

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

SUSAN CROSS

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I am Rabbi Rami, and this is the *Spirituality & Health Podcast*. Our guest today is Susan Cross who lives in New Mexico. She describes herself as a well-wisher to ravens, bears, bumblebees, rattlesnakes, and coyotes. She tells us that she's a burial shroud maker, rawhide hand drum and rattle builder, a ceremony writer, a gardener, an old mother, a tour driver, a grief-stricken naturalist drowning her sorrows with single malt scotch, and a weary but wonder-filled pilgrim who has written a number of essays that you can find on the *Spirituality & Health* website, spiritualityhealth.com. She is also the author of a wonderful new book called *A Fleeting Presence: Fieldnotes From a Crone*. That's what we're going to be talking about. Susan Cross, welcome to *Essential Conversations*.

Susan Cross: Thank you so much for the opportunity. I'm glad to be here.

Rabbi Rami: I'm very happy to talk to you. This should be really interesting because the book was very interesting, and yet, I'm going to start out with something so predictable. I can't find a reason not to be. Let's start with your understanding of the crone as the master of the life-death-life cycle. I want to know what you mean by crone, and I want to know what you mean by the life-death-life cycle.

Susan: To me, the crone is a wise woman, a person who's lived a long life and has experiences to share with people, but the word crone has been vilified for centuries really. It used to be a tag of honor just like the word hag, but through Christianity and the squelching of paganism, that word has been tainted. [laughs] I think when most people think of crone these days, they think of the pejorative, an evil old woman like in *Sleeping Beauty* with the poison apple.

Rabbi Rami: Right, the Disneyfication of the feminine. [laughs]

Susan: Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: The destruction of the crone. I want to come back to the life-death-life thing in a second, but you also say that a crone is elementally neutral, yet caring. That really caught me; elementally neutral yet caring. Tell us a little bit about the crone as being elementary-- Ah, it's even hard for me to say elementally, elementally neutral yet caring.

Susan: I think, again, with compassionate life experience, people develop that sense of really caring for others and at the same time you aren't there with your own agenda. I guess that that's mostly what I'm thinking of there is that it's an agendaless taking care of others and also of yourself.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, that's also in the book. I'm not quoting you, but you say the crone isn't contaminated with personal agendas. I guess by personal agenda you mean something small, almost selfish. Is that right?

Susan: Yes, and trying to influence people or manipulate people or drag your own belief systems into their world.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, right. Impose your sense of what's supposed to be happening on the other person's experience, that kind of thing.

Susan: Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: Elementally, it sounded so deep, so profound that somehow-- These are my words, not yours, but it sounded like to me that you're speaking of someone who has gone beyond her personal agenda into this elemental, I'm going to play on your notion of elementally neutral, an elemental agenda, maybe speaking for the planet, or speaking for nature, or seeing things from a more globalist or maybe even cosmic perspective and helping people find their place in that larger reality. Am I making too much of this?

Susan: Yes, you're totally there. The crone in many ways is older than old. In my understanding and the way that I think of it is like she's almost the void that things manifest from and definitely very much a part of the elemental birth and the cycle of life. That in our world, we tend to not want to complete the circle. [laughs] It seems to me that many Americans get stuck in that adolescent part and don't want to mature. The crone is definitely about maturity and about the gravitas of completing that circle, that you have death on your shoulder.

Rabbi Rami: Right. It's interesting because we talk about life cycle, but the way you're saying it is we really don't want to complete the circle. We talk about, there's birth and death. That's not a cycle. That's a straight line that ends, but a life cycle, the way you have it, it's life-death-life. I'm curious as to how you understand, is the first life and the last life in the life-death-life equation the same, or how are they related?

Susan: My understanding there comes from the Celtic world. The crone is in charge of the cauldron of transformation, and so everything that dies goes into the cauldron and is transformed and transmuted and comes out again in another form. So, no, I don't think that it's necessarily the same life at all, but I think that it's life. [laughs] Yes, I think we come back many, many times.

Rabbi Rami: In some essential way? I would agree with that, but I would use the analogy of the ocean and the wave so that the ocean continually waves but no wave ever repeats. Is that what you have in mind or do you actually think, "Susan's been here before, and Susan will come back"?

Susan: No, more what you're describing.

Rabbi Rami: Okay, good. Then you're right.

[laughter]

Susan: I like being right.

Rabbi Rami: Since I get to define what's right, then it's good for me also. There's another aspect of the crone that seems to be bigger than its connection to women. You talk about, despite the fact that a crone is like the old grandmother in some kind of archetypal way, I'm going to quote you from the book you write, "This slim book is for anyone who is growing older each day, for those who have ancestors, for those who will die, for people who have had their life explode in surprising ways, and for those who seek." Now, that's not women exclusively, right?

