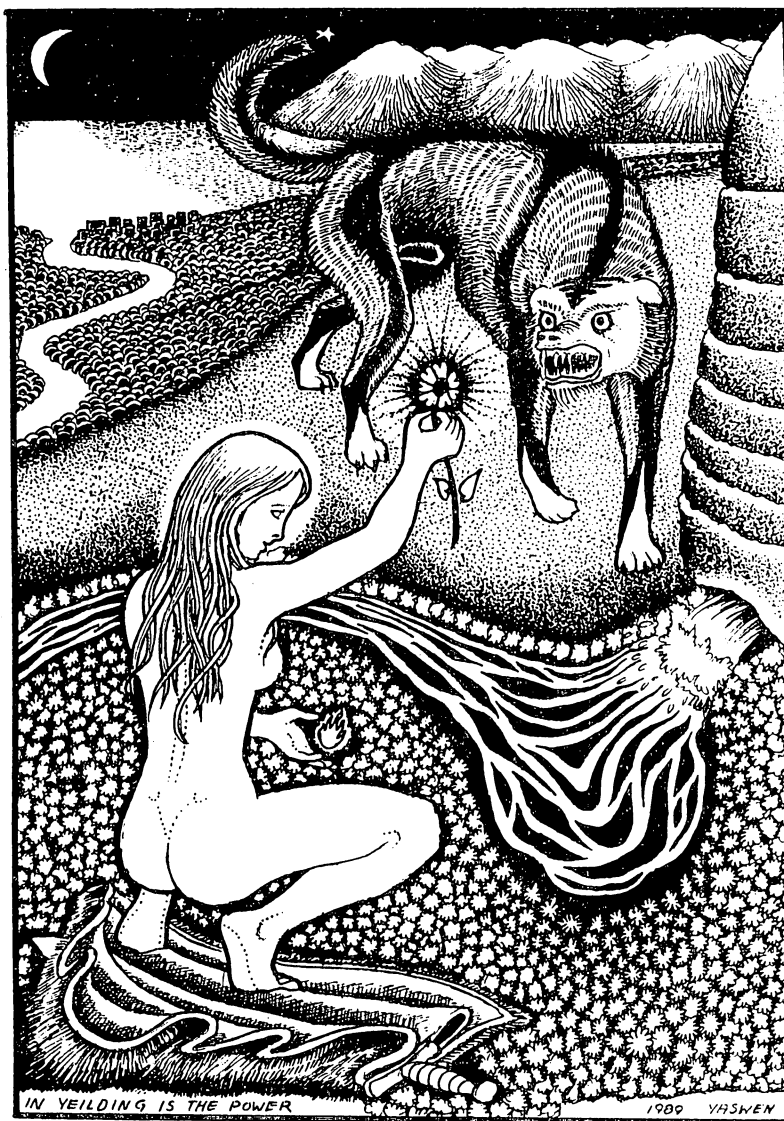
L E S S O N S F R O M T H E F I R E

FOR THOSE OF US who heat with wood, winter is the season of building fires. Every night, my warmth and comfort are dependent on my ability to get the woodstove going. When my relationship with the fire elementals is good (and/or the wood is dry) I can toss in a match; and whoosh—the room is warm. On a bad night, when I'm impatient, when I haven't laid the fire correctly, it will fizzle out over and over again while I swear quietly and use up all my matches.

Fire is a teacher. For most of my life, I got warm by turning a small dial on the wall, so I've come to its teaching late. But I now believe that it is no accident that the hearth is so much associated with the heart of home and community. Building a fire can teach us a lot about building a relationship, a home, a community, a movement. Here's a meditation—or really, a sort of musing—I began working with this summer at California and Mid-Atlantic Witchcamps—with added inspiration from Kymistree and Thorn. This version focuses on community, but you can easily adapt it to relationships, rituals or actions.

If possible, do this meditation as you actually build a fire: Consider what fire needs to burn—fuel, oxygen and heat. What is the fuel that sustains your community? What is the oxygen, the breath of ideas, visions, concepts? What is the heat, the passion? And who or what is the spark, the catalyst to get things going?

To burn, a fire must have all these things arranged in the proper relationships. A fire has its own order. Before building a fire, consider what contains it. A woodstove? A fireplace? A caul-



dron? What boundary contains your community, defines it and keeps it safe?

