

Practising the Witch's Craft

Real magic under a southern sky



Douglas Ezzy

practising the witch's craft

DOUGLAS EZZY


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introduction

DOUGLAS EZZY

This book contains the stories of individual Witches, but it is much more than personal stories. It contains some spells, but it is much more than a spell book. It describes some of the theory and history of Witchcraft, but it is much more than a theory book. This is a book about the practice of Witchcraft.

Are there different types of Witches? What is it like when you first experience magic? What do Witches believe? How do Witches perform spells? What are the aims of Witchcraft rituals? How do you find other Witches to work with? What are the dangers involved in Witchcraft? What is it like to be a Witch? Why are women so interested in Witchcraft? This book answers these questions. Witches with many years experience tell stories of their own journeys to explain the essence and variety of contemporary Witchcraft.

This is a book about Witchcraft written by Witches. There are a large number of Witches in Australia, many of whom have been

practising for decades. This book describes the experiences of modern Witches in their own words. I have written my contribution to this book as an academic. I have spent many years studying Witchcraft, but I did not want to write *about* Witchcraft. Rather, this book is written *with* Witches. Witches speak for themselves.

Television and film present stereotypes of Witches as either evil people on the margins of society, or gorgeous young women obsessed with fighting demons. Neither of these images of Witchcraft is accurate. Some of the people in this book have university degrees, whereas others have educated themselves. Many work in professional jobs in the media, education, health, information technology and businesses of various types. There are also Witches living in the country on alternative-lifestyle farms and some have written chapters in this book. However, Witchcraft is a religion of the city as much as of the country.

The contributors to this book are Witches who are typically practitioners with years of practice and reflection. Many are leaders of the contemporary Australian Witchcraft movement. Others are relatively inexperienced in Witchcraft, describing it from the perspective of the newly initiated. The contributors represent the diversity of the contemporary Witchcraft movement, with representatives from most of the traditions and varieties of Witchcraft in Australia.

I have usually found Witches to be generous people. I have been welcomed into their circles, and have shared many meals and warm cups of tea. I could not have put this book together without the support of these people, too numerous to thank, and who often prefer not to be named anyway. They know who they are. In particular, though, I would like to thank Ambriel and Hiraeth who first encouraged me to work on this book and suggested a list of chapter topics and contributors. I would also like to thank Lewis, who was

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one of my first Pagan contacts and who has shown a sustained interest in my research.

Witchcraft is a spirituality that celebrates life. I hope that this book goes some way to correcting the many misunderstandings about Witchcraft that still prevail in our society. I, as an academic, remain convinced that the development of a contemporary spirituality is one of the central social issues of our times.

I what is a witch?

DOUGLAS EZZY

My lover and I are on the shores of a remote beach. The full moon shines brightly. Skyclad, we cast our circle. Carving a pentacle in the air, I say: 'Hail ye guardians of the watchtowers, watch over our rite.' She draws the circle with her ritual knife. I light a bonfire that warms our goosebumped skin. The eucalypt smoke mixes with the salty scent of the sea. Nature. What bliss.

The words of invocation roll off my tongue. I kiss her feet: 'Blessed be your feet, that have brought you in these ways.' I kiss her knees, her belly and her breasts. Embracing her, I kiss her lips: 'Blessed be your lips, that shall utter the Sacred Names.' Her eyes stare into my soul. She is Goddess to me. She is the beauty of the green earth, the white radiance of the moon and the mystery of the waters. In the sand, by the fire, our rite is complete.

As the bonfire dies, we open the circle and farewell the quarters. Thank you, thank you for watching over our rite. That peace, that loss of self when lover, land, sea and heaven become one. The Gods and Goddesses, they are here.

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The sea is refreshing and calm. My lover and I swim together, over and around each other. Nature, pleasure, trust and the joy of life—that for me is Witchcraft.

Olvar

Sex, nudity, being close to nature, women leaders, frank discussions of death or menstruation, and rituals late at night—Witches often experience all these things, and it is easy to see why this might scare some people. My experience of Witchcraft, however, has been one that joyfully celebrates the pleasures of life, and honestly discusses the traumas and difficulties. I have come to see life in a new way.

How can you tell if someone is a Witch? There are many kinds of Witches. Some work by themselves, others in groups. Some only ever perform a few simple rituals, others devote their lives to the Craft. In one sense, a Witch is anyone who calls himself or herself a Witch. However, there are a number of groups and traditions that make up the contemporary Witchcraft movement, and these are the focus of this chapter. The first part of the chapter describes some of the practices and ideas that most Witches share. The second discusses some of the different types of Witches.

what do witches do?

Many of the Witches I talk to say that when they discovered Witchcraft, it ‘resonated’ or ‘just felt right’. What is it about Witchcraft that is so satisfying? Witchcraft resonates with many of our central values. It encourages self-development, respects nature, treats men and women equally, celebrates life, is comfortable with sex and is open minded. Witchcraft also teaches people to use ritual, a skill that is largely missing from modern life. Witchcraft provides a set of ritual tools and magical practices that opens people to the spiritual side of life.

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To become a Witch is to become more aware of yourself and your relationship to the physical, social and spiritual world around you. This process of self-transformation is mainly achieved through rituals. Initiation rituals, for example, may take a long time to prepare for, and can profoundly change a person. A self-confidence spell may take less preparation, but may be no less serious, or significant in its effects. Many Witches find their lives transformed by their spiritual practice. These transformations are not always easy, but they are rewarding as part of a process of personal growth. To become a Witch is a deeply personal choice—a choice to face yourself, and the universe, with open eyes.

Witchcraft is a mystery religion. This means that central aspects of Witchcraft are mysterious, or hard to understand and explain. It also means that it is impossible to learn how to be a Witch without experiencing being a Witch. Rituals and magical experiences are central to Witchcraft practice. Witchcraft challenges us to discover the Goddess and the God within ourselves. In one sense, one of the mysteries of Witchcraft is to realise that we are part of nature.

Witches celebrate nature. The ritual calendar of the Witches follows the seasons of the earth (see Chapter 11, ‘The sabbats’). Witches draw a lot of symbolism and imagery from nature, using animals, trees, flowers and landscape features in our rituals. Some Witches have become environmentalists as a result of this focus on nature, though many Witches are not actively involved in the environmental movement. A common Witch’s chant goes: ‘Earth my body, Water my blood, Air my breath, and Fire my spirit.’ Witches understand humans to be part of nature. We are part of the earth, not separate from it. The God and Goddess are found in people, in the earth and nature around us, not in some distant heaven in the sky.

Witchcraft taught me not to feel guilty. Sure, I have made mistakes in the past. But, rather than feeling guilty about these

mistakes and the pain they cause, I try to deal with the consequences as best I can, to make life now as good as it can be. What is the point of feeling guilty about things done in the past that cannot be changed? This idea of 'consequences' also applies to how I decide how to act. I often remind myself that if I really want to do this, or that, I must be prepared to live with the consequence of my actions.

To be a Witch is to celebrate life as it is here and now. Witches typically do not look forward to heaven or wish away the present, longing for a time in the future when things will be better. Although many Witches do believe in an afterlife in the summerlands, the point of life is to live it now. Witches may still try to change things they don't like, but just as night follows day, death is part of life and painful loss is part of joyful new growth, so Witches do not run away from any part of this process.

The Goddess is central to Witchcraft. There are some forms of Witchcraft that are strongly feminist, often referred to as Dianic Witchcraft and Goddess spirituality. Sometimes these Witches have women-only circles. Other forms of Witchcraft treat the God and the Goddess, female and male, as equal and different. However you look at it, most Witches place the Goddess as equal to the God, and often give the Goddess preference. The name of the God or Goddess that Witches use varies significantly. Witches might invoke deities from ancient Egypt such as Isis and Osiris, or Greek deities such as Hekate and Pan, or Celtic deities such as Cernunnos and Rhiannon. Many covens have deities that they 'work' with for a time.

The equality of the Goddess and God is symbolic of the equality of men and women in Witchcraft. Witchcraft typically attracts more young women than men, although there seems to be nearly as many men as women in the older age groups. One reason Witchcraft is attractive to young women is because it provides a spiritual practice that empowers women. On a superficial level many young women play with Witchcraft when they experiment with love spells. Not

what is a witch?

surprisingly, these often do not work. On a deeper level, many young women find in Witchcraft a powerful way of reclaiming their identity, their sense of self-confidence and their bodies.

I could never understand why some people thought the sexual and sensual aspects of the body were evil. Surely sex is part of life? Witches believe sex is a sacred ritual of pleasure and joy. Nudity during rituals is one way of openly celebrating our bodies, although it is typically only done amongst people who trust and know each other well. When Witches celebrate sex, this does not mean that 'anything goes' in regard to sexual practice. Many of the Witches I know are monogamists. They have one partner at a time, and often remain with that partner for a lifetime. Other Witches are polyamorous, which means that they have a number of lovers at the same time. The important point, however, is that whatever form of sexual practice you follow, sex becomes an act of celebration of life and the sacredness of the body. Many young Witches I have talked to describe how Witchcraft has led them to a greater respect for their bodies, and a more considered approach to sex and its consequences. Sex for Witches is part of life, celebrated, respected and enjoyed.

Most Witches are open-minded. Witches are open-minded in two ways. First, Witches do not try to convert other people to their religion. Witches are quite happy to accept that other people follow different religious traditions and that these spiritual paths are just as legitimate (well, almost) as Witchcraft. Second, Witches tend to be open-minded about introducing innovations and new ideas into their spiritual practice. Some Witches are more fixed in their ways, preferring to follow rituals that have been used over many years. When rituals and spells become second nature through constant repetition, this can create a special kind of power. However, most Witches are quite willing to experiment, trying out new ideas, rituals and ways of working magic.

One of the reasons why Witches tend to be open-minded is that

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samhain by ennelle

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they are more concerned with spiritual experiences than with correct beliefs. For example, some Witches believe that the Goddess is a real spiritual being, others think She is a symbol of nature around us, and some would describe the Goddess as an aspect of ourselves. This huge variation in belief does not seem to bother most Witches. What is more important is that people have an experience of the Goddess, and know how to work magic together in rituals.

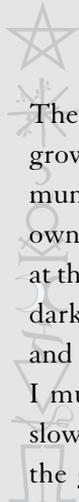
Rituals are central to modern Witchcraft. One of the simplest ritual acts is the lighting of a candle. More complex rituals involve robes, ritual tools, incense, rehearsed lines, detailed visualisations and choreographed movements. Rituals change things. Rituals change the way people feel and think about themselves and the world. Witches argue that ritual can also change other things in the world. Modern life is strangely devoid of religious ritual. This is because we tend to ignore the emotional and spiritual dimensions of life. Witches use ritual as a way of opening up and working with the emotional and spiritual aspects of ourselves. As a consequence, Witchcraft rituals can be powerful and emotional events.

A Book of Shadows is a set of written rituals that provides the basis for many Witchcraft rituals. Some Witches copy their Book of Shadows by hand at their initiation. Witches often add to their Book of Shadows or create their own, including rituals, spells and other magical information as it is discovered. Why is it called a 'Book of Shadows'? One of the best explanations I have heard is that the spiritual world is a world of shadows, and so a Book of Shadows provides a set of rituals and practices that allows the Witch access to the other world.

The athame is a Witch's main ritual tool. Athames are traditionally double-sided knives with cryptic engravings on the hilt and they are often consecrated in special rituals. The athame is used to cast the circle, to invoke power, and for a variety of other ritual purposes. Some Witches prefer to use blunt athames to avoid the

risk that someone may actually cut themselves during a ritual. Witches may also use a number of other ritual tools including a wand, a cauldron, a sword and a chalice. As Witches grow in experience, they often collect a variety of ritual tools and paraphernalia to facilitate their rituals.

A coven is a small group of Witches who meet regularly for sabbats, esbats and other ritual workings. Sabbat rites are performed at times determined by the seasons of the sun. Esbats are performed on the full moon. It is in these small coven groups that most magical work is performed. However, among the various Witchcraft traditions that these covens constitute, there is a huge variation in the practices, politics, beliefs and expectations. The next section describes some of the varieties of modern Witchcraft.



An initiation

The eucalyptus leaves crunch beneath our feet and darkness grows with a quietness and serenity. Tonight I step out of the mundane world and enter the unknown Underworld on my own. When I return, it will be with new insight. We arrive at the ritual site, an old disused mine in South Australia. The darkness envelops us as we bring in the quarters. We circle and sing and, one by one, we approach the Underworld. This I must do alone. I throw a coin down the mine shaft and slowly descend the ladder. I have no sooner put one foot on the ground when Hekate springs to life and asks me my purpose. My heart pounds. I respond and then I am directed on my journey. The darkness is so black that I have to feel my way along the shaft, touching the sides. There is only just enough headroom to stand. I can only keep going forward. The chants of the rest of the group are barely audible now.

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I am here. I am on my own. In the womb of the mother there is no fear. I feel safe. I feel beautiful. Minutes pass. I keep going. I see a change in the blackness, first to brown then to lemon. I have done it! I am ecstatic! It was wonderful! On my arrival I receive a gift and a reading from the High Priestess and take my place in the circle with the rest of the group. Tears of joy stream down my face. No one speaks, everyone knows. Although it is different for everyone, it is an experience that none of us will forget. It is an experience to cherish and to work with.

(Jeanette, 2002, from 'My Journey')

witches' covens and traditions

A young woman arrives home after a night out. It's late, but not that much past midnight. Her body is still buzzing from the dancing. 'Where have you been?' demands her mother, who can see something is very different about her daughter and is not sure what to think of the change. The young woman has been to her first Witches' circle. Attending the first group ritual is a moment of profound transformation for many Witches. Witches often begin their journey alone. Perhaps they are inspired by a magazine article, a movie or a website discovered on the Internet. Books found in libraries or bookshops are often an important part of the journey. However, the first meeting with another Witch and attending the first group ritual are powerful and transforming experiences.

Witchcraft rituals are often dramatic events requiring full participation. Typically, the rituals I have attended involve a small group of people who meet for the evening. They put on dark flowing robes as the ritual approaches. They might sing a well-known Pagan song as they walk to the ritual site that could be in another room or

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outside in a secluded bush location. The ritual circle is marked out with candles in the four directions of east, north, west and south. There is an altar with candles, incense, flowers and other ritual containers and tools. The ritual may consist of many things, but it is typically both a serious and joyful occasion that involves magic and the celebration of life. How does one find such a group or coven? The first step is to understand that there is much variety in modern Witchcraft.

eclectic witchcraft

I met Bruce at a Witches' full moon ritual. He had been a Witch for more than ten years, and his training derived from a variety of sources. He had been initiated by a coven who described themselves as engaged in 'Celtic Witchcraft' and with whom he worked for several years. They wrote their own rituals, drawing on books, the Internet, visiting Witches and their own creativity. Since that time, he had also been initiated by the local Aboriginal community where he had grown up. Bruce incorporates this Aboriginal spirituality into his Witchcraft practice, and played the didgeridoo in the circle that was cast that night. During the ritual we danced around a flaming cauldron under a clear sky. Bruce clearly knew the ritual well, joining in the chants. He draws on a variety of sources for his Witchcraft and he places great importance on following their practices correctly.

Most modern Witches are eclectic. 'Eclectic' means to choose from a variety of traditions or ideas. Eclectic Witches draw on a diverse range of Witchcraft traditions and often include material from other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Aboriginal or Native American Indian spirituality. However, the more a person draws on material from outside the Witchcraft traditions, the more they become a generic New Age practitioner rather than a Witch. When you are eclectic, it is easy to pick and choose and never do anything in any depth. While many generic

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New Age practitioners are like this, there are also eclectic Witches who take various practices very seriously and spend considerable time and energy building up their own traditions and rituals.

gardnerian and alexandrian wicca

The terms 'Wicca' and 'Witchcraft' are often used interchangeably. However, they do not always mean the same thing. Gardnerians and Alexandrians are a particular group of Witches who usually claim that only someone who has been initiated into a Gardnerian or Alexandrian coven can call themselves a 'Wiccan'. On the other hand, eclectic Witches, not surprisingly, argue that if an eclectic Witch wants to call herself a 'Wiccan', why shouldn't she? In other words, depending on who is using the term, 'Wiccan' can refer to Alexandrian or Gardnerian Witches only, or it can be just another word for any kind of Witch. In order to understand this debate about the term 'Wiccan', we need to understand some of the history of modern Witchcraft.