I too have ancestors, I'm going to die, my life has exploded in surprising ways, and I am addicted to seeking. Having read the book, I can attest to this that the book speaks to men also. I'm wondering, from your perspective, if it speaks to women and men differently or if women and men benefit from the wisdom in the book in a different way?

Susan: That's a really good question. I think that the crone is like a sacred femininity, and certainly, I think that all of us contain both the sacred masculine and the feminine. Yes, I think that it's definitely a presence in men. I think it's more individual than gendered. Do you know what I mean? [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: Yes.

Susan: I think that people would get benefit from the wisdom of the crone in many different ways and that it's more aligned with your individual path than it is with what your gender is.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Now in my life, because I think you could look at this in a number of ways, and one is like the inner crone getting in touch with your archetypal crone or something. I've had, well, I can think of two right off the top of my head, crones in my life. Both of them were, I thought, ancient women, [laughs] but that's because I was so young. Now I've realized that they were my age. They're in their 70s, but when I was in my teens and early 20s, I thought these women were really old.

I've had two, I would say, crones in my life who were deeply in very different ways, deeply, deeply spiritual women without a personal agenda or even-- I don't know how you put it, but they didn't have a religious agenda. They had a deep spiritual wisdom about them, but they weren't promoting a specific religion at all. One was a professor of world religions and the other was a professor of history. They were both wise.

I'm going to say they were both wise in the same way but expressed it in uniquely different ways. My question is, well, first of all, have you known crones in the body kind of way, and then how might they have a common wisdom and then express it without a personal agenda, still expressing it through unique personalities?

Susan: Yes, I've known some crones. I feel like I have a circle of crones right now. [laughs] As I was growing and moving through life, there have been a couple of women who were definitely older. The thing that I think about that I learned from them was, I love that there's this tolerance and joy that emanates from people who are in that space and they're inspiring often and comforting. For me though, I think

that that tolerance and joys are the two pieces that stood out the most for me women who really influenced me as I was a young woman coming up.

Rabbi Rami: They were not in any way-- This is a question, I'm making it sound like a statement, as I understand, they weren't in any way mirror images or copies of one, each one was unique with a dynamic personality of her own, right?

Susan: Very much so.

Rabbi Rami: Yet this greater pool of wisdom out of which they come, that's how it seemed to me in the book and that's how I've experienced it to the limited extent that I have. That's what you're saying though, right?

Susan: Correct.

Rabbi Rami: It's really interesting. I don't know. I just have no way to know this. I'm hoping those who are listening to the podcast will take a moment either right now while we're talking or afterwards just to think about who are these people in your life? I don't know. I'm wondering, and you can't answer this. This is just a rhetorical question. I'm wondering if in our society it's more difficult because we don't mix ages that way. I guess I, will make that a question. What do you think?

Susan: Oh yes, I think that that's really true. If you've ever listened to Stephen Jenkinson, talk about elderhood, that's a whole other three-hour conversation, I think one of the things that he says that I really resonate with is the idea that if there's this reciprocity that happens between the generations and young people are longing for elders and elders need young people and desire to help them form.

I think that, yes, we're very separate in this culture. We're very age-segregated, and it does definitely make it harder. Then also even like, right now I have a group of women who feel they're alone in their crone-hood where they are. Geographically we're from all over the United States, but we're trying to support each other because people feel alone in their identity as a crone.

Rabbi Rami: I would imagine that makes doing the crone work and maybe even blossoming fully as a crone much more difficult.

Susan: Definitely. Everybody in America wants to stay 45 forever.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. We're always into the new and improved and the old and dying is not on our agenda. I want to switch gears a second because you write very powerfully, it seems to me about something that I want to get into with you. I'm going to quote you back to yourself. This is very early on in the book, it's actually page three.

You say that you grew up without deliberate transference of heritage, no cultural underpinnings, no creaky relatives leaning on a cane and telling me legends from the home country. In fact, there was a deliberate severance, a great forgetting. If you could elaborate on that a little bit, talk about the heritage that was not transferred and what the impact of that is on you now?

Susan: Well, it's a big thing. [laughs] Again, it's a particularly North American phenomenon, I think, because so many people did leave European nations under duress. My people were Scottish and Irish and from Cornwall, all places where the languages were squelched and there was deliberate genocide, really. When people immigrated to America, their memories often were quite unpleasant. Not only was there the political unpleasantness, but there's also this desire to move away from a struggling life. As people "bettered" their lives, they often started to really resent the idea of labor.

I think that there's a lot of strands there of not wanting to remember those awful times and starting fresh in a place where you have no history really. I also think that it's a real deep longing in every human being to be connected to their heritage and their culture and their people and their landscape. I think there's a real ache in our world today for that kind of continuity and knowledge and wholeness.