Begin with a small pile of something quick to burn. What catches fire easily in your community? Many times I start with garbage—used paper, old newspaper, tissues. Many times we begin to create community around our garbage: our old issues, our unhealed wounds. A fire needs just enough of that stuff to get it going. Pain can spark community into being, but to be sus-

groundwork for the big logs? Too many sticks at the same time can deprive the fire of the air it needs to burn. Sometimes we may bring a perfectly good stick to the fire only to find that the timing is wrong, that it is not needed and may even harm the fire if we insist on adding it at that moment. Can you think of a time when you've done just that? What might have happened if you had been able to hold your stick back?

A strong fire can burn up a lot of

tained, we need to start adding sticks, small at first, then larger and larger. The big sticks, the grand visions, can't be added until the fire is going strong. Put them on too early, and you smother the fire. (This is one of my personal mistakes—so many times in my life I've stuck a large log on a small fire and killed it!)

What size log can your fire handle? What does it need? What do you tend to bring to the fire—kindling? The little sticks, the dealing with everyday details, that lay the



garbage—but garbage alone cannot sustain a fire. How does your community find the big logs it needs to keep going?

A fire, to be sustained, must be tended. How do you feed your fire? How do you tend your community? Think of everything you do in community, every communication you make, no matter how small it seems, as an act of feeding the fire. Timing is everything in sustaining a fire. The same log that may keep the fire burning if placed when the flames are hot may kill it if

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HOW DO YOU FEED YOUR FIRE?

HOW DO YOU TEND YOUR COMMUNITY?

you wait too long. Returning a phone call, answering an email, sending out the minutes of a meeting, all the thousand small acts of service we do feed the fire best when they are done at the right time. Have you ever undone your own work by procrastinating?

A hot blaze is wonderful for a bonfire or for quick heat, but at the Witchcamp Spokesouncil gathering we were told: "If you want to cook, you have to cook on the embers." How do we learn to find the creativity in the ember times, when energy seems to be lower and the issue is sustaining, not blazing? What can we accomplish then that we cannot do when the fire is high?

What are your own lessons from the fire?

At the German and Vermont Witchcamps, we worked with the story of Vasalisa, whose jealous stepsisters and stepmother put out their own fire in order to force her to seek help from the Baba Yaga, the frightening old hag who, they believe, will eat her. At both camps, we spent one night of ritual working with the theme of jealousy. At the end of the ritual, as people were chanting around the fire, suddenly and with no warning we quenched it with buckets full of cold water. "Vasalisa, you stupid girl, you've let the fire go

out!" we cried in the voice of the jealous stepmother, and the rituals ended on that note.

At Vermont, that moment of putting out the fire was literally chilling on every level. That fire was our hearth. It contained the ashes of Maureen Joy, a beloved member of the community who died last year on the Fall Equinox. When the fire went out, we stood in the dark hearing the hissing coals and watching clouds of billowing steam.

The ritual was a powerful metaphor for the process of creating community. Working together is always a fragile and delicate process. Fire can teach us how to build and sustain our hearths, but we might also consider the ways in which we douse the fire.

One of the major ways we put the fire out is by being careless in communication. We do a ritual focused on love and compassion—and then go off and viciously dish someone over the snacks. We talk to the people we know best and who reinforce our opinions and grievances, and don't seek out people who might challenge us. We complain about people behind their backs, and don't directly confront them or give them clear feedback. Or we neglect to say the word of affection, praise or support that might carry someone through a hard time.

Email exacerbates these problems. The ease of email encourages us to be hasty and casual in what we post, and the ease of reaching lots of people at once encourages us to put our grievances out before the multitudes instead of thinking carefully about who really needs to hear them.

Conflict cannot be resolved via email. We can generate conflict aplenty online, but to resolve it we need actual face to face or at least ear to phone contact. Written communication just does not work. There's a Law of Mediation—"The more people involved, the less likely the problem is to be solved." No conflict can be resolved under the scrutiny of a hundred people

whom you can't see and don't know.

If you bring a conflict to a list, you essentially make it unresolvable.

We can feed the fire, instead of quenching it, if we think of communication as a form of spellworking.

Sending out the minutes on time might not seem as mystical and esoteric as chanting over a cauldron—but it's a very real form of magic. Making sure the person who irritates you is nevertheless informed when the group is meeting might be as powerful an invocation as anything we do inside a magic circle. As we move into the end of this millenium, into a volatile time of change and shifting consciousness, I'd love to see each one of us practice an ongoing awareness meditation around how we communicate, and honor communication as a core of our spiritual practice.

At the end of the fire-quenching ritual in Vermont, after the steam cleared away, the fire was still going. Three big bucketfuls of water had failed to quench it. Only embers remained, but we were able to blow them back into life.

May that be an omen for this coming time.