The modern Witchcraft revival was largely begun by a man called Gerald Gardner. Gardner claimed that in 1939 he was initiated into an ongoing 'traditional' coven in the New Forest in England. Some contemporary Witches claim to be 'Traditional Witches', where initiations and training were passed down through a family line. Gardnerian Witchcraft is therefore, in one sense, a variation on Traditional Witchcraft. After his initiation, Gardner established his own coven and began initiating others. Most of the rituals and practices used in popular Witchcraft texts derive, at least in part, from Gardner and Doreen Valiente, one of his High Priestesses. Gardner's *Book of Shadows* has a variety of sources, including influences drawn from the Order of the Golden Dawn, Freemasonry and Aleister Crowley. Key parts of some rituals were written by Doreen Valiente, and she also rewrote the Charge of the Goddess and wrote the Witch's Rune. In other words, Gardner may well have

been initiated into the New Forest coven, and may well have received some rituals from them, but Gardner and Valiente clearly invented, collated and rewrote a great deal of material. To a certain extent, Gardner acknowledged this, claiming that he received only fragments of rituals from the New Forest coven. Most Wiccans are happy to acknowledge these various sources, pointing out that Wicca, as it is practised in our times, is a relatively recent invention. Some of the rituals from the Wiccan Book of Shadows have been published in the works of the Alexandrian Wiccans Janet and Stewart Farrar, and the practice of Gardnerians is perhaps best represented in the books of Doreen Valiente.

Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wiccans who can trace their initiatory lineage back to Gardner are difficult to find in Australia, though they are thriving in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. To become initiated into this tradition may take years of training, although there is considerable variation. Wiccan covens tend to be more hierarchical than other Witches' covens, with certain rights and responsibilities restricted to people who have completed first, second or third degree initiations. Although women are equal, and if anything slightly privileged over men, Wiccans tend to be less involved in feminist, or environmental, political movements.

Alexandrian Witchcraft is only slightly different to that of Gardnerian Witchcraft. Alex Sanders, who is the source of the 'Alexandrian' tradition, began his own version of Witchcraft in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s, working with his partner Maxine. Sanders was initiated into a Gardnerian coven, but managed to make personal enemies of some key Gardnerian Witches. This split led Sanders to set up a separate tradition. Although Wicca has been very influential on the contemporary Witchcraft movement, there are not very many initiated Alexandrians and Gardnerians in Australia compared to the much larger numbers of other Witches.

feminist witchcraft and goddess spirituality

Feminist Witchcraft developed alongside Wicca and the feminist movement. Similar to the feminist movement, it seeks to heal women of the wounds inflicted by the domination of men. This healing involves the empowerment of women. Most of the traditional religions disempower women, treating them as second-class citizens. Feminist Witchcraft uses the symbols and traditions of Wicca as part of a process of healing and transformation for women. For example, Feminist Witchcraft has developed rituals that celebrate the onset of menstruation as a transition into womanhood (see Chapter 5, 'Feminist spirituality and the power of ritual'). However, Feminist Witchcraft is not simply about empowering women. It also provides a holistic spirituality that values the environment and emphasises the need to approach life with respect and sensitivity.

Goddess spirituality is a broad term that covers a general trend toward seeking feminine images of the Divine. Goddess spirituality is a general movement associated with Witchcraft and a variety of mainstream monotheistic religious traditions including Christianity and Judaism. It is also a daughter of the New Age and has strong links with the feminist movement. Feminist Witchcraft draws on Goddess spirituality, although it also has other sources including Jungian psychology and Paganism.

Starhawk is one of the more famous contemporary Feminist Witches. Her book, *The Spiral Dance*, originally published in 1979, inspired many people. Starhawk was one of the founding members of the Reclaiming Collective. The Reclaiming Collective is a tradition of Witchcraft that began in California in the 1980s. It emphasises the worship of the Goddess, is feminist, politically activist and strongly egalitarian. Starhawk regularly participates in political protests, for example against nuclear power plants, encouraging women to chant, dance and celebrate their femininity as part of their

protest. Other well-known feminist Witches include Robin Morgan who set up the 'WITCH' coven in New York in the 1960s as a radical political activist group, and Mary Daly, who practises a separatist spirituality that excludes men. Carol Christ's book, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, provides one of the more recent and clear discussions of feminist spirituality.

solitary and hedge witches

I met 'cunning man Geoff' in a pub on the outskirts of London. He was the founder of the Association of Hedge Witches, and we had a fascinating conversation about his struggle to have Hedge Witches accorded equal recognition. In *The Hedge Wytch* (the magazine of the Association of Hedge Witches), they say: 'The association's definition of a Witch is anybody who practises Witchcraft of any variety regardless of ability or level of expertise.' In many ways, the Hedge Witches define themselves over and against the Alexandrian and Gardnerian Witches. If you want to become a Hedge Witch, it does not really matter who initiated you, or whether you have been initiated at all! Whereas to become a Gardnerian or Alexandrian, it is vitally important that you are properly initiated. While Hedge Witches may work with other Witches in a coven, their work as a Hedge Witch is performed typically on their own or with one other person.

media witches

I have never met Fiona Horne in the flesh, although I feel like I know her, if only a little! I first met her in an article in a popular women's magazine. Then I read her book, listened to her sing, and surfed her website. I also discovered some photos of her in one of the last Australian editions of *Playboy*! I watched her perform a spell during a television interview, and heard that she was involved in her

own television show. I seem to see her face constantly when I scan the Witchcraft sections of bookshops around the world.

There are a large variety of media Witches—some with many years of experience who have some respect in the Witchcraft community, and others that are considered a joke. Confusingly, many media Witches call themselves ‘Wiccan’. When they do, they are usually using the term as another name for ‘Witch’, and do not mean Alexandrian or Gardnerian Wiccan. Media Witches sometimes claim to be ‘white Witches’. By this, they seem to mean that they do not practise ‘black’ magic. Many images of Witches in books, films and folk tales portray Witches as evil and malicious women who go around cursing and manipulating people. Media Witches probably call themselves ‘white’ as a way of rejecting the image of the Witch as evil and malicious.

The modern Witchcraft movement has been profoundly shaped by books, magazines, television, movies and the Internet. Many people become interested in Witchcraft through one of these media. Some of the more experienced Witches sometimes call the media Witches ‘fluffy’, and it is true, for example, that many of the television shows present a very one-sided and limited image of Witchcraft. Nonetheless, many people begin their discovery of Witchcraft this way—we all have to begin somewhere!

high magic and ceremonial magic

‘Ceremonial magic’ or ‘high magic’ is related, but different, to Witchcraft. The main difference, not surprisingly, is that ceremonial magicians place a greater emphasis on elaborate ritual and ceremony. Witches tend to focus more on nature, preferring to do their rituals outside and to use natural materials. There is not a clear dividing line between ceremonial magic and Witchcraft and the two are interwoven. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was an occult organisation formed in the late 1800s and is a good example of a

ceremonial magical order. Some of the rituals and language that Witches use derive from the rituals of the Golden Dawn. However, members of the Golden Dawn would not call themselves Witches. In fact, many of them were occult Christians, and much of the symbolism of the Golden Dawn is drawn from Christian and Jewish literature. For example, ceremonial magicians may invoke Christian archangels in the four directions when casting their circles. Often, a central part of a high-magic ritual is a pathworking. A pathworking is a guided visualisation or meditation that involves working through various symbols and encounters to draw the magician closer to the deity. One common set of symbols used for pathworkings is the Kabbalah; another is the tarot cards.

witchcraft and paganism

Witchcraft is part of a more general Pagan revival. Other Pagan traditions include Druidry, Heathenry and Shamanism. These are different traditions because they have different Gods and Goddesses, different rituals and different organisations. The Druids, for example, have a number of organisations including the Order of Bards, the Ovates and the Druids. Druids cast a circle and invoke the quarters in a quite different way to Witches. They have their own rituals that are derived from traditions that go back at least as far as the 1800s. Druids tend to place more emphasis on the solar festivals of the sun, whereas Witches work with both the solar and lunar cycles. Druids tend to be more philosophical and intellectual, whereas Witches tend to be more experiential and less ceremonial. Modern Druids see themselves as reviving the pre-Christian religion of the Druids who practised rites at the stone circles such as Stonehenge and Avebury in the United Kingdom, and draw on the Celtic deities.

People who call themselves Heathens, or Asatru, are committed to reviving the pre-Christian Germanic religions including those of

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the English, Norse, Icelanders and Germans. They follow the 'Northern' deities such as Odin, Thor and Freya. Unlike Witches, Heathens do not invoke Gods or Goddesses, they just accept that the deities are there. For similar reasons, Heathens tend not to use ritual to make a space sacred, rather they see the otherworld as always there. Heathens have a stronger sense of their ancestors than Witches do and they don't perform magical spells in the way that Witches do.

Shamans are the medicine men and women, the witchdoctors of non-industrialised societies. Shamanism is not defined by following a particular religion or a cultural tradition, rather, a Shaman is a person who has devoted himself or herself to directly experiencing the spiritual forces around us. In modern times, many people have attempted to revive the practices of Shamanism. For example, at workshops the participants may be invited on guided visualisations, often accompanied by drumming, and brought into contact with 'power animals' and/or spiritual beings.

witchcraft and the New Age

The New Age is a very general, modern spiritual movement that is hard to define because it is so flexible and broad. At its heart the New Age emphasises a process of self-discovery through self-exploration. In a very general sense, Witchcraft is part of the New Age because Witchcraft also has this general focus on self-development. However, most Witches would not consider themselves part of the New Age.

New Agers tend to place more emphasis on the idea that we are moving into a 'new age' of peace and spiritual awakening. Witches do not believe this. New Agers tend to emphasise the ideas of light and healing. Witches talk about both light and dark, healing and death. Witches sometimes jokingly suggest that the main difference between a New Age weekend retreat and a Witchcraft retreat is about 400 dollars. New Agers tend to be more consumerist, focusing

on buying crystals or special trinkets and on attending courses. Witches are often anticonsumerist and more interested in ignoring mainstream culture, although the media Witches are very consumer oriented. New Agers tend to think of the Self as the true reality, focusing on transcending nature and moving beyond our natural life. Witches want to be part of nature, integrating themselves into its cycles and patterns. New Agers place a lot of emphasis on feeling good and on spiritual ecstasy. Witches also like to feel good, but they are more interested in doing rituals and having the experiences that these rituals bring, experiences which may be confronting as much as pleasurable.

IS WITCHCRAFT A CULT?

The term 'cult' is often used to describe a new religious movement that is thought to brainwash its members so that they will give their money and lives to the organisation. There are actually very few 'cults' in this sense, and Witchcraft is certainly not one of them. Witches' belief in magic and theatrical rituals may be surprising and unusual, but Witches do not coerce or force people into doing anything. In fact, it is quite the opposite. It is not easy to find a Witches' coven. Very often, they do not advertise themselves at all. If you do manage to locate a practising Witch and ask them to teach you about Witchcraft, they may well tell you to go away and read a book. Some groups and individuals do run fee-paying courses, but I have not yet met a Witch who was trying to convert people to his or her faith.

There are evil and malicious people who claim to be Witches, just as there are evil and malicious people who claim to be Christians and atheists. Among all the careful research that has been conducted on contemporary Witches, Pagans and various forms of magic, there

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is no evidence to suggest organised conspiracies or systematic abuse in modern Witchcraft. It is a myth.

Some newspapers and television shows have tried to create panics about Witchcraft or other small religious movements such as the Children of God (now called The Family), Scientology, or various New Age groups. Unfortunately, these stories mostly appear to be cynical attempts to sell more newspapers. Academic research suggests that small religious groups, that are often labelled as 'cults', are more likely to do things that endanger their members if they feel persecuted by the rest of society. These sensationalist stories create this sense of persecution. When journalists run stories that create panic about small or new religious groups, they are usually doing more harm than good.

When people describe Witchcraft as a 'cult', they are usually trying to say that they do not like what Witches do. They might not like what Witches do, but there is nothing in the practices or beliefs of Witchcraft that requires people to do anything against the law. Witches do not brainwash or force people to join their groups. If a person, young or old, is exploring Witchcraft, it is because they have chosen to, and because they are looking for a spiritual dimension in their lives that they have not satisfied elsewhere. Witchcraft may be unusual, challenging and disconcerting, but it is not a dangerous cult. Rather, it is a deeply respectful spiritual tradition that encourages people to discover themselves and the Goddess and God within.

We are summoned when it is time and with drums beating we walk up a path lit with candles all the way to the ritual site. A faerie-road into a night filled with naked dreams of many moons ago, many moons to come. The fires are already burning as we gather at the entrance to the circle, hidden

among the trees, and we are met by a divinely tall priestess, raven haired, trailing crow feathers behind her as if she is new to human form. In this rite, on this night, all things are possible. The black veil she wears hides nothing, her skin shining luminously despite the firelight. She carries a broomstick with her, and proceeds to sweep the circle free of unwanted spirits, while summoning us to enter. 'Come Goat and come Goblin. Come Wizard and Witch. Come! Come! Come to the Sabbat.' We enter the circle widdershins, the current carrying us further into the fire and the dark.

The circle is cast and the quarters called. As well as the great centre fire, there are smaller fires ringing it about, their smoke adding to the unreality of it all. At the edge of the circle, shadows seem to gather, and I can feel presences up in the trees above. Tonight we work with the Earth energies, primal and savage. We dance, raising energy, the fire in the centre hot against our bodies. The raven-haired priestess is among us with her scourge, encouraging the dance. Our psychopomp, covered in white clay, bears a great staff topped with goat horns curling back over his hand. He uses it to draw a great pentagram in the air, crying aloud in a great voice, invoking the presence of BAPHOMET, the God of the Witches' Sabbat. 'BAPHOMET! BAPHOMET! IO EVO HE!'

I see one young woman, too shy to remove her clothing [previous night], close her eyes and give in to the wild current washing around her. Slowly, so slowly, she removes her robe and dances around the fire, and I can feel from her the release, the sense of abandon and freedom. Many have gone by this stage, left the circle to continue their adorations in private!

(Gavin Andrew, 2001, from 'Impressions of Euphoria')

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witchcraft into the future

Witchcraft is a rapidly growing spiritual tradition. However, much of this growth is being pushed along by the marketers behind television programs and magazine publishers. This means that popular Witchcraft tends to be 'McWitchcraft'. It is designed for easy consumption and to excite and stimulate your desire to buy the merchandise or to watch the television show again. However, even given this, the number of people who take Witchcraft seriously as their spiritual tradition is certainly growing. In Australia and New Zealand, one of the best ways of meeting other Witches is to attend a pub moot. The Pagan Alliance coordinates pub moots in both countries, and information about them can be found on their website at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Thebes/4320/> or by going directly to the pub moots pages at <http://pagan.drak.net/publinks/>. Some other useful links can be found at <http://paganfederation.neogenesis.com.au>.

I stand in front of a massive bonfire, its flames licking the night sky. I feel its heat warming my cloaked body in the humid air. Beside me stands the High Priestess. Behind me is the altar. I watch, mesmerised, as more than a hundred cloaked figures file in and around the circle. By the firelight I see glimpses of faces and lose them as they move on. The circle is cast. The incense, the salt and water, and the sword go around the circle. The quarters are called: 'Hail and welcome!' Summoned by a trumpet call, morris dancers join the circle. Pan, a dark, horned figure, leads them with shaggy thighs. He dares us to join in the revelry. We laugh, dance, chant, and celebrate the spring equinox. The wine and cakes are blessed and passed around with the words 'Thou art God' and 'Thou art Goddess'. With time the bonfire has come to burn a little lower and couples take it in turn to jump over the burning pyre. Everyone chants: 'Jack jump over the

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candle stick! Renee takes my hand, and we jump. Woo hoo!
Someone else jumps and falls over. More laughter, cheering and
jeering. The quarters are closed: 'Hail and fare well'. The rite is
ended: 'The circle is open, but never broken.'

Douglas Ezzy

further reading

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about the author

Douglas Ezzy has been fascinated with spirituality and mysticism since his youth. He is a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Tasmania and has a PhD from La Trobe University. He has been studying Witches and Witchcraft for more than ten years and attended his first Witchcraft ritual in the early 1990s. He has published a number of academic books and articles, including sociological studies of Witchcraft.

2

when magickal things begin to happen

VERONICA HALL

Softly, a light begins to shine, gently silhouetting a naked form seated on a dais behind a falling transparent veil. She wears a shimmering belt of silver. She calls: 'Come unto me, with your hair unbound.' An incredible feeling of love fills the ritual space as she speaks, and the veil is slowly parted. 'Come unto me. Come unto me.'

(Gavin Andrew, 2001, from 'Diary of a Witch')

That silhouette was mine. My knees trembled, my hands shook. I was veiled beneath indigo chiffon and hidden behind curtains of transparent blue silk. Those gathered could see me clearly silhouetted by a single light, while I was looking out sightless into a black void. I was certain that everyone would notice my visibly shaking legs as I stood. But somehow I opened my mouth and began to speak, to sing, and somehow, instead of the terrified, trembling me, they saw the Divine and wept.