Rabbi Rami: When I read that, I was thinking about-- myself I'm Jewish, I come from a tribal people that's in some ways obsessed with the transference of heritage yet I have a similar sense of what you call a great forgetting. After the Holocaust with the destruction of 6 million Jews, the survivors were interested in maintaining the heritage, transmitting the heritage, but the heritage that they transmitted, at least in my estimation, was very much of the surface. There was a great forgetting of the depth.

Now this is not universally true, but this is my experience. I think this is fair to say that what I was taught was the ritual, how to do the rituals, how to dress in the proper Jewish ritual dress, how to do the proper ritual things, the holidays and all of that, but with no spiritual depth to it. It was just form but the forms were empty.

That wasn't, well, maybe it was in a sense deliberate, but it caused, and here's the question, I think for Jews it caused a great alienation from the heritage because it just seems so meaningless and you have to dig so deep to get the meaning back. I'm just wondering, cause you are engaged in this; this is not your words, but almost a heritage reclamation in the crone work, do you feel there's something similar that what they didn't pass on was really without depth anyway and you have to dig for that on your own?

Susan: Well, for me personally, I think it was even-- there was nothing. I didn't know what countries people came from. It was never spoken of. My mother though, she used to say we were Shanty Irish, which in her mind was poor for Irish. She probably transferred the most information about heritage in those funny ways. It was a total emptiness for me. I didn't even know my grandparents' names so yes, it was a big dig.

I've been interested in diaspora. I live in the Southwest, I worked with a lot of archeologists down here and diaspora is a huge thing in the archeological world. It's like, what do people carry with them and what transfers as people migrate and move? I think about diaspora all the time and what did my people bring with them? For me, mostly it was these funny little superstitions actually.

Rabbi Rami: Right. Well, I think a lot of that is common. My grandmother who came from Russia, she came with a lot of superstitious, evil eye-focused behaviors that

you could never do in America without really finding yourself at the wrong end of people's [unintelligible 00:20:00]. Let me switch gears a little bit. I know you have a copy of the book with you because a little bit later I'm going to ask you to read a passage to close out the conversation but it just dawned on me that there's something else I'd love to have you read if we can find it quickly. It's on page 46.

This is about your burial and what your plans are. I've been going through a lot of stuff about death and dying with different members of my family, not COVID related though we had that also with an aunt dying but just planning out our own end, and you write about it. What I'd like you to read is the part where it begins and for heaven's sake, no burial. Can you find that?

Susan: Yes, I got it. And for heaven's sake, no burial. I'm far too claustrophobic for that. No, my hope is for a hot, hot fire, preferably a real one, accord a juniper and pinyon pine to act as a catalyst. To send me the visible part, now I've oriented to where I am off on a final phase change to transition, at least for now, to vapor and ash.

If my daughter or friends want to, I invite them to sift through the ash for the bone bits and the melted gold teeth blobs. To use those intimate and enduring pieces for rattle sounders or to store in a pretty box for setting on the ancestor altar [unintelligible 00:21:33], next to the whiskey, or to take me along in a pocket on special occasions. I'll do my best to be there when needed. The rest, the fine ash, I'd like to dust the places I love, to rest my tired old molecules on what sustained me during one life, one mysterious round.

Rabbi Rami: That is just-- it really moved me when I read it myself and way more so when I hear it in your own voice. There is so much in this to unpack and we don't have enough time to do that but I just want to ask you about a couple of things. The notion that your daughter or friends would take bone bits or melted gold teeth and do something practical with them. You see them as intimate parts of you and then they're going to carry them with you or use them ornamentally or use them in a rattle sounder. Okay, wait, I'm going to answer my own questions. I was going to say, what do they get out of this?

Then it seems to me that, you say you're going to do your best to be there when needed. I have this fantasy, this complete fantasy as if I were your daughter. That's how I experienced it when I read it. That, yes, I'm doing to take mom's bone and teeth, make a rattle sounder and then when I have a question or I have a what do I do, which path do I take, I'm going to use the rattle and in the sound it's mom speaking to me in this new way and I'm just going to rattle it to get an answer. Mom, what do you think? Does that speak to-- is that what you had in mind or is that just me going nuts?

Susan: No, I think that that's exactly what I had in mind. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: How did your daughter respond to that? She goes, "Oh, mom."

Susan: No, she's pretty aligned with me. She's on for all of it. [laughs] I know, I told her, "Get the dry ice baby because you have to sit with my body for three days." She's ready.