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That single event is one of the most significant in my Pagan pathway. I was fortunate to participate in a ritual at the 2001 Euphoria Festival in Melbourne. Euphoria is a Pagan festival that runs for four days over the Easter weekend, and it was first held in 2000. That event in 2001 was my first foray into the world of Pagan festivals; indeed it was my first ritual outside of our small coven—at that time there was only six of us.

I still do not understand how I managed to get to that place, let alone invoke such a powerful response in so many people. I had been in the Craft less than a year—a rank amateur with so much to learn and even more still to understand. Standing on that altar, my life changed. I saw the magickal arts in a whole new light. My then fluffy edge was firmly knocked off and a new ritualist emerged. I was more confident, keener to learn, to absorb and to experience. It was then that I realised that magick is within all of us. We all tap into it in varying degrees but it is there nonetheless. The greatest



veronica hall.
photo by t. hartridge.

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gift is the ability to recognise that magickal potential in others—to see the Divine within. Once my magickal eyes were opened, I saw the world in a new light.

I fell into Wicca by accident. I never knew there was a name for my personal belief system. The Internet led me here. While doing some extensive Internet searching on aromatherapy, I kept bumping into these Witchy sites. It's amazing how many Witches and Wiccans are also into aromatherapy. I thought I knew what Witchcraft was but *what on earth was Wicca?* A little further reading of the basic Wiccan beliefs and I found myself nodding my head. Karma, reincarnation, psychic abilities, the God and Goddess—could it be possible that there were people out there who thought just as I did? It was like coming home. I had found a belief system that would fit me, rather than me trying to fit into it.

I was raised Catholic and happily admit that, unlike many others who I have met in the Pagan community, I rather enjoyed my Christian upbringing. The Catholic Church was a great support to me (and I love the ritual involved), but all experiences are subjective so I'll leave it at that. The circumstances of my life led me away from the Church, and, for a long time, away from spirituality of any form. Some of the most significant writings I had the pleasure of reading were by Barbara Thiering. Reading her book, *Jesus the Man*, changed the way I looked at the religion of my birth. In her books, she shared her theories about the true meaning of the Bible stories and blew my blind faith out of the water. I began seeing with new eyes and stopped believing what I had been taught and started to question what I thought I knew. It took me about a decade to work out which beliefs were truly mine and which were parts of my upbringing. So here I sit, despite my 'only believe what you can prove' scientific education.

I believe we reincarnate. I believe that God is both male and female and perhaps, in some ways, both and neither. I know that

everything is made of energy in some shape or form and that we can affect that energy to make things happen. Now I have set out on a journey to discover the truth about these things that I believe and also to discover what things I do not yet know about—and that is when magickal things began to happen.

One of the first people to touch my life was Judy, a lovely and remarkable woman. I went to her for a reiki healing and spirit reading—not really knowing what these were but wanting to experience something of the unknown. At that first meeting, Judy was able to tell me things about myself that she could not possibly have known (including my middle name!). She also told me about Spirit and angels. That's when I stopped hoping that there were spirit presences and started experiencing them.

As I learned about my spirit guides, things started to click. I found myself asking for things to happen—usually little things like finding all-day parking spots on crowded streets or an urgent and rare vacancy at the doctor—and sometimes my angels would come up with both! I began to learn that everyone has the ability to communicate with Spirit. Whether you call it angels or intuition, everyone has different ways of making it happen. Some people see visions, shapes, colours or impressions that convey a message. Others hear and are able to openly channel the messages they receive, or feel sensations in their body that they interpret according to symbolism and emotion. I had always wanted the ability to communicate, and now I was able to stop wishing for the skills and talents of others and start looking for my own talents instead.

Many would consider angels as part of the Christian tradition, but angels are far older than any of the organised religions and they appear almost everywhere in historical images and ancient writings around the world. The Kabbalah is a rich source of angel lore, Hindus call them *devas*, Buddhists have *bodhisattvas*, and many others call them simply Spirit or guides. I am content to call them angels

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for it is an archetype that I understand. I learned how I could sense their presence almost by accident. I was lying on my bed in the middle of a sweltering midsummer Saturday and began to talk to my guardian angel (prayer is really just another form of communication after all). At first it was barely noticeable but then I became aware of the temperature drop in the room as I focused on her. The longer I held the communication open, the cooler the room became until I had to pull a blanket over myself on a blistering day. I realised something from that experience—I had frequently wished for psychic talents and often envied it in others, but now I was allowing my own abilities to surface. This enabled me to experience a lot of what I believe magick to be—an awareness of the energy around us.

My mind was opening up to infinite possibilities. I met a group of Pagans, through the Internet, who were able to offer me the means by which I might acquire some skills in the Craft and who would later influence my otherwise ordinary existence. I also met a most remarkable man who would come to feature very significantly in my life, both magickally and personally.

The first meeting with this group was the most daunting. We met in a pub in Central Sydney, to eat, drink and discuss a selection of Pagan books which had been brought along for the occasion. Being blonde and not generally prone to wearing black, I very much felt out of place surrounded by hippies and goths wearing enormous pentagrams around their necks. I remember wondering what on earth I was doing there. We were thirteen at the table, which seemed strangely synchronous and rather amusing considering the subject matter. One of the group leaders had brought along an enormous silver candelabrum and had set waves of perfumed haze in the air with a censer of smoking incense. The pub patrons eventually complained but it set the perfect scene and we were having a wonderful time!

I learned that workshops were being run—workshops in Witchcraft! Could I do it? Was I brave enough to crawl out of my shell and actually work with these strange and interesting people? I began learning the difference between Witchcraft and Wicca. While some use the words interchangeably, I can safely say that, while all Wiccans of my acquaintance consider themselves Witches, not all of the Witches I know consider themselves Wiccan. There seems to be a very fine line dividing the two and it has something to do with their style of ritual practice. The Wiccan tradition holds to two basic belief sets: first, the Wiccan Rede ‘Harm none, do what you will’; and second, the Law of threefold karmic return ‘What you send out comes back to you amplified by three’. Witches do not necessarily hold to the same rules or traditions, and appear to me to be much more eclectic. While Wicca beckoned me to the Path, under my own definition I would have to say that I am practising Witchcraft, simply because I am experimenting with many elements of different paths to find what works for me. I am also questioning whether I truly believe in the Wiccan tenets.

I discovered there were covens of practising Witches in Sydney. I became involved in Coven Witchcraft over a martini at one of the book gatherings. I had struck up a conversation with one of the group members about trance-work and had expressed the fact that I was having difficulty achieving a trance state. (I attribute this to a combination of my tendency to not want to let go of my control and a distinct lack of technique.) During the conversation, I was casually invited to a coven meeting. The decision to attend the coven on that night was to change my life beyond recognition and lead me to experiences I never knew existed. Suddenly I was in a world of dance, drumming and trance.

When I arrived at that first meeting, it was to a darkened house marked only by candles at the doorstep. The doorknocker was a horned goat's head, like something out of a horror flick. Inside, the

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house was filled with remarkable decorations, candelabra and occult bric-a-brac the likes of which I had never seen. The walls were painted deep orange and decorated with amazing Persian carpets. Deep within the house was the temple space, with an indigo-blue marquee erected inside the room. An altar stood in the western quarter and contained items that I longed to touch and inspect yet I did not dare. I was both fascinated and terrified. My nervous brain was working overtime but I never contemplated walking away.

We had discussions about the workshops over a glass of wine. There were three of us keen to participate in the workshops, which would teach us the basics, and we planned to meet with the workshop leader each week for a month.

Then we were invited to join the other coven members who had gathered out in the backyard. We sat in a circle beneath the almost full moon, its luminous beams reflected in the silver chalice filled with wine. The chalice was passed slowly around the circle, with each person taking a sip before passing it to the next with a kiss and a blessing. Soon the cry went up for us not to waste the moonlight and, before I knew what was happening, a huge cauldron was brought forth and lit. Musical instruments—shakers, bells and drums—were brought into the circle and we began to dance: ‘Eko Eko Azarak, Eko Eko Zamilak.’ Over and over went the chant as the fire crackled and the drums pounded. I was swept along with the tide. The atmosphere thickened around us, building to a crescendo, and then, as if on cue, the whole group went tumbling into the long grass, each person losing themselves in solitary trance heralded by the sound of a repeating drumbeat like a single heart pounding.

That night gave me a taste of what it might be like to be part of a working coven.

The workshops beckoned like a doorway into that world, and I couldn’t wait for them to start. But while I was keen to learn the

techniques and discover the possibilities, the thought of actually participating skyclad, that is, naked, was utterly terrifying. I am a mother of two and won't even wear a swimming costume if I can avoid it. So, unsure if I could do it but determined to at least start the process, I began.

In the workshop classes, I learned about many things for the first time—hermetics, trance, casting circles, Enochian magick, the psychic reflex, the cone of power, the Tree of Life, microcosm, macrocosm, and drawing down the moon. For four weeks a vast array of fascinating and compelling subjects had me entranced. And then it was time to put aside the books for a while and experience a truly magickal rite—the formal ritual.

The Full Moon Rite is a skyclad working and it was the class's graduation into serious Witchcraft. At that ritual, there was Tim, the workshop leader, Jonathan, a man who had been involved with the Craft for some years but not with this group in particular, another woman, Nat, who was about my age and also a beginner, and me. The ritual consisted of an admittance ceremony to begin the working. Two people in any combination of genders usually perform this. In this instance, it was left to the two more experienced of the group while Nat and I waited, with anticipation, in another room. The house was filled with the billowing smoke of the censer and soft music could be heard coming from the darkened temple space. We had taken cool ritual showers. We were naked beneath our borrowed robes and, as Nat and I sat there, we joked about our chance of taking off out the front door before anyone noticed!

The Guardian of the Portal came to collect me first. With my dry tongue plastered to the roof of my mouth, I went. The house was in darkness although I could see flickering light coming from the temple space. Guided every step of the way in solemn silence by the Guardian, I was stopped at the threshold and challenged by the masked Master of Ceremonies before being allowed to enter the

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sacred space. The cauldron fire raged and the air in the room was thick with heat and scented smoke. I was brought to stand before the altar and ritual words were solemnly exchanged. I was asked ‘Are you willing to be Prepared?’ Indeed I was.

Gently I was disrobed and given the five-fold salute. I felt no threat or awkwardness, only respect and solemn reverence. The nervous fear I had held to so tightly vanished as though burned away in the cauldron’s fire. With eyes closed, my body was anointed with scented sabbat oil. It instantly warmed me, tingling on my skin. I felt pure and ready for the ritual to come. I went to sit at the edge of the circle and the Guardian brought in Nat. The ceremony was repeated with her but, this time, I was urged to take the sabbat oil and participate in anointing her body. I realised that full participation was asked for wherever possible and that gave me the opportunity to own the ritual as much as participate in it. That first time I worked skyclad I understood that, as with many of the hurdles in my life, the leap looked bigger from the ‘before’ aspect than it did from the ‘after’.

This small group of four, including the workshop leader, worked together for several months. At the time, due to my newness to the Pagan scene, I wasn’t aware how fortunate I had been to connect over a martini with Tim Hartridge who has become a prominent figure in the Australian Pagan Community over the last 30 years. Being unaware of this, all I saw was a charming and educated man with a vast knowledge of the occult pathways and a library to die for. Not only was I fortunate enough to be taught by a man with such vast experience, ultimately, I was also to fall in love and have it returned. Being involved so closely has meant that I have had some ritual and psychic experiences beyond my wildest dreams, and much earlier than might have otherwise been possible. I am eternally grateful to Tim, and also to the many others that I have been honoured to work with in circles—all remarkable people who have

touched my heart and helped me in the process of transforming my life.

In the circle, I started to see physical manifestations of Spirit. The purpose of the Witch's dance around a lit cauldron is to raise energy, also called the cone of power, for a magickal working. My first experience of this took my breath away. It was difficult to believe what I was seeing. Although I had seen a video of a coven group dancing with a snake of fire rearing up out of the cauldron, the reality of it never quite registered. The sight of the fire still awes me as it spins and twists, spiralling up as the energy moulds it into a whirling tourbillion of flame. I have seen the fire snake spin from the thickness of a rope to the full width of the cauldron. I have seen it stretch six feet above the cauldron and watched it spiral upwards even though there was hardly enough fuel left to support it. I have seen it change colour to blue and to green, and, most recently, to a shade of purple that left me astounded. The physical manifestation of the cone of power is something that awes and excites, and is never forgotten.

Between my circle work and my experience of Spirit, I now had a whole new perspective on life and began to observe the big changes that started to happen around me. These last twelve months have been some of the most painful, difficult and turbulent of my life. Much like the central myth of Wicca, the Descent of the Goddess, I have been to the darkest depths and emerged on the other side with new insight, fresh views and an old wisdom that has started a transformative process in me. I know this is only the beginning, but I have found the courage to make major changes in my personal life. And I found the old adage true: Beware what you wish for, you just might get it!

When it was time for me to go out and start collecting my own set of ritual tools, I didn't really know where to begin. There are eight working tools of the Craft. I knew I would start with the

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athame, used by Witches to cast the magickal circle, but where does one begin to purchase a ritual dagger? So I asked the Universe and my angels. I asked for the athame to find *me*, and it did. I am a keen supporter of the Salvation Army stores and I visit them quite frequently. On one visit my eye came to rest upon a sheathed knife held behind glass in a beat-up display cabinet. At first glance it looked too long, rather like a short sword, but I asked the assistant if I could look at it and we started talking, though she couldn't tell me where it came from or anything about it. In its sheath, it looked like a ritual short sword. The scabbard and hilt held eight red stones, symbolising for me the eight sabbats, eight tools and eight paths of Wicca. The traditional athame is black handled, and this one had black paint beneath the intricate wire scrolling that decorates it. In the centre of the scabbard was the yoni symbol, a diamond with crescent moons on either side, as a perfect representation of the Goddess. Out of the scabbard, the sword is actually a good couple of inches shorter than it appears when sheathed, making it ideal as an athame. I knew it was destined to be mine when the very kind assistant gave me unusually generous discounts on the various items I purchased that day—the total discount being the exact cost of the athame. My first ritual tool was a gift from the Universe.

Apart from the physical workings of magick, a world of experience has opened up to me beyond anything I could have hoped for. Around the time we were preparing for Euphoria 2001, I attended a series of reiki workshops run by Debbie, a gifted woman whom I am honoured to now be friends with. She attuned me to second degree reiki and gave me my first dramatic taste of energy work. She taught me to feel the energy at work in the healing groups to the point of carrying the physical sensations of other's emotional states. This opening of sensitivity has enhanced my work within the circle. For the first time I was able to see and feel manifestations of energy that were not visible to the naked eye.

Not long after this reiki attunement, I had another significant experience. I was with the coven, in Circle. The room was dark, only a single masked flame stood in the centre. We stood silent with our eyes closed letting the softly playing music flow over us and through us, breathing, finding our still centres and preparing for our opening rite. I felt someone brush past me, and thought that it was one of the group, but then I felt the cloth of my shirt slide against my skin and I was jolted forward. I opened my eyes, wondering who had bumped into me, only to find that no-one else had moved. The others stood just as they had been, silent and meditative. I resumed my position, and breathed deeply, feeling the energy. It wasn't a negative energy and there was no fear or anger that I could register, merely curiosity. I was aware that sometimes the energy of the circle acts as a beacon to energetic forms, but my teachers have since helped me to understand that what I had felt was a lost or displaced soul and they also gave me assistance to understand how I could help these souls to find their way home.

I used to be very active on the Internet, but I hardly ever use it for my magickal learning any more (although it is still the best source for finding magickal recipes). I have discovered, both to my dismay and my delight, that the more I learn, the less I know. I am now content to sit back and listen to the wealth of experience and information out there, and that gives me more time to study.

Now is the lead-up to the next Euphoria Festival and once again our coven will contribute a ritual as a major working for the event. This time I am more focused and less nervous but, as ever, in awe of the magick that will occur for me and the other participants. Magick surrounds me in everything I do and most of it has to do with the way I look at the world. I initially thought that I would use spellcraft to help make things happen for me. In reality I have found that simply asking the Universe to provide for the greater good of us all actually does the job much more effectively. Each day I am

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thankful for the special moments both within and without the Circle that has become such a major factor in my life. I, too, am learning to see the Divine in myself as well as in everything else.

One by one, the principle ritualists drink from the cup she bears, including myself, and then I am sent to gather others to receive her blessing. For the first time (I could not have torn my gaze away before then), I see one or two people openly crying as they behold this vision of the Divine. It is one of those moments you do not forget.

(Gavin Andrew, 2001, from 'Diary of a Witch')

further Reading

Gavin Andrew, 2001, 'Diary of a Witch', <www.ozpagan.com/euphoria>

About the author

Veronica Hall fell into Paganism via the Internet rather like Alice through the looking glass. In Wicca, she put a name to all the beliefs that she had buried deep within because they didn't quite fit her Catholic upbringing. After the revelation that there was already a belief system that fit her private beliefs, there was no turning back. Veronica currently practises Witchcraft both in a training coven and as a solitary. She makes no claim to hold any great knowledge on the subject and feels honoured to be contributing her story.



3

Sabbat wine of the witches

TIM HARTRIDGE

Drink from the cup of Witches' wine and
remember ancient rites forgotten by time.

Witchcraft is a practical system of mysticism whose method is known as magick. At the core of my experience of Witchcraft is a direct and personal encounter of the psychic reality. I have come to understand Witchcraft as a type of gnosis or mysticism through which communion with the Divine is the principle initiation. Akin to the Mystery Cults of the ancient Pagan world, the experiences hold an occult quality that may lead you far from the usual encounters of secular religion and into the practice of magick. I believe this is exactly what the initiates of the old Pagan Mystery Cults experienced and precisely what Gerald Gardner, the father of modern Witchcraft, had in mind with the contemporary expression of Wicca (I use the terms Wicca and Witchcraft interchangeably).

My early encounter with practical magick was via the casting of spells learned from a man who had spent years living with the

Spanish Gypsies. Marc de Pascale had published his collection of Gypsy sorcery under the title *Book of Spells*. He was a gifted psychic, a natural clairvoyant, and over an occasional exchange of tarot readings we became friends. His spellcraft worked well and it taught me to rely on my ability to wilfully cause results through visualisation. By candlelight I would enter a dreamlike state where desires took on ghostly forms, tangible and fluid-like. Later, I learned this manifestation had a name—the *vinum sabbati* or sabbat wine of the Witches.

The *vinum sabbati* is a substance not made of any ordinary fruits of the vine. Its roots draw from the rich, dark recesses of dreams. This ethereal fruit may be harvested under the light of the midnight moon, and fermented in a cauldron of dreams generated in the nocturnal trance of sleep. Whether awake or dreaming, the world of imagination is most acute in children, but some adults maintain this capacity. Although I didn't realise it in my youth, for most of my life I have had a natural propensity to this type of imaginative impulse. In the practices of Witchcraft, I found methods to engage my psychic dreams, coupled with an overwhelming fascination to understand what was behind these twilight experiences.

I was in my first year of high school when I realised that there was something beyond the everyday reality. An incident occurred within my family home involving physical contact with an aberrant spectre, an entity which had haunted our home for years and was later identified as my paternal Grandmother. The family home faced onto the beachfront at Bondi and had been bought especially for my Grandmother. One sunny day as I stood in the room that overlooked the beach esplanade, ghostly hands gripped hold of both of my arms. I struggled to prise myself free. Her presence and power completely overshadowed me and I was forced to witness a distorted vision of a fierce storm happening outside. The sky turned suddenly dark. From where I stood I could see something like a king tide had

entirely swamped the beach. Winds acting like a vacuum sucked windows straight out of the apartments and homes along the entire esplanade. I shook with fear and somehow managed to liberate myself from my spectral grandmother's grip. As soon as I had left the room, everything returned to normal. Later, I was to learn she had passed away in that room. As frightening as this had been, the event triggered a major turning point.

My first reaction was to approach my science teacher to find out if he could offer any logical explanation. It took me a week to summon enough courage to broach the subject with him. Although he was a high-school science teacher and a good one by my estimation, he was also a Christian Brother. They were like a separate breed, knowledgeable but unapproachable. Unfortunately his response consisted of a clichéd, 'Well my son, there are some things in this world we just can't explain.' I wasn't sure whether he was speaking as a scientist or as a Christian, but either way I was devastated that he had no answers. The subject was never again raised at school.

This led me to my second choice, which proved much more productive. I turned to books. Reading brought a new and very hidden world gradually into the light. The occult in Sydney during the late 1960s consisted mainly of astrologers, spiritualists and incense-burning hippies, some of whom had tarot cards but didn't know how to use them. There was the 'Witch of Kings Cross', Rosaleen Norton, but she was totally reclusive. Therefore my mentor became the pages within these scarce and treasured volumes. I read Gerald Gardner's book *Witchcraft Today* and a number of things struck an immediate cord. I had been instinctively practising many of the techniques used by Witches to encounter the psychic reality.

From 1973 I began to formally practise the Wiccan traditions of Gerald Gardner and Alex Sanders. (After all, what is the point of tradition unless you follow it?) Sanders did for the 1970s generation

of seekers what Gardner had done in the 1950s—only on a scale that Gardner could not have imagined. Sanders’s style of the Old Religion was a fusion of Qabalah, Hermetics and Wicca. Stewart Farrar very eloquently describes his teachings and influence in his book *What Witches Do*.

The shift to coven-based Wicca provided the structure necessary for me to work with others. I set about in the development of the first coven in Adelaide by performing a ritual to invoke the moon Goddess with the purpose of attracting others of like mind. Up to that point, much of my Witchcraft had been focused around practical magick. Although this provided me with the basis for occult development, it was more result driven and didn’t enable me to experience the Divine of which Gardner and Sanders spoke; and which I now understood was central to a complete initiation into Witchcraft. During the first year there was a lot of exploration—circle orientation for southern hemisphere conditions, the initiatory grade structure and, in particular, experiments in trance and clairvoyant states.

By 1974 the coven consisted of a diverse group of people. There was Chris, who worked by day as a personal assistant and assumed the role of principle priestess for the coven. There was her younger sister Ros, Alex a policeman, Christine an antique dealer, and Alastair a university student and practitioner of Tantra. A few months later, Linda, a teacher of Italian, joined. Linda teamed up with me to lead the coven in the development and formal training of potential members.

We met frequently in the private covenstead of my home in Melbourne Street, North Adelaide, a street better known at the time for doctors, dentists and architects. Affectionately called the ‘Witch’s Cottage’ by the locals, my home, and I, had developed something of a reputation by challenging the Law in a landmark courtcase over my right to read tarot cards and do psychic consultations in a

professional capacity. The 'Witch of North Adelaide', as I had become known, was a regular identity seen in the evenings walking down to Café Istanbul with coven members and other students of the occult in tow.

At least once or twice a week we would cast the circle and practise some form of trance induction, and train in the 'Black Arts' as the neighbours liked to think. Some of our initial methods included staring into bowls of inky-water, gazing into black mirrors, or using the strange, mirrored Witch ball—a mirrored glass ball usually hung in the window to avert evil. Witch balls have been very popular from at least the eighteenth century. Using these devices for scrying induced the desired change in consciousness. At the start, these experiments helped to open our awareness of the subtle etheric field (life energy) surrounding the body, but eventually we could also see this energy field around the objects themselves. As we progressed in these methods, they led us to try other techniques that resulted in deeper visionary experiences. We were now using more active techniques including special breathing exercises and hypnotic dances.

At the same time I was exploring other occult traditions. One of the major influences in the Western Magickal Tradition is the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (founded in 1887). Their initiations taught a procedure for trance via a set of astral doorways. These are a set of specially coloured symbols representative of the elements. Using them as a focal point, the practitioner begins to mentally journey through and into the astral world beyond. We used this focused projection of consciousness with our trance techniques to open the psyche into direct experiences. On occasion, spontaneous out-of-body episodes (astral projections) would occur. These encounters with the psychic reality began to trigger events in our everyday lives, frequently resulting in significant life changes. Such as on the occasion when I awoke from an afternoon nap after having had a hair-raising 'astral joyride' in a friend's car, which was being

stolen at that very moment. We rushed to the garage only to find my experience was more than a dream.

My perception of reality has undergone dramatic change as a consequence of these encounters. Years later I came to refer to these events as 'occult darshan'. Darshan is a Sanskrit term for a direct and personal mystical experience.

Studying Gardner, I found he was particularly interested in how Witches awakened an energy field around the body. In his book *Witchcraft Today*, he guardedly outlined some of the Witches' methods and how their rituals were designed to open a space outside of the normal reality. Using a formula of ritual magick, he demonstrated how the Witch cast a magick circle as a doorway to an objective psychic reality and, more significantly, offered examples of what it was used for. He postulated that a current of energy around the body acted as a bridge between the mundane and the psychic. With the aid of ritual magick, this natural but excited energy could be amplified by using the Witches' circle. Such rituals could move an individual's awareness outside of time and space. Gardner explained the ultimate purpose in creating this bridge was to experience encounters with the Divine.

Examples of this communion are found in the performance of such rituals as Drawing Down the Moon, a ritual designed specifically to channel the spirit of Luna, the ancient Pagan Goddess of the moon and initiation. The root words for both moon and mind are the Indo-European *manas* and *mana*; the derivative *mania* originally meant an ecstatic revelation. Likewise, lunacy meant possessed or chosen by the spirit of Luna. Gardner examined how a corresponding psychic reflex could be invoked. Many of the procedures used by Witches cause an altered or heightened state of consciousness as a necessary stage to facilitate initiation and direct experience of the Divine.

practising the witch's craft

*We mark this round and cast this rune
Upon this night in the sight of the moon
Our bare feet mark this Witches' round
And thus it becomes hallowed ground*

(Tim Hartridge, from the rite Lumen in Tenebrae)

The coven membership had expanded and with it our need for a more dedicated space. We rented a large old house in an inner suburb of Adelaide. It was perfect for our needs and, not surprisingly, had a witchy number—thirteen. We painted the whole house; the ritual room standing in stark contrast to the rest of the rooms with its deep indigo-blue walls and stained red cedar floorboards with the Witches' circle painted on them. This became the physical heart of the coven's ritual practice.

Hypnotic, strangely soothing, the Witches' mantra named and called to the twilight spirit to draw down. The lithe spirit entered into the midnight-room. Weaving the magick of the sonorous spell, as ancient as humankind, the Witches called to the moon. The supreme and archaic Witch Goddess, ruler of the deep indigo night, the ethereal shape-shifter who bestows mana upon Her chosen. The voice of the Goddess's Priestess sang the charm to the night and the moon, calling the Lunar Goddess to draw near. Other voices joined, summoning the bright Goddess into the Witches' circle. A spirit of the night responded and I felt afloat as though on the flowing tide. The deeper the echoes chanted, the more I sank into an emotional sea mixed with currents of excited joy and engulfing sadness. Luna was with us, She who rules the oceans, lovers and lunatics. I was immersed in an atmosphere both brightly charged and darkly intoxicating. She began to appear. Gliding into the sensuous bodies of the Witches and gazing out through their eyes, She was all around me, in the faces of these wild Witches and in the rhythm of the dance, She whirled around and around

me. The lunar current swarmed tangibly and surreally in the sea of incense in which we swam. In the centre was a dark iron cauldron and out of it danced a flame. The scarlet fire rose and flared with such force it wound and spiralled up into the air. It transformed into a massive leviathan, and from out of the black cauldron it bellowed a flood of flame like a firestorm. Awe, terror, thrill, intensity poured out in a powerful cone of bright fire, engulfing my body and brain.

Such encounters taught me a great deal. If the Goddess had been an ideal, something not quite real to me, then experiences like these changed all this. I instinctively knew She stalked me, occasionally leaving me hints and clues where I should look to find Her. If the Goddess had seemed more like a yearning for something far away, like lovers kept apart by the cruel circumstance of Fate, then through such initiatory experiences Her presence was felt most acutely in my life.

It was while working with others that powerful archetypal energy began manifesting in the coven. The shadow Gods like to challenge our conditioning, testing in us what is true and what is false. The amphibious Hekate was chief amongst the Gods to pique the cosy coven. She stirred things to create a divine hell-broth which brought home the words of warning of poet Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*: ‘. . . the Goddess whom you adore . . . she demands either whole-time service or none at all.’ The amphibious nature of Hekate would take the coven circle from the dry land of the logical intellect into the watery realms of dreams and astral experiences.

Chris, the Priestess with whom I worked, had some propensity for trance. We both instinctively knew it was time to invoke the Archeron Goddess of the Underworld so I designed a ritual in which we might take advantage of trance mediumship. The ritual would also be our induction into the archaic mysteries of the patron and

Queen of Witches. The initiation was deeply emotional and I began to change. If I had been a reluctant and ignorant initiate up until then, I now felt the influence the Goddess would play in my destiny. From that moment on, I knew we had been taken under the wing of the nightshade Goddess. Not too surprisingly, my confidence grew and the work in the coven became deeper. I realised, too, that initiation was more than simply joining the club.

I gradually began to understand my relationship with Witchcraft in terms of an inner initiation and an outer connection with coven members and others of like mind. I began to question the literalism with which others understood their roles as Witches. My explorations were challenging many of the accepted protocols. The Witch in me frequently appeared more as an unexpected eruption of the unconscious. As if encountering a fascinating stranger, I didn't recognise myself in these moments. Although I didn't have the language to describe the nature of these happenings, I knew one thing—in the make-up of my personality I was not a Witch 24 hours of the day. Instead, I began to recognise that at certain times this psychic function of the Witch would emerge, usually during times of emotional stress. I began to embrace the idea of Witchcraft more as a psychic phenomenon of the Self, and this opened up many new possibilities. Principally, Witchcraft was less about religion and more to do with the practice of magick as a function of the psyche.

All my early research and spellcraft provided me with some skills to share with the members of our developing coven. Our desire to explore magick sometimes resulted in a number of amusing outcomes—as on the occasion when we decided to conjure a rainstorm. Summer in Adelaide can be gruelingly hot. This time of year is very dry with a desert-like climate due to the northerly airstreams coming directly from Central Australia. During January and February the expectation of a naturally occurring thunderstorm is as likely as a visit from Elvis. Despite the odds, this is what we

were attempting. We set about logically evoking water elementals, which we bound into knotted cords. The technique enables the Witch to simply release the knots on the desired day for rain. I did this and for good measure cracked the cords like a stock whip to stir up the winds of a storm. By five o'clock that afternoon, in the sweltering heat, an unnoticed black storm cloud had gathered directly over North Adelaide where I lived. A powerful downpour lasting several minutes ensued, followed by something like a Turkish steam bath in the street.

Several of the major TV and radio stations broadcast from North Adelaide and so the evening news weather reports spoke of a 'freak rainstorm over North Adelaide!'. Needless to say I was elated and out I danced into the street. Before long the telephone began to ring with calls from coven members: 'Was that us?' However, my joy was soon diverted to problems with the plumbing, which never seemed to be permanently fixed, and an equally annoying case of genital crabs (the sexual organs are ruled astrologically by Scorpio which is the fixed water sign). While I don't adhere to such Wiccan concepts as the Threefold Law, I was beginning to appreciate a need for balance.

After almost a decade of practising coven-based Witchcraft, changes were occurring and it was happening from the inside out. I had mastered most aspects of contemporary Witchcraft and was now more confident to rely upon my own conclusions. But the Gods were stirring the cauldron again and this time I was the medium.

Many contemporary forms of Wicca place the emphasis upon the Priestess in the coven. This is especially true in the celebration of the full moon or Witches' esbat. At these rites the Priestess is the one who is said to actually *draw down* the spirit of the moon Goddess into herself, while the Priest plays little more than a support role. The one thing I noticed was this *drawing down* did not always happen, and more than that, I might experience the Goddess regardless! So

I began looking into what was really happening during the full moon esbats and other sacred rites.

Not surprisingly, I realised that I had been too rigid and literal in my understanding of the rite, or indeed its intended purpose. I suddenly thought, what if *drawing down the moon* really meant *manifesting Lunar consciousness*, and not just in the Priestess but in anyone present at the rite? Almost immediately, I began to be subjected to an immense flood of Lunar influences. These began with an insomnia at the time of the full moon. During these periods I would sometimes hear the ethereal sound of a woman's voice calling the names of the Goddess—Ma, Binah, Moon, Ea, Ge. Spontaneously, I began to sing these names in a chanted melody. Like a bottled-up dam, the floodgates burst open and offered a passionate out-pouring. The soulful sounds of this Lunar mantra are a powerful spell, and one that the present coven still uses more than twenty years later. It has had an enduring quality, which has proven effective in connecting to the Lunar current of the White Goddess.

The experience also produced some unexpected psychic reflexes. I was given access to glimpses of past-life memories: a more recent past life in which I was a paratrooper shot down during World War II and drowned behind enemy lines. Other even more unexpected encounters were astral visits to other Witches' sabbats both in the past and present. This was not an entirely unfamiliar occurrence because I began to recall how, in my early teens while exploring the occult and the tarot, I had had shadow memories about unfamiliar ritual procedures. One time I even went so far as to build a stone altar based upon such a memory. I constructed it from old stone and brick in an abandoned part of an adjoining garden and used it to invoke the wild energies of the place with offerings of candles and flowers. I would feel an immense sense of solace while communing there amongst the huge Moreton Bay fig trees that overshadowed my small temenos. Unfortunately I had to abandon

and dismantle my shrine because my father found it and became convinced that the neighbours were practising black magic.