Rabbi Rami: I'm glad to hear that because it seems such a-- The sitting with the body, that's also a Jewish tradition though we bury within 24 hours so you don't need the dry ice. There's a lot of traditions that people have in common. The idea of speaking, and I'm just obsessed with this rattle idea, it just really hit me. Speaking through the rattle just seems so powerful. My mom has recently had a stroke and she's not-- she's dying, we're all dying. She's in her 90s but she's not dying that quickly as far as we know.

When she was at her most stressed with this, physically stressed, not just emotionally, she was having these deep conversations with my father. My sister was present for this. She was having these long talks with our dad basically saying, "Okay, I'm coming. Get ready." It wasn't a negative thing. She wasn't sad. She was ready and still is I think ready even though she's not dying as quickly as we thought but there's a gone there, she's just gone. That's it. She's not here. What you're describing is something I think more powerful that you still have a voice. If your daughter does this, you still have a voice, which I thought was really something.

Susan: In some Celtic places, when someone dies, they hang a harp above the fireplace for a week after the death. They think that the voice of the dead person goes into the harp, which almost makes me choke up just telling you that story.

Rabbi Rami: Why does that happen?

Susan: Because then that person when every time the harp is played, that person's voice is there.

Rabbi Rami: Okay. I'm just going to ask one more time because that makes sense but it doesn't make me choke up. Why the tears? Why that response do you think?

Susan: Well, I think it's because I'm really feeling like, over the last maybe five years I've really developed a relationship with some of my distant ancestors. They are very much there. They advise me and we speak. Every morning I light a candle and tell them that I'm looking for restoration and reciprocity and I'm living in gratitude for the gifts that they gave me, the talents and their strengths and they're there. To me, that's a very comforting and powerful thing. It feels the same as my daughter making a rattle with my bone bits in it.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. No, I can see that completely. Let me ask you something else, just cognizant of our time. Actually, let me go to this other thing I wanted you to read as a way of bringing this to a close because again, there's parts of this book that were, I don't know, they left me breathless for a moment. I needed to reread them and then to contemplate them for a bit and because I'm lucky enough to have this podcast, I get to have you read them to me and see where they go with that.

This last thing I want you to read is from the very end of the book and I'm not going to ask you to unpack it. I want it to linger with the listener. It's from the very end, the past exists, starts the light is fading and you can just read that all the way through and that will bring this conversation to a close.

Susan: All right. The light is fading. It's still quiet. The cat has had his second supper. As I crab shimmy back up my loft ladder to crawl into my angular crevice for

rest, I look lovingly at my companion cat. He curls up to sleep blissfully in the moment. I don't think he worries except about first breakfast and second supper. I would like that kind of respite from the forethought of grief. I feel the breeze pick up and watch the thunderheads build, smell the juniper and dust. I hear a cricket start to sing and I feel sadness and gratitude in equal measure.

Rabbi Rami: I said we were going to let it hang there but I can't. It's so beautiful. I found this last bit, I find sadness and gratitude in equal measure. Is that still true today?

Susan: I think it's more true today as my countryside burns up and I live under a heat dome and at the same time, my squash are producing fruit and my chickens lay eggs and I have beautiful hummingbirds. Yes, it's just always there.

Rabbi Rami: It's what the Dowers call the 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows of everyday living. In my book *Surrendered*, I coined the term sublime melancholy. The word just came to me so I used it seemed to me that you're expressing something very similar with this sadness and gratitude in equal measure. This is a question that I will end with this.

It's my sense, reading your book, that the crone to go full circle, that the crone feels the sadness of the world and yet also experiences the gratitude for being alive or the world's aliveness. So it's not like one of this new age, ah, everything's wonderful, everything's great, I'm beyond all the negativity. It's this bigger heart that feels sadness and gratitude in equal measure in the same moment, in a sense, what I can sublime melancholy. Is that how you see it as well?

Susan: Very much so. Yes, I can't even understand that sense of the, I call it, pollyannaish, everything's okay. It's not okay and yet there's joy. So, yes.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Well, Susan, you're right again because you agree with me.

[laughter]

Susan: Very good.

Rabbi Rami: We're going to end on a positive note where we're both right. Our guest today is Susan Cross and is the author of *A Fleeting Presence: Field Notes From a Crone*. You can read her essays on our website spiritualityhealth.com and you can certainly benefit from reading her amazingly wonderful book. Susan Cross, thank you so much for talking with us on *Essential Conversations*.

Susan: I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you so much.

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Rabbi Rami: You've been listening to the *Spirituality & Health* podcast. If you liked this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. To enjoy this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithealthmag. You can also follow me on the *Spirituality & Health* website where I write a regular column called *Roadside Musings*. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well.

The *Spirituality & Health* podcast is produced by Ezra Bakker Trupiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

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