These shadow memories have persisted throughout my life so that I am never surprised to learn that some ritual I have constructed has a near-identical twin with other Witches living on the other side of the world, or that it was some supposedly top-secret magickal procedure known only to the initiated. Despite having had many psychic experiences, I was for a long time in denial of these abilities. I didn't know if I could trust these shadow memories, especially what I have come to identify as recollections from past lives. On occasion these might occur right in the middle of a ritual and act to cause total confusion for anyone else working with me. Despite the inconvenience to my fellow coven members, I would proceed to steer the ritual in some completely new direction. Because of this ability to tap into these shadow memories, I now count amongst my achievements some of the most successful large-scale rituals conducted at Australian Pagan festivals.

On a more mundane level, Luna was making Her presence felt. For the first time, I allowed a friend to read my horoscope, revealing that I carried a permanent full moon in the water sign of Scorpio. On a positive side this may manifest as deeply-felt emotions and sensitivity; in a negative aspect it can lead to depression. The condition is triggered each time the moon returns to its natal position. A full moon will occur once a month when the sun is directly opposite. The moon is also the place of one's soul, and at full moon is turned toward one's spirit (sun). Speaking in psychological terms, it is likened to the direct flow between the conscious and unconscious. The father of modern psychology, C. G. Jung, wrote in terms of the light of Consciousness bringing to bloom the flower of the Unconscious.

Sound and music began playing a more significant role in my ritual work. In particular, I was exposed to the Shamanic drum

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trance techniques as taught by Dr Michael Harner (see 'Further reading'). I would combine these techniques with my own instinctive and experimental methods. Some years before I had also explored the use of the resonant qualities of the Chinese gong and its effects on consciousness. The gong has some unique qualities and benefits over other percussive instruments. I found that its shimmering sound waves aid in parting the psychic reality, so the Witch may slip through the openings and gaps created. It is not unusual to hear people report, after I have taken them through this technique, that they thought either the ritual room or I had disappeared during the rite.

Around 1975 I had purchased a ritual gong through a friend, Alan, who runs an antique business in Adelaide. Alan had quite a story to tell about the 'satanic' gong, as he liked to call it, and was clearly pleased (or relieved) that I decided to take it. The gong has



tim hartridge holding
the ritual gong. photo by
t. hartridge and v. hall.

attracted many unusual psychic and physical phenomena over the years. Its history is similarly curious—constructed in Europe during the eighteenth century, about a hundred years later it was procured for the practice of Haitian Voudoun ceremonies, at which time it was inscribed with the ritual vevers (symbols). I discovered that by using the gong's reverberant qualities, and by applying a rapid, percussive technique, I could produce a sound to provoke trance.

As well as the use of sonic devices and techniques, ritual dance also helped to aid a shift in consciousness. Dance is one of the eight specific methods mentioned by Gardner for producing magickal effects. Dance is particularly useful in raising a psychic phenomenon known as the cone of power, which may occur spontaneously when the dynamic ritual dance is performed in a coven.

Examining many of the practices of Witchcraft reveals that these methods help to facilitate the emergence of the archetypal Witch from within the psyche. For example, the active participation in inspired ritual helps to transport the practitioner out of the normal routines of life. Also, methods that heighten sensuality will assist in shifting the ritualist into an altered state of consciousness. Sensuality in this context should not automatically be equated with sexual libido, but has more to do with an arousal of the senses. In other words, anything that assists the ritualist to 'go native' will help them to enter the mythic reality. The use of aromatic sabbat oils rubbed into the body before or during ritual, the use of ritual nudity (skyclad), or the play of frenetic dances, especially when done around a central fire, are all effective triggers. If you can step aside from the centre focus of self-consciousness (the real meaning of the word ecstasy), then an altered state of consciousness will occur. This can be encountered by any sincere person prepared to explore their wild and uninhibited nature, for it is in these neglected places of the psyche that the archetypal Witch can thrive and be directly experienced.

Many modern books fail when it comes to useful teachings in

the practice of magick and Witchcraft. This is because they are more about following a tradition without having first explored personal psychic experiences. Many authors are content to let their readers simply follow the prescribed rituals, rather than developing an inner understanding. This is little better than playing at being the Witch. Without a means of connecting to the magickal current, these types of rituals remain inert. Therefore, the first thing I emphasise to the student of Witchcraft is the importance of connecting to the *chi* of the ritual, meaning its life energy or spirit. Once this is done, an authentic experience will follow.

In contrast, the writings of magician Kenneth Grant are an excellent resource for any student of the occult. Grant's background in writing began in the late 1950s. In 1989 a series of his essays was reprinted under the title *Hidden Lore*, including one of the more significant essays entitled 'Vinum Sabbati'. This deals with a comparative interpretation of the alchemical symbology of Witchcraft. Grant suggests that much of the imagery of the Witches' sabbat are symbolic motifs of astral phenomena, and that the Witch makes such phenomena manifest in the 'latent wish'. This is a primitive urge for union with the Divine. Grant identifies the *vinum sabbati* as an intoxicating sabbat wine ostensibly brewed from dreams, astral essences and the trance of the ritual participants. I knew I had tasted the *vinum sabbati* as the product of the psychic reflex.

The arguments for and against a preference in describing oneself as either a Witch or Wiccan evidence a great deal of literalism on the part of those who practise Witchcraft. But what if becoming a *Witch* is more a psychic phenomena of the Self? It is less, then, about religion and more to do with the practice of magick and initiation into the Mysteries. This is the domain of the archetypal Wild-Witch, who unapologetically awakens from deep within the psyche.

When being a Witch is experienced in this way, as our link to the natural, we may begin to re-animate our primitive and forgotten

powers. These natural instincts may manifest in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar forms. Our intuition is one such form, while others include clairvoyance, astral and psychic projections, and even a natural ability to heal. The Witch's Craft may be thought of as the ability to bend and enter the psychic reality at will through the many techniques of trance.

This approach in using an alternative interpretation to what it may mean to be a Witch places a greater emphasis upon the personal psychic function and the importance of personal experience. By looking for the Witch within, we may begin to think in terms of wanting to do more than simply learn from others. We are more likely to seek self-initiation into the Mysteries; to show initiative in the contribution to our own psychic study and knowledge base; and we will almost certainly find greater value in our own experiences above those of others as a basis for belief.

Currently I work within a coven based in the inner-west of Sydney. I still teach and conduct workshops that explore the wide variety of ritual techniques I've acquired over the years. I am just as curious and fascinated by other peoples' experiences as I am with my own and have found the practice of Witchcraft deeply enriching. For me it is not a spiritual practice which claims to know it all, but it certainly challenges me to ask 'why'.

Perhaps old Gerald Gardner had it right when he spoke of Witchcraft in the following terms:

'It is the old case of: Unless you experience it yourself you will never believe. When you have experienced it, you don't believe, you know.'

further reading

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websites:

<<http://www.ozpagan.com>>

<<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WitchesWorkshop>>

<<http://www.witchesworkshop.com>>

About the author

Tim Hartridge has been a practising Witch since his early teens, and became involved in coven-based Witchcraft in 1973. An active Pagan advocate, he has appeared in TV, radio and print media interviews. For a number of years, he ran an Adelaide radio programme 'Broomstick Corner' (1981–84) and independently published the *Dark Cycle Magazine* (1986–89), *Venifica* newsletter (1986–89) and *OzPagan* newsletter (1992–93). The OzPagan Internet website was also launched in 1992, making it the first Pagan Internet website in Australia. Tim was the driving force behind the annual Eostre gathering (1985–97), the first Pagan festival of its kind to be held in Australia, and is currently a major contributor to the annual Euphoria gathering (2000 to present) held in Victoria. He was a founder-member of the Sydney-based Dark Circle (established 1984) and continues to run a local coven. He presents regular workshops in Witchcraft and runs the WitchesWorkshop Internet-based e-list, now the largest Australian Pagan e-group.

4

A pagan birth

CHEL BARDELL

Caitlin's magnificent body glistened in the candlelight with the Coils with which we had anointed her. Fully nine months pregnant, she lay in the centre of the circle, her swollen belly forming the altar at which we would honour the Goddesses of old. Outside, the moon, brilliantly shining in its own fullness, auspiciously signalled tonight as the time the women of the coven should gather to prepare Caitlin for her rite of passage into motherhood.

One by one the women bestowed their blessings upon the coming birth. Kneeling beside Caitlin, each placed a small cowrie shell upon her belly, chanting the incantations that would transform this shell into an object of sympathetic magic that each would invoke on the day of the birth. Borrowed from the South Sea Island cultures, the beautiful cowrie shell forms a natural talisman for the pregnant body; one side the smooth swollen belly, the other symbolic of the entrance of the birth canal.

Cassandra, Vanetta, Kirane and Kara, not yet mothers themselves, invoked the powers of the Maiden Goddess to impart to Caitlin a

swift and strong delivery. Molly, her second child still at her breast, asked for the blessings of the Mother Goddess to welcome Caitlin into the mystery that none can tell in words; the passage of pain leading to the unsurpassed joys of motherhood. As crone, my fertility now well behind me, I ask for the blessings of the Matriarch to sustain Caitlin through this rite of passage that will change her life irrevocably, and forever.

Bonded in the mysteries of child-bearing, the women chant together, sharing the stories of their own fertility and passing down the secrets of generations of women, as well as those contained in the ancient Pagan myths. Caitlin's time is near, and we shower her with gifts, with our love, and with the promise to be with her throughout her time of pain. Each woman ties the small cowrie shell to her wrist with a three-fold cord, there to stay until the birth is over. Tenderly we place the coven's birthing robe around Caitlin, crowning her head with a wreath of flowers and five-lobed leaves, all sacred to the Goddess. The rite ends with the sharing of moon cakes, and an elixir of herbs and juices beneficial to the coming birth. Although she must walk this path alone, Caitlin finds comfort in knowing that the hands and hearts of her coven sisters will be by her side.

Childbirth, itself a profound act of natural magic, has attracted much myth, lore and custom since the beginnings of time. Pagans past and present will conjure the natural powers and invoke the blessings of the old Gods, starting with the very act of conception, to achieve an optimum birth experience. Many of these customs and practices have filtered down through the ancient sands of time and into the rites and rituals that we still perform today. It is of very little significance whether the actual, physical form of these rituals, charms or activities is thought of as the catalyst to achieve the outcomes we seek; rather, if they achieve none other than focusing our intent, and thus bringing into play the vast and powerful forces of our own

minds, then they have done their job. So whether we believe a charm or invocation to be true, or whether we believe in it to make it true, either way, the power of ritual to transform our lives is almighty and undeniable. With these thoughts in mind, let us now begin the journey towards welcoming a Pagan-born child into our lives.

conception

Pagan parents very often plan conception to take advantage of solar and lunar phases or various seasonal celebrations in the Pagan year. Others leave it all in the lap of the Gods, and are subsequently surprised to discover the correspondences created within their own lives. The Beltane fires of spring are notorious for creating their own magic, bringing forth a rush of little moon children the following winter. Well-worn rumours exist about it being impossible to conceive either within a magick circle, through enactment of the Great Rite, or without a myriad of elemental and other correspondences being properly observed. However, pregnancies have certainly occurred both because of and in spite of all the above, and I believe that it is the readiness of the parents and the place they have reached in their own path, that above all determines the point of entry of a child into their lives.

Often this time of arrival may seem misguided, unanticipated, a trial not ready to be faced; yet inevitably the child becomes the catalyst for immense and necessary changes that we do not have the wisdom to foresee. Thus I believe that when the time is right, the signs, the stirrings within, will be there. Whether we choose to see them or not is a matter of our own sensitivities, as is the decision to ignore them, or enhance and nurture them through rituals and practices designed to acknowledge that the will of the Gods is about to be realised within our own lives.

Conversely, if conception proves difficult, it may be that the time

has not yet come, and perhaps there are other aspects of our lives that need attention first. This may well include the physical health of the parents, or perhaps the completion of other tasks related to the life path. Our ancestors often resorted to fascinating methods of sympathetic magick, such as sleeping on a mattress stuffed with the tail hair of stallions. Another charm tells the woman to 'eat parsley, and be pregnant within a moon', no doubt in reference to the phyto-estrogenic content of parsley; although it is in testament to our ancestors' skill in learning merely by observation that they should draw such conclusions without the benefit of modern scientific knowledge.

The physical aspects of conception are fascinating. In our ancestors' time, women all menstruated together, in time with each other, and with the moon cycles. They all ovulated together, too, again in line with the moon—the full moon. Babies were born ten lunar months later, again at the full moon, and to this day, labour is often triggered by a woman being exposed to the full moonlight. The advent of artificial light sent our light-sensitive pineal glands crazy, and this lack of natural sun and moon-related light signals, plus the increasing isolation of women from each other, is making our menstrual cycles progressively shorter than the natural 29-and-a-bit days of our forebears. Yet imposed over our physical cycle is another, moon-related cycle.

It is only a matter of time before the scientific community, who readily accepts the effect of the moon on the oceanic tides, will 'discover' its effects on our own, inner tides. The excellent work of Francesca Naish, an Australian expert in the area of natural conception, tells us that at the time of your birth, the moon was in a certain phase. Perhaps, for example, it was on the day of first quarter. Once puberty is reached, at every first quarter for the rest of your fertile life, regardless of where a woman is in her physical cycle, she has the ability to ovulate on that day, if she has sex. For a

man, his sperm count will soar on his lunar day. Conceptions achieved on these lunar ovulations account for approximately 10 per cent of all pregnancies. The medical profession even has a name for it—‘spontaneous ovulation’—although they see it as merely a random act of nature. As our forebears were mostly born at full moon, they also ovulated, both physically and in lunar cycle, at full moon, so is it any wonder that the connection between lovers and the full moon exists to this day?

Pregnancy

Once a woman conceives, the magical transformations of pregnancy begin almost immediately. Older women, in particular the girl’s own mother, usually ‘know’ about the pregnancy, often before the young woman does herself. Likewise, most women ‘know’ almost immediately when they have conceived a second or subsequent pregnancy. Impossible to put into words, this natural alchemy provides universal evidence for the existence of detectable forces far beyond the physical senses.

Such are the subtleties and sensitivities of pregnancy that our ancestors saw the wisdom in allowing the pregnant woman to fully indulge herself, spending time alone, or with Nature, in quiet contemplation. She was surrounded with beauty and harmony in the belief that to do so would ensure a beautiful and calm child. It was thought that any birthmarks the child carried took the shape of anything that had frightened or harmed the mother during pregnancy. While birthmarks may mean anything from random skin lesions to the remnants of past-life tattoos, scars or initiation markings, modern science as well as conventional wisdom can attest to the certainty of foetal responses to any maternal stress. For this reason, if for no other, it is good practice to make your pregnancy a

time of calm, peace and beauty; of good diet, rest, fresh air, gentle exercise and positive thought.

Some people say that the child chooses us as parents to learn its own lessons. Some certainly seem very determined to get here! You may like to try a solitary pathworking or meditation aimed at welcoming the child into your life, and see what transpires from there. Some women clearly see their child in dreams, often before conception, as if the child has come to consider its potential parents. Sometimes in that liminal state between dreaming and waking, a woman may actually see a small child standing at the foot of her bed.

A pathworking of this type may involve a visualisation of you going to meet your child within a cave, or perhaps inviting it to come out of a darkened wood and sit by you beside a campfire you have lit. In either case, let the child speak to you of its wishes and needs in this life, and likewise tell it of your expectations.

There is some debate as to the wisdom of having a pregnant woman in a working circle, as both mother and child may be exposed to less than ideal influences, but if you are already part of a trusted group, a working aimed specifically and only at your welfare may bring forth some interesting information!

One sure thing that pregnancy brings is heightened instincts and awareness, so perhaps through your own contemplation or inner knowing, you already have answers to questions about your child, such as what sex it will be. If you can honestly accept this answer, untainted by your preferences and prejudices, you are more than likely right. A recent mother was not only able to predict the sex of her child by using her awareness, but she also learned the exact time of birth which came to her in a dream.

As the mother's body grows heavy, so increases her need for rest, however, a strange thing happens in late pregnancy—suddenly the expectant mother will get a burst of energy, wanting to spring-clean the house and everyone in it. This is Nature's way of heralding the

birth. This bout of furious activity is the 'nesting syndrome' wherein the mother instinctively prepares her environment for the arrival of the baby. Medical or mitigating circumstances aside, once the nesting syndrome occurs, you can assume you have about two weeks to go before the onset of labour. It is also said that more babies are born on an incoming tide, and with the full moon, so you may like to look up these dates and times to give you further clues.

pre-birth

The Witch attending the birth has generations of accumulated birth lore and knowledge behind her, and sometimes an apprentice who learns by being at her side. They have much to do both before and during the birth. Once the mother has requested her services, the Witch will take out her birthing shawl. This is usually a quite beautiful creation, made from patches of material from past successful births and from the clothing of people connected to those births. She will then take the shawl to the mother, requesting that the mother supply small pieces from the clothing of those who she wishes might bless this birth. This may be the father, or perhaps other relatives or close friends whom the mother admires, or sometimes the person after whom the child is to be named. If this is not possible, often the Witch will suggest that the mother fashions a special decorative piece herself, either embroidering or painting onto it those sigils and symbols of her wishes for her unborn child.

Thus, over time, the birthing shawl becomes a powerful magickal object, imbued with the positive forces of many successful births. In the rare and unfortunate event of a child not surviving birth, or dying within the first moon, it is customary to bury the child wrapped in the shawl, thus sending it to the Otherworld wrapped in love and good wishes, and another shawl is started afresh. Many shawls have tiny charms sewn into them, as well as locks of hair and

other items hidden within their folds. The Witch, together with her apprentice if she has one, will sew these patches and items onto the shawl during a birth preparation ritual, usually held in a special place at the Witch's own home. At this time, the other items to be used throughout the birth are cleansed and charged in preparation: a candle, a silver coin, an egg, some salt, bread, a cowrie shell for each woman involved, a silver dish in a box, and a clay pot; herbs such as the aptly named birthroot may be gathered and prepared; a piece of ash wood is burnt and ground up; a ritual birthing cake, distributed to close friends and relatives at the birth, may also be prepared at this time.

At the appointed time, the pre-birth ritual is undertaken, usually at the home of the mother, or if she is part of an established coven, perhaps at the covenstead. This may involve a simple gathering of the woman's close female friends and relatives, similar to the 'baby showers' held in mainstream society, or any variation of this theme, or the type of full coven ritual that began this chapter.

Birth

At five in the morning the call comes. Caitlin is in labour. Quickly the word is passed around the other women. Each goes about her day, seemingly as usual; yet Kirane, sitting behind her desk, greets her clients, making notes with her right hand, while in her lap, her left hand is massaging the smooth, shiny hump of the small cowrie shell tied around her wrist. When alone she chants the birthing charm under her breath. Vanetta, Molly and Kara come together for the day, lighting a candle, chanting and singing, working with their cowrie shells between exchanging excited phone calls with Caitlin and myself. Cassandra spends the day with her herbs and incense, blending and imbuing them with the charms of old, her cowrie shell ever between her fingers as she works.

A pagan birth

Caitlin, her eyes glistening with emotion, whispers to me of her hopes and fears while I massage and wash her, feeling a love for her as I would my own daughter. The midwife arrives mid-morning, and amid hugs and tears we ease Caitlin into the spa bath as her pain grows. Between contractions I softly sing to her the Goddess chants she knows so well, running warm water over her aching back, and rocking and breathing with her as the pain returns. On this occasion, the bathroom windowsill acts as altar, and the Goddess picture that Caitlin has chosen watches over us, softly glowing between two white candles. Frequently throughout the day, I stare into the eyes of the Lady, asking for Her strength as our energies flag and giving thanks when a difficult time is over. I hold Caitlin's hand as the midwife does what she must, and, feeling her pain, channel the strength of the Mother into her to ease her journey.

As she nears the second stage transition, Caitlin suddenly lashes out, telling us all to 'just shut up!', and exchanging knowing glances, the midwife and I leave her alone momentarily, assured that her time is near. Kurt, the child's father, is brought into the birthing room and, within the hour, their little daughter Ruby emerges through the waters and into her parents' loving arms.

Birthing used to be, and I believe should be, the province of women. The father, if it is his wish, and with the blessing of his partner, has every right to witness the birth of his child. Men can be very caring and empathetic birthing partners, and I am sure practically all fathers who attended their child's birth will say it was an event of profound significance to them, and one not to be missed. The father is not necessarily passive during the birth process either—many men report feeling labour pains themselves, and it was an old Yorkshire custom to search the village for a man in pain if the father of the coming child was not known! For same sex couples, female partners can play a similar role.

However, this important day belongs solely to the mother and

her needs. Another woman who has given birth herself is the best person to understand exactly what the mother is going through. There is an almost palpable magickal atmosphere within the birthing room that connects the women involved in an unspoken bond, passed down from woman to woman, since the beginning of time. Older women become the conduit for passing the unspoken magic of the initiation of childbirth into the new mother. As we massage her back and her belly, urging her to push, or hold, or breathe, chanting the same phrases of comfort and encouragement that have been used for generations, we feel her pain, instinctively knowing where the baby lies along the birth canal, and freely give of our own strength and love to help her through.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to have a fully trained and competent midwife or medical doctor attend the birth. Do not think you can do it yourself. Yes, I know birth came easily to some of our ancestors, but these women also led lives of daily hard physical activity, ingesting food and water untainted by mutagenic and teratogenic chemicals, living lives largely unstressed, and with generations of knowledge behind them. They didn't take drugs, smoke, drink, or sit in front of computer screens all day. Yet despite all of these measures, they and their babies continued to die with great regularity.

Spiritual midwifery is another matter and, although in days of old the local village Witch was both physical and spiritual midwife, today we have the advantage of having women separately trained in both areas to attend to all the age-old practices of women-centred birth. In my experience, many medical midwives, if not openly Pagan themselves, are usually Goddess-aware, and generally have no objections to working alongside a woman competently trained in the Old Ways who will incorporate the spiritual practices into the birth. I well remember a hospital nurse, mystified but supportive, picking up the large cowrie shell from our makeshift hospital altar

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at around 3 a.m. during a particularly difficult birth and exclaiming ‘What a lovely shell!’. As an aside, if you find yourself in a hospital birth, make sure you request from the beginning that the placenta is kept—they often have a way of disappearing into the system, through no fault of anyone. The request seems to be particularly noticed if it comes from the father as well as the mother. We will return to the role of the placenta in a Pagan birth when its time comes.

The joyful, sometimes traumatic, but always magickal rite of passage into motherhood is not easy to talk about in other than the most practical terms. The mystical experience remains unique and very individual, with many women experiencing visions, enlightenment, and contact with Goddess forms that they have been unable to explain or verbalise afterwards. It is a shame that these experiences are often blunted by medical interventions, but, in even the most clinical of births, this is sometimes compensated for during the first sleep that the mother takes after birth. This phenomenon is not limited to Pagan women. Many other women report having what they often dismiss as ‘weird, realistic dreams’ either during or after childbirth.

post-birth

After the birth, the baby is washed and then wrapped in the birthing shawl. The first bath was given, by tradition, ‘before a fire of ash wood’, the ash wood symbolising the successful transition from a previous life to this one. By the burning of the ash wood, the baby was cleansed of any unwanted influences left over from previous lives. Today it is more common to sprinkle a little ground, previously burnt ash wood into the bath water as a blessing on this new life. The birth, the wrapping and the first bath may take place, if practical, in a ‘downstairs’ room, so the child’s first journey is ‘upstairs’,

ensuring advancement in this life. If the baby is presented with a caul (part of the amniotic sac that sometimes remains attached to top of the head), it is carefully removed and placed in a silver dish within a wooden box, and given to the mother for safekeeping. Traditionally, the caul is said to prevent death from drowning, and, in days of old, sailors would pay enormous sums of money for them. It was also thought that the caul would give warning of both the sickness and health of the child, by either shrivelling up, or remaining soft and pliable respectively. Today, the caul is kept as a talisman for the child, being a powerful aid to any water-borne magick.

Once the baby is cleansed of the old life, the Witch then blesses the new life, placing the previously prepared objects either in or under the cradle or bassinet, while chanting a charm such as:

*Silver coin for wealth, Salt for health,
Egg for long life, Bread for no strife,
And a candle to light the way.*

The candle is circled, sunwise, around the cradle and then extinguished with the fingers—it is not good magick in this instance to destroy one element with another, hence Air is not used to blow out the candle) and placed beneath the cradle with the other items. The cradle should not be made of elderwood, which is too strong a conduit for magickal power. It is good practice to place a sprig each of rosemary and rue at the head of the cradle to deter unwanted magickal currents.

The Witch takes the placenta from the birthing room (after it has been checked for medical reasons), by placing it in a clay pot, and later conveys it to her home for preparation within her outdoor area. The placenta is a most beautiful, shiny, liver-like organ with a marbled surface of deep reds and purples; the white-yellow cord being surprisingly tough and spiralled with blood vessels. In days of old it was believed that part of the child's spirit, or the child's

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guardian spirit, resided in the placenta, and it was often buried in, for example, a battlefield for a boy to ensure his good warriorship and that he would never die in battle. Likewise, a girl's placenta may have been buried under a hearthstone, to ensure her domestic skills. For obvious reasons, the placenta must never be thrown onto a fire, or into water. Often the mother would take the placenta, alone, to a sacred place such as a stone circle, holy well or ritual grove and offer it to the Gods, giving thanks for a successful birth. Sometimes it would be placed on a hawthorn bush, rather than being buried in the ground.

Today, the Witch first places the placenta directly on the ground, allowing the blood of both the mother and the baby to run together into the Earth. If the birth takes place in a hospital, do everything you can to keep the placenta. Take it home in a plastic bag and place it on the ground, allowing the blood to drain out. A small piece of the placenta is cut off to be dried and powdered later, and a small piece of the cord is also removed. By spiralling the remaining cord around the centre of the placenta, it creates a quite beautiful object. Once the blood has drained, the placenta may be refrigerated or frozen, depending on the length of time before the naming ritual, when it will be buried under the birth tree. The small piece of cord is later buried under another tree that the Witch dedicates to the child, often planted at the place where the blood was allowed to run into the Earth. If, for any reason, the birth tree planted by the parents is lost, this second tree provides a source of further magickal support for the child. By the time the child is old enough to decide for themselves whether to follow the Pagan ways, the tree will be big enough to give some of its wood for the making of some very personal and potent magickal tools.

Before the mother leaves the birthing room she is given a warm drink, in which a little of the previously dried and powdered placenta has been sprinkled. In this way, she continues to hold within her the



ritual tools and birth shawl.
photo by chel bardell.

magickal powers of the placenta to nurture and protect her child. The time and date of the child's birth may also afford some protection or bestow some special traits upon the child. Those born at the liminal edges of the nature cycles, that is, at midday, midnight, dawn, dusk or at the solstices or equinoxes, are blessed (although some may say cursed!) with the ability to see spirits, ghosts and other non-human forms. The midnight-born also have the ability to hear the Wild Hunt. Those born on the hours of three, six or nine are able to hear and understand elfin or faerie speech without danger, and cannot be cursed by others. Breech-born babies are said to become great travellers; those born feet-first have the ability to discover hidden treasure; and, of course, being the seventh born of a seventh born (although this must be mother to daughter, or father to son) bestows the Sight, and the ability to develop great magickal powers.

Naming

Naming the child is an act of great magickal significance. Traditionally, the parents would tell no-one the name chosen before the naming ritual. An old magickal law states that to know the true name of something is to have power over it, and, without the protection bestowed by the naming ritual, the child lay at risk of magickal misuse. In choosing a name, it is very dangerous to name the child after someone who has recently died, as the dead sometimes call their own. This is particularly important with a Samhain-born child. Likewise, to name the child after a favourite animal or other non-human entity often ties the fate of the child to the fate of the animal or entity in some way, which may not be optimal for a human life. A modern, and similarly risky practice, is the taking of a God or Goddess name. Do your research thoroughly and make sure you understand all the traits of the chosen Godform—not just the sanitised, romantic ones—as you are carrying out an act of sympathetic magick that may well bestow some form of the less desirable traits on your child. (I have yet to come across any Godform that was all sweetness and light.)

To protect the baby before it is named, a metal amulet of some kind (often the coin placed beneath the cradle at birth) and some salt are placed at the foot of the sleeping baby, particularly if it is to be left alone in the room. Not to do so is to risk the child being swapped for a changeling or faerie child, or for its soul to be swapped with that of a passing, earth-bound spirit. The father may also place his coat at the foot of the cot to symbolise his protection of the child. The cot itself is then ‘sained’ (from the Old English *segnian*, from the Latin *signāre*, meaning to sign, mark or seal in some way, originally having nothing to do with crosses), usually by carrying a lighted candle around it in a similar manner to that which was done at the birth.

practising the witch's craft

Both our Druid and Norse ancestors used specific naming rituals involving water, complementing the other elements expressed in the use of candles, salt, coins, etc. at the birth. Early naming was important to our ancestors for three reasons: the protection of the child, the fact that the right of inheritance of the child depended upon it, and the belief that the child would not really thrive until it was named—indeed it was thought that a sickly child could be cured by the naming ceremony alone.

One important feature of the naming ritual is the burying of the placenta under the birth tree. In this way, the child's 'life-cord', once attached to the physical mother, is now attached to the Earth Mother for Her eternal love and protection. Many Pagan mothers also like to bury their child's first teeth, and sometimes hair and nail clippings, under the birth tree.

Birth trees have been used in traditional cultures from Africa to Russia. Sometimes one tree is used for the entire family, and it is said that the tree will shed a limb in mourning if a member of the family dies. In my own line, the seed from an ancestral birth tree (an oak) is used to propagate the birth trees of successive family members.

The naming ritual is also a time of gift giving, and relatives and friends may give the traditional gifts of bread, eggs, salt and coins alongside more practical or creative items. Many an old aunt has pressed a silver coin into the hand of a newborn on such occasions. Other items such as books, particularly those outlining the cultural heritage of the child, and the traditional silver spoon, which used to be placed into the mouth of the child before its first feed to ensure prosperity, but now serves a better function as a record of the date and time of birth, are wonderful gifts for the newborn. Whatever the item, as long as it in some way equips the child for this new life and is given in the spirit of love and blessings upon the child, it will serve them well on this, their current life journey.

Note: The people mentioned in this chapter are all past or present members of Tanglewood Coven. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.

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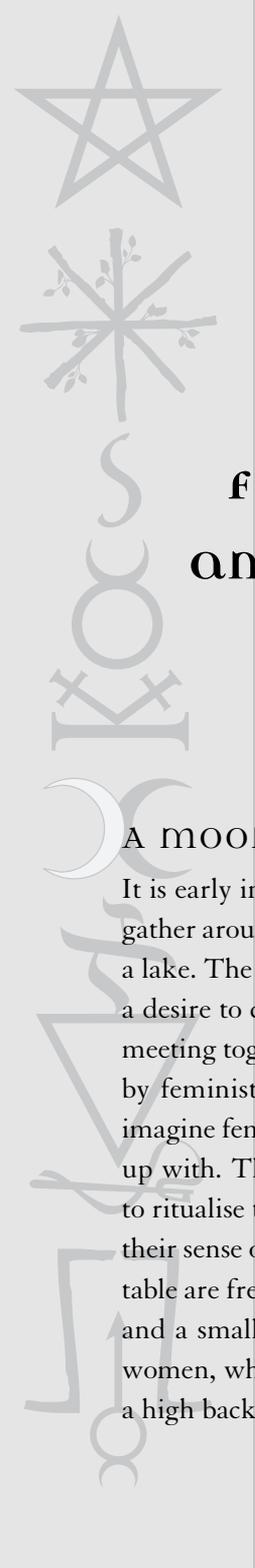
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about the author

Chel Bardell grew up in Sydney in the 1950s, in an alternative, vegetarian family, greatly influenced by her Rosicrucian mother, and surrounded by ouija boards, tarot cards and stories of past lives. Her elder brother, Jay, taught her much about alternative religions, which she went on to pursue in later years, finally embracing Traditional Witchcraft as her chosen path. Emulating the traditional village Witch of old, but in a modern context, Chel has formal qualifications in psychology, herbal medicine, natural fertility management and complementary medicine. She currently runs a busy clinical practice in a large country town. Chel, and her British husband, Jon, live on an organic farm, and belong to a group of Traditional Witches, based in Essex, United Kingdom. Chel and Jon are former editors of *Pagan Times* magazine, and former administrators of the Pagan Alliance in Australia.



5 feminist spirituality and the power of ritual

KATHLEEN MCPHILLIPS

A moon ritual

It is early in 1990 in a small town just north of Sydney. Six women gather around a low table in the lounge room of a house overlooking a lake. The women are good friends, and together have long shared a desire to celebrate their spiritual longings and needs. They began meeting together once a month on the eve of the full moon, inspired by feminist accounts of creating ritual that could appreciate and imagine feminine divinities outside of the male gods they had grown up with. This particular night in 1990 they meet for the first time to ritualise their monthly passing of blood, which is fundamental to their sense of self and experience of being in a woman's body. On the table are fresh aromatic garlands of summer flowers, several candles and a small glass vial containing menstrual blood from one of the women, who is currently bleeding. At one end of the table, there is a high backed, velvet covered chair, and on the ground before it sits

a painted enamel basin filled with water and strewn with pale pink and yellow rose petals. A large green watermelon sliced in half is placed on the table just in front of the chair. At this point, the chair is empty and the women sit on the floor around the table. Someone lights the candles and a reflective silence descends upon the group.

One by one, the women begin telling the stories of their first menstruation. While we shared a sense of the amazement of women's bodies and menstruation as an entry into womanhood, not surprisingly, these stories lack joy and celebration. Our experiences are tellingly perforated with memories of shame and guilt: of mothers exonerating young daughters to clean up after themselves; the importance of removing all traces of blood from the toilet and from clothes; of always being prepared and carrying pads around in bags, wallets, and so on; of quietly dealing with gushes of blood and hiding its movement from the outside world, especially men; of furtive backward glances—a continual surveillance of one's clothes for signs of blood; of making excuses for why you can't swim/dance/party/play—anything but the truth. For some women around the table, who are only in their early 30s, they knew nothing of bleeding until the moment it began; some women thought they were bleeding from a wound; others were lucky enough to find out from school friends; others so baffled they kept it a secret in case of punishment. Even the women who knew had a knowledge grounded in medical discourse, a clinical, monocultural, linear knowledge that explained a woman's body only as an adjunct to male sexuality (menstruation is about *reproduction* and hence only and essentially tied to male desire).

As each woman shares her story, the effects of years of silence, of loss and grief, of profound cultural displacement, are overwhelming. Everyone is crying. Eventually, a song is sung to the Goddess, reminding the women of some ancient powers that women might have once had, creating a space where a re-imagination of

body and spirit can take place. One of the women moves to the chair and places her feet in the cool, scented water. She takes up the watermelon and lays it upon her lap. She looks at the other women and speaks some words to reclaim her body, her monthly blood, and sinks her mouth deep into the flesh of the melon. The juices run from her mouth and down her hands, into the water. With this comes a feeling of release and the women all laugh and clap. Each woman repeats this, until the water has turned red with melon juice, and faces, hands and feet are sticky and wet. The women stand and hug each other and slowly move into the adjoining room, where there is a table laden with a feast of red foods.

Following this ritual there was a lot of discussion in the spirituality group, over a number of years, about how to challenge this embedded silence and disgust around menstruation and, in particular, how to appreciate menstruation as a sacred activity. Some women began deliberately taking time off work to spend the first day of bleeding in solitude—or bed, depending on how she felt! Those who couldn't manage this attempted to ritualise the days of bleeding, becoming conscious of constructing the time and experience as sacred, surrounding oneself with sacred icons, taking special care of one's body, plenty of warm baths, herbal tea, restful moments. One woman began building a menstrual hut in her back yard and we all had visions of menstruating together, removed from the business of our families and daily lives—which never eventuated. We shared ideas and suggestions, recipes for making cloth pads, herbal teas and restoratives, and stories of how other women in other ages had managed menstruation. In this, we experienced a sense of a collective sacred body as well as significant control over our understandings of being in bodies that bleed. But truthfully, it was a body nearly always contained by a larger reality over which we were in constant negotiation, particularly around how to make the taboo work for us.

Much later, in 1995, when we began thinking about our daughters and their bodies, this work took on more serious undertakings, and we began planning ways to teach the girls healthy relationships between self and body and spiritual life. At this time, the girls, who were around the ages of four to eight, were becoming increasingly aware of popular culture and therefore vulnerable to the sorts of desirable bodies being peddled in this influential sphere. We decided to set up a special group that was centred around the needs of the girls and which could actively provide positive alternative paradigms for a growing self and body. In the mid-1990s the Girls Group was formed and we moved into new territory in our understandings of ritual and spirituality.

The questions that this story raises are: why is it necessary in the first place for women to meet—often in private and sometimes in secret, and only with other women—in order to find their spiritual selves and re-learn through ritual the sacred contours of their bodies? Why has there been such a gathering of feminist energies around the forming of spirituality groups and ritual observation? What is it that women are searching for in the quest for spiritual understanding?

One answer to the question of women's deep search and engagement with new forms of spiritual and ritual practice lies in understanding the ways in which spirituality was slowly devalued in the Christian West. Religion and the church in pre-modern Europe was the pre-eminent institution, and often the church had political and economic power as well as power over the symbolic realms. Well into the eighteenth century, the church in Europe and its colonised satellites determined the nature of government as well as the daily routines of citizens. Today we can see vestiges of this kind of power in the Vatican and the Church of England. However, with modernisation came secularisation which was driven by the new logic of science, and which held that the world and its origins

could be explained by physical forces, and that there was no such thing as God or a superior divine force. This idea grew to be very influential and proposed that faith could be replaced with logic. But secularisation caused another form of social dislocation: disenchantment. While science could explain the physical nature of the world and provide facts and evidence for phenomenon that seemed unexplainable, it could not provide the deep sense of meaning and mystery which surrounded the natural world within which people lived. Communities longed for stories of origin, a sense that the world and all within it was bigger than its physical measurements, and that there might be other forms of life that were outside human observation and understanding. In short, something was missing from scientific explanation, and without it, our ability to construct meaning was affected. In recent times we can see clear evidence that this desire for mystery, enchantment and a life of the soul is becoming stronger and more emphatic. People everywhere are searching for spiritual nourishment and deeper understandings of the meaning of life.

feminism and the search for spiritual meaning

For women, however, there is a further problem which has been recognised by feminists for decades: most religious institutions, especially major churches, are patriarchal. The power to organise congregations, perform rituals and theologise has belonged to men for centuries. It wasn't until the cultural revolution in the 1960s that women began to challenge these institutions *en masse*. The passionate force and influence of second wave feminism touched every corner of women's lives and experience. When Simone de Beauvoir stated in the 1950s that women were socialised into their oppression and that oppression was not a natural state, she gave voice and meaning

to the lives of millions of women the world over. It was finally clear that if women were oppressed, they could also become free.

Religion, and, in particular, the major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), came under feminist scrutiny as women explored the myriad ways in which these institutions failed to provide symbolic and real avenues of active participation and in which the symbolic economies of these religions seemed only to offer male gods and patriarchal stories. Such offerings were reflected in language, song, liturgy and community structures. All too often men were in positions of authority—at the altar, in theological colleges and on committees, and women were in positions of subordination—serving tea, arranging flowers, in the choir and washing vestments. Feminist thinking challenged these gender structures to their very core and, as a result, has instigated major changes in church cultures. Today, feminist theology is a well established and generally respected discipline; women can become priests in some religious traditions; and the governance structures of some churches have been severely shaken. The major religions, however, are still perceived as fundamentally patriarchal, making room for some change but, in many ways, denying women full active participation.

Many women have left the church, while others have stayed to fight for change. My own experience is probably typical: although a committed Catholic, I got to a point where I couldn't bear the sexist language of the liturgy and the lack of real participation for women. In the late 1980s I moved sideways and began to search for more meaningful expressions of spirit and community. It was at this time that I began to read widely in the area of feminist spirituality and ritual. I came across several books where women were talking about feminist ritual, feminist Witchcraft (Wicca) and new forms of spirituality. I was hooked and began talking to other women about what we could do to explore these new ideas. In the early 1990s, after a fair bit of searching and experimentation, nine of us formed a

feminist spirituality group in our local area and closed the group to new members so we could concentrate on exploring in depth the place of ritual in our lives. We drew deeply from the traditions of Wicca, and in particular the work of Zsuzsanna Budapest, Starhawk, Carol Christ and other feminist Witches. I was deeply influenced by the literature that insisted that the current age represented a return of the Goddess or female divinity, and I read Merlin Stone's book, *When God was a Woman*, and realised that matriarchal, Goddess-based cultures had been common between 25 000–5000 BCE. This gave me a deep sense of connection not only to the past but to possibilities for the future of a patriarchal-free society. I began reading the feminist archaeologists such as Maria Gimbutas who had researched these ancient communities, and I read the emerging literature on the Witch hunts of the Middle Ages. I was genuinely shocked to discover the violence against women during this period, and the ways in which women's healing and spiritual powers had been systematically destroyed—mostly by the Catholic Church. But it meant as much to me that, at one time in human culture, women had been imagined as holy and divine.

In the group, we practised the Wiccan traditions around the solar and lunar calendars—equinoxes, solstices and full moon rituals—and we tried to find time and space in our busy lives for our spiritual work. We felt enormously free to organise rituals as we felt fit. For example, we melded the summer solstice celebration with a Christmas nativity play, and to this ritual we invited our broader community of friends. In the early days of the group, many of the full moon rituals focused on our bodies as some of us were birthing babies and breastfeeding. This was a major incentive to appreciate our bodies and what they could do, in very different ways to what we had been taught by the wider culture. We ritualised life changes and one of us had a Croning Ritual when she turned 55. In participating in and creating these rituals, I experienced a deep

sense of spiritual freedom and empowerment, and knew for sure that women's oppression in other religions was based on fear and power.

The powers of ritual

Ritual was the centre of our group practice and for good reason: it was in the moment of enactment that we came so close to experiencing the Divine within and between us. It bound us together and provided a place from which to understand an appropriate ethics for living in the world. We discovered that ritual has multi-functional arms. Every known human culture has organised its cosmological understandings of the world, its origins and the place of humans around a system of beliefs and religious symbols. A central part of this cultural practice is ritual.

Rituals perform the important function of 'play back', where the centrally held beliefs and values of a culture are systematically replayed—over time, in performance mode—to each member of the culture, providing a structure of meaning and tools for ongoing meaning making. Rituals provide the means by which collective and individual identity is both constructed and viewable, and through which a culture's understanding of the big-picture questions are answerable (or at least ask-able): Where do we come from? Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? In traditional cultures, the connections between spirit and earth, between self and divinity, are clearly defined and interwoven into a cosmological understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things. Ritual, especially in performance, re-states again and again the sacredness of this ongoing interconnectedness and its centrality to the health of the community. Rituals are also the place where the responsibilities of groups and individuals are stated and learned, and where the history of the group can be passed on. A central part of this interconnect-

edness is an understanding of the differences between men and women, which provides a culture with ways to organise not only work and kinship but also religious symbology. In traditional cultures, cosmology includes myths and stories regarding the role of men and women and the appropriate relationships between them. Because our group's experience of gender had been so damaged, much of our ritual life was concerned with re-writing the patriarchal codes into new stories and meanings that connected men and women together in healthy ways. The upshot of this was that our experiments with ritual spilled over into our daily lives and our relationships with our partners and children and our broader community. Ritual was the means by which we re-oriented our spiritual and physical identities. For example, rituals around our bodies brought to our attention the need to care for ourselves and for each other in ways that our mothers had not been able to do. We cooked for each other when we were sick or giving birth; we wanted to eat healthy food, and exercise our bodies; and we began growing our own vegetables and herbs. We also read widely, not only in the areas of feminist spirituality but also New Age and self-help, recognising that emotional health was just as important as physical and spiritual health. We brought these insights into every facet of our lives.

The group also used the traditional Wiccan technologies of magick, including tarot readings, spells and casting circles, where appropriate. We incorporated new and old stories into the routines of rituals, and we were particularly keen to turn the Wheel of the Year around so that it reflected life in the southern hemisphere. We celebrated the many images of women Goddesses and divinities that were being produced by feminist artists, revelling in the great plurality and diversity that was available. We were deeply affected by the ideas of spiritual feminists, such as Grace Jantzen, a philosopher of religion at Manchester University in England. In her

book *Becoming Divine*, she suggests new ways to think about the connections between spirituality and gender. She does this by proposing new metaphors of the sacred: new ways to imagine the relationship between divinity and humanity.

Lives that flourish

Jantzen argues that because religion has been so fundamental to the conceptual systems of the West, it is of utmost importance to disrupt its patriarchal biases. The nature of this disruption is the work of feminist imagination, where a new idea of God provides ways for women to imagine the female form as sacred. Although women are often religious, the religions of the West, with their male gods, offer no way for women to achieve identity in relation to a divine horizon. Jantzen agrees with another feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, who suggests that women need a God ‘who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity’. In order for this process to become a reality, women must first find ways to disrupt the male image as the *dominant* image, and then provide form to a feminine divine. Irigaray challenges women to see differently—‘This god, are we capable of imagining it as a woman? Can we dimly see it as the perfection of our subjectivity?’ What is being proposed here—that women must search for and achieve a specific life-affirming identity according to ‘self potentiality’—is identified by Jantzen as the power and ability to *flourish*.

The notion of flourishing has ancient biblical roots, but has been overlooked in Christian theologies for another metaphor: that of salvation. Jantzen argues that salvation is not a productive or biophillic metaphor for women: it implies a need to be saved or rescued by someone, which produces a sense of passivity and reinforces connections with death and sin rather than life and birth. Theologies of salvation have focused primarily on dealing with the

sins of pride and ego; so where women require self worth and love, their attention is focused on how bad they are, rather than on how good they could be. Considering the idea of flourishing, many images come to mind: beautiful gardens, scented blooms, fields of wild flowers, vibrant colours of the bush, burgeoning fruit trees. To flourish is to be vital and vibrant, and to dwell with a deep sense of wellbeing: it signals abundance and health, life and joy. Jantzen says, 'A movement or a person in full flourish is a movement or person that is vibrant and creative, blossoming and developing and coming to fruition.' When we flourish we are not reliant on another to rescue us, but exist within the web of life, giving and receiving and open to life. As a metaphor, flourishing can provide us with a way to re-think and re-imagine ourselves and our communities, by re-orienting ourselves to values that honour life, the earth and spirituality. These values can then be taken up in rituals, and embedded as statements of belief and deeply held ethics.

Flourishing is a perfect way to describe the essence of our small feminist spirituality group. Not only have images and notions of a feminine Divine—often imagined in the form of Goddess—allowed our spirits and souls to flourish, many of our rituals take place in our gardens, or in the bush close by. Flowers and fruit are always present in our rituals, and often constitute our gifts to each other. We have sat in each other's gardens on so many occasions and for every reason, and in every kind of weather. We visit each other in spring and summer just to view the changing blossoms, smell the flowers and see the trees in fruit. We eat the bountiful produce that our gardens make and which our labour helps to produce. The garden is often the first place that we are drawn to when we visit each other. At summer solstice we make garlands of flowers for our hair and bury the richest, sweetest fruits in the earth as offering to the Goddess. We dance on the grass and the children hide in the trees. At winter solstice we light candles outside and build a fire to

remind us of the return of the sun's light. In spring at the equinox, we gather on the beach and watch the sun come up, and in autumn we go to the bush and watch the sun go down. Our rituals are built around gardens and the bush, and around our deep desire to flourish as human beings. In our gardens we have no problem imagining the forms of sacredness, and connecting this to our everyday lives. The interconnectedness of the web of life is expressed in our gardens: we work to look after the plants, provide water and nourishment, prune when ready and pick fruit when ripe. Many of us buried the placentas of our children in our gardens, and planted trees upon the rich soil. Two years ago when one of us died from breast cancer, we painted her coffin in the midst of an autumn garden, and later scattered her ashes in her bush retreat where we had met on several occasions for rituals, including the initiation ritual for our young girls. Death was also a moment to flourish, rather than only an end of a life: it was a moment where our community gathered and where we were able to use our spiritual knowledge in appreciating the passage of life we were witnessing, and we created many small rituals to move through this momentous happening. Only months before we had all gathered to celebrate the first menstruation of the girls—our daughters and friends—and it is this ritual I recount now in order to express both the vitality and empowerment of feminist ritual, and as a powerful moment in reclaiming what had been lost to us as women: the sacred power and possibilities of menstruation.

A first moon ritual

The Girls Group first met in the spring of 1996, when we went bush for two days in a secluded spot in the Upper Hunter Valley. We spent the time planning an initiation ritual that was based around the theme of moving from babyhood to girlhood. There were four girls aged between seven and nine and, as well as their mothers, there

were two other women who were keen to be allies for the girls. Each year since, we have gathered for the 'girls' weekend' as well as continuing our own ritual work and gathering together with our wider community for solstice, equinox and Christmas ritual celebrations.

During the 'girls' weekends', a number of the women, including myself, experienced a strong sense of a space outside of patriarchy, where we were not constantly having to organise our bodies and minds around busy work schedules and households; where we could sing our Goddess songs without looking over our shoulders; and where we could set up rituals without needing to privatise them in certain rooms in our houses, as the locations we chose were invariably houses or camping sites owned by friends or family. The ritual celebrating babyhood to girlhood was very special and as new girls have joined the group, they also undertake this particular 'initiation' ritual. The sacred objects associated with the ritual, which include a name stick, ribbons and length of material, are brought along each year and displayed where all can see them. Last year, in spring, two more girls joined the group and so we experienced the initiation ritual once again, adding to a deepening sense of group history and ritual continuity.

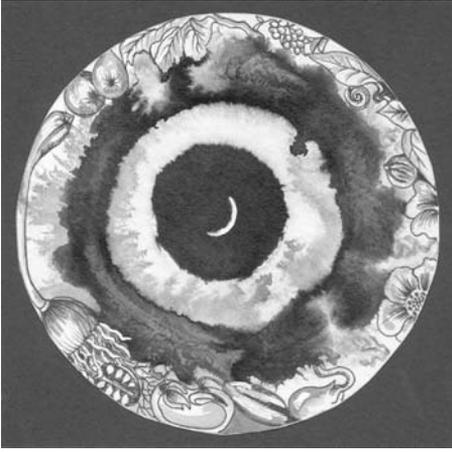
The first ritual celebrating menarche was one that we women were eagerly anticipating and about which we had discussed with each other and the girls to some extent. Public rituals around menstruation do not exist, and the private secular rituals that do exist are often couched in highly negative terms—which we knew well from our own experience—and nearly always involve strong socialisation around how to conceal the menstruating body.

The inaugural First Moon ritual occurred after the Girls Group had met for five consecutive years. This particular ritual generated a lot of interest and energy, not only among the women and girls but also in our wider community and friends, and especially the

family of the young menstruant, Jen. Her father, who was not present at the ritual, did most of the cooking for the party afterwards, and various friends had already given her presents acknowledging her new bodily state. It also involved the participants in a form of narrative censure, in the sense that we had to be careful who we talked to about the ritual and what we said about it (this was also the case for the Girls Group in general, as many people would no doubt think it was 'weird').

The ritual was held in a suburban house on a hot day in early December 2000. After everyone had arrived, the five girls present were sent into the backyard to play and do craft work. The women, who on this occasion included the spirituality group as well as a small band of special women friends, taped to the wall poems and bites of text that were especially chosen, and which Jen would read when she re-entered the house. The women retreated to the main bedroom and the ritual began with the traditional Wiccan practice of casting the sacred circle, calling the four elements and focusing collective attention on the feminine Divine. The bedroom had been lavishly decorated and included many of the items that the group had come to value, including Goddess icons, flowers, crystals, incense sticks, and so on.

After the preliminary rites were complete, a bell was rung and Jen left the other girls in the backyard and entered the house. She spent time reading the texts that we had stuck on the walls in the living room—one of which was a poem written for her by her mother—before proceeding to the bedroom where the women waited in meditative silence—and also anticipation. She was certainly nervous when she pushed open the door and peered into the quiet but full-to-bursting room. It was a tremendous moment for some of us as we recognised that this was the first time that one of our daughters was actually witnessing first hand the ritual space which we have re-created over the years. There were several parts to the



moon art by elena
morris-britten.

ritual that I won't detail here but which included a special reading of the Motherpeace Tarot cards, gifts and blessings thoughtfully chosen and given to the young woman, the singing of songs, a special story, and the sharing of stories about bleeding. These stories were not the medicalised narrative, but our own accounts of bleeding; what it felt like, what we did, how we managed, and what we hoped for this young woman. The blessings she received contained mixed messages regarding her transformation into a woman; her reproductive capacity (you can have a baby now); her initiation into the ritual group and a new level of spiritual awareness; as well as blessings for a good and flourishing life. One of us read an ancient story of a Goddess whose monthly flow created the rivers and oceans and the landscape around her, and whose body formed the mountains and valleys, providing us with rich images from which to connect our own monthly flow with sacred earth imagery—a powerful antidote to medicalised versions of menstruation as 'failed reproduction'. When I think about this, it strikes me that the conflation of menstruation with spiritual initiation is a very powerful

opportunity for a young woman personally as well as a moment for the handing on of our group traditions and knowledge. The young woman not only remained focused and attentive but was clearly loving every minute of it.

The ritual went for well over an hour and reluctantly ended with the younger girls in the backyard losing patience, banging on the doors, wanting to know what had gone on and when the party would begin. Like other initiation rituals, the young girls were met with silence on the details as well as a promise that their turn would come. There has since been two other First Moon rituals for the girls, each one with different inflections and ingredients, but based on the same ideas and values. The girls themselves, together with their mothers, have had responsibility in planning the ritual.

The Moon ritual aimed to provide a means by which women's bodies could be encountered as holy and sacred. The ritual stood explicitly against shame, but not necessarily invisibility, attempting to utilise the power of the taboo as a sacred force of female sexual energy. While it certainly doesn't render the forces of shame and disgust impotent, it does suggest other ways to imagine the relationship between body and self.

Locating the ritual in a home meant that nearly all of the ritual objects were taken from the everyday world. Unlike some accounts of sacred ritual objects as totally *other* to the objects of the everyday, the women move with their sacred objects between ritual and ordinary space. Most times, the everyday space becomes the ritual space (the lounge room, the bedroom, the bush). The source of the everyday, the ordinary and the domestic, as sites of women's ritual life reflects not only where women are socially located but positions them against the dominant site of public (masculinised) religion. Finally, the ritual can be read as a powerful moment in a young girl's growing up, where her 'new' body is deeply affirmed as a source of wonderment and mystery. For Jen, she clearly has special relation-

ships not only with the women in this group but also with the other girls. Where she feels she has to hide her menstruation from her school friends ('Oh we don't really talk about that stuff, the topic just never comes up'), she is happy to discuss it with the other girls in the group, and has eagerly participated in the other girls' menstruation rituals.

The powers of feminist ritual

I am proposing here that feminist ritual is not just a polite place that exists alongside our busy everyday lives. There is a power here, that women have access to and that can radically transform lives. Accessing this power is the key challenge that we face in realising spiritual identities of integrity and authenticity. Women's flesh and blood have been subject to a deep colonising and any work that contributes to freeing women from exploitation changes the core of our society. An essential part of this change—maybe *the* essential task—is re-imagining ourselves as wholly and directly connected to a Divine presence which is in the (multiple) image of 'woman'. Feminist spirituality and its attendant rituals are not 'optional extras' on the lifestyle menu: they are necessary and fundamental to the task of women's ongoing liberation. But we should also recognise that Goddess or feminist spiritualities are not an end in themselves, but steps on the road towards spiritual enlightenment and liberation. What is important is to restrain any desire towards creating orthodoxic texts and/or practices, which might close off spiritual and feminist possibilities, and strive to remain open to the need for change and experimentation.

Religion, in its role of imagining and maintaining the deep connections between humanity and the cosmos, and healthy relationships as the basis of this connection, is a core element in 21st century cultures. Australian feminist spiritualities make an important,

essential contribution to this ethical and cultural work, re-imagining connections between body and soul, man and woman, people and earth, earth and sky, in localised ritual-based groups. As I suggested above, one of the central elements of this work has been the re-imagination of our bodies as embodying the Divine and the sacred. This is an ongoing struggle that engages us in generating alternative understandings of embodiment and selfhood. It is here that I situate feminist menstrual rites, which pull into preparation and practice the feminist metaphorical and symbolic re-workings of blood and body.

In the broader picture of women's struggles against fragmentation and oppression, and the search for a holistic sense of Self and body, for autonomy and dignity, for the life of the spirit, it might be that the efforts of feminists engaged in the processes of exploring sustaining and meaningful spiritualities will engender new forms of the life and body of the soul. Whatever shape these forms take, there is no doubt that they call us to a flourishing, vital living.

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practising the witch's craft

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about the author

Kathleen McPhillips has been practising feminist Wicca for more than fifteen years. She is a member of a feminist spirituality group and has an ongoing interest in all things feminist and Divine.

6

goddess/witch/womon

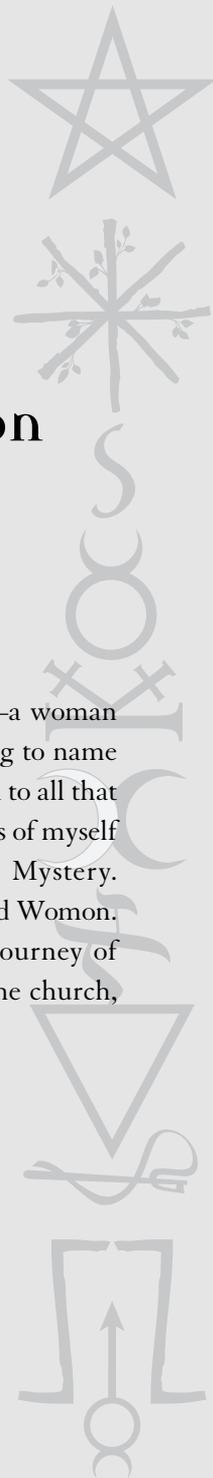
THEA GAIA

My story is about discovering myself as a woman—a woman in the setting of the Universe—a woman needing to name my own experience—a woman with a sense of connection to all that is and was and ever will be—a woman becoming conscious of myself as Earth and Air, as Fire and Water, as Universe, as Mystery. My story is about discovering myself as Goddess, Witch and Womon.

In 1981, when I was entering a new phase in my journey of discovery, reflecting upon my previous involvement in the church, I wrote these words:

*Today
I feel so unrestful
so deep
and so fretful.*

*I came to God
to offer Him my world
and . . . in the offering . . .*



practising the witch's craft

*I found that it was not MY world at all
but
a world I had been given—
a world I had accepted—
the world of the Father . . . the Son . . .
and the Brother . . .
. . . and only 'my' world
as the world of the Other!*

*Today
I feel so unrestful
so deep
and so fretful.*

*I came to 'God'
to offer 'Him' 'my' world
and
it
crushed
in
upon
me . . .
. . . slowly . . . tightly.*

*I feel it now—
. . . dark . . . stifling.*

*The 'One' to whom I spoke did not understand.
The 'One' for whom I reached faded away before me.*

*I waited.
I waited for release.
I waited for an affirming presence . . .
and still I'm waiting.*

*Today
I feel so unrestful
so deep
so fretful.
(Don't we?)*

The 'world I had been given' included the church. I was born in a small country town in Queensland and before many days had passed I was baptised. Thereby I was formally connected to the community of 'God' the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As a teenager I then took what seemed to be the next natural step. I 'joined the church', being received into full membership by the Congregational Church that had nurtured me and given me a social setting from the time of my baptism.

The church that I knew in those days was a community which gave me wide horizons and in which I always felt something more was calling me. This sense of call took me through teacher training, teaching deaf children, the presidency of the Queensland Congregational Youth Fellowship and theological training at the Queensland Congregational Theological Hall. My training was completed; churches affirmed my sense of call; and in 1959 I was ordained as the first woman minister in Queensland. Twenty long years later I resigned from the ministry (then in the newly formed Uniting Church in Australia) and from church membership altogether.

*What happened along the way . . .
to bring me to the state of 'unrestfulness'
mentioned in the poem above?*

During my twenty years of ministry in Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide, I learnt much. I learnt about the power of belonging to a community, the value of having a story on which to build one's life, the reality of human connectedness to particular times and places, and the

possibilities of life that are in every place and situation. At the same time I discovered within myself an enormous capacity for creativity and I experienced deep satisfaction in having a big task and a big picture in which to fit that task. Above all, however, the great gift of the church to me was *people*: people with needs and gifts and dreams, all trying in their own way to give meaning to life.

Those people whom I especially remember now were church members who embodied what was understood to be distinctive about Congregationalism. They lived out what it meant to belong to 'a people' rather than to a collective or a network or even a bonded community. As a people we 'covenanted' together, making a sacred contract to be the church, committing ourselves to honour one another across all our differences, insisting on the freedom of the Spirit and, in the process of decision making, respecting different positions taken. As a people covenanted together with me, my congregation in Perth shared with me the presidency of the Congregational Union of Western Australia. 'Officially' I was the elected president for a year but 'actually', everywhere I went as president, members of the congregation came with me, until all members had participated in the visits we made to all the other Congregational churches in that region. The One and the All meshed together. (Not until years later did I associate 'covenant' with 'coven'.)

Like all life-changing decisions, my decision to leave the church was multifaceted, or multi-layered, and one of the two layers I am most aware of now was my loss of a covenanted people. Nothing adequately replaced the covenanted relationship for me on my journey from Congregational Churches through United Churches to the Uniting Church in Australia. As I struggled to understand the different ethos of a United Church and of a church in the centre of a city, I lost my sense of belonging, becoming more aware of the distance between me and others than of our connections.

At the same time I was becoming more and more conscious of

myself as a woman, and the energy of this ‘layer’ of experience gradually permeated every other layer. I not only lost my sense of belonging, I lost the thought of any possibility of belonging! For years I had ministered *as a woman*—often reminded of that by surprise or questions, and often alone, as at ministers’ ‘fraternals’(!) and interchurch gatherings. As a woman I had also been actively involved in a myriad of women’s activities, bringing women and ministry closer together. On the whole, however, this simply meant being as creative as possible within a set framework, where the absence of women in the ministry was generally accepted. My new woman-consciousness took me far beyond the awareness I already had and encouraged me to look elsewhere for a more creative way to live, both with myself and others.

In the midst of struggles about ‘belonging’, I was living in Adelaide and was often in the presence of women and men informed and thoughtful about non-sexist concepts. I found myself in new situations where attention was being given to the sexist connotations of jokes, illustrations used, and language generally. I also experienced myself in a new way. On one occasion, when three of us in the leadership team met to consider problems raised for some worshippers by the exclusive male language of hymns, I felt myself suddenly surrounded by women from across the ages. They filled the small church vestry where we were meeting and supported me, as the only woman present, when copyright issues seemed to become more important than the invisibility of women. I connected with my womanline and the history of women in a new way on that day.

The loss of a sense of belonging to a people and the finding of myself as a woman were both pulsating layers of my being during my last days in the church. The first was uppermost, I think, when I wrote my letter of resignation. The second was my great energiser when I left six months later. The great gift of those last six months was Mary Daly’s book *Beyond God the Father* and I can still feel the

remarkable energy that was raised in two groups formed to study it. My decision to resign was not only affirmed, it was underwritten; and my final statement to my local church Parish Council included the following words:

I cannot believe now that a patriarchal religion and a patriarchal system can adequately deal with all human needs, and simply to accommodate women into that religion and system is not possible if our gifts, our insights and our be-ing are to be enabled and if we are to make our unique contributions to human history.

What about Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit? What about the story I had inherited through the community of the church? Initially, as I felt my sense of belonging leaving me, the story seemed not to be an issue. As I was feeling the loss of a people, I did not feel I was being held by the story of that people. It had given me a way to relate to the Universe, to myself and to others but, in my sense of loss, it seemed almost incidental. I needed to move and it seemed that life would unfold, 'whatever'.

It was my second layer of experience, that of my growing woman-consciousness, that awakened me to the significance of the preponderance of male imagery. The message of care and connection that had formed the basis of my life began to crumble as I listened to other women's questions and as I began to ask deeper questions about what was happening to me.

As I felt my creativity slipping away within the churchly setting and as I felt the excitement of looking beyond God the Father, my Holy Womanspirit enabled me to see that I had been living in the world of the Father, the Son and the Brother with myself as the Other and that I needed to walk free to be wholly woman.

enter: The goddess

Ready to discover myself as a woman ‘under my own auspices’, I walked into a vast open space beyond the church, where nothing seemed fixed and where my accountability was at a minimum—except to myself. I was alive with a new energy and a new sense of wonder and I kept meeting similar energy and wonder in other women making changes and seeking yet more. I put pen to paper again and I wrote:

*As I feel my sparks astirring
At my central fire place
I find others to alight me
For ‘wherever’ is their space.
There are those that touch me closely
There are those that glow afar
There are those that stir me fiercely
With the passions that we are.
In the patriarchal darkness
I was really tinder dry
But alight with sparkling sisters
Flames within me leap up high.*

Groups that helped to sustain my energy were available to me right from the beginning of this new time. One simply known as ‘The 1980 Group’ met weekly throughout that year. It was a follow-up of the ‘Beyond God the Father’ groups of 1979, involving both women and men and acting as a great catalyst for change. In it, I questioned and dreamed, laughed and cried, read books and took part in long discussions, argued and wondered, experimented with different names, listened and planned, played and sang, and sometimes sat in silence. As well as letting our imaginations run wild, we created a feminist spirituality course for ourselves, without

realising it. Some of our dreams have been actualised while others still float freely. The idea of 'A Wild Life Sanctuary—for Women' is still 'out there' somewhere, free of life-depleting rules and conventions set by 'masters' and 'patriarchs'; and the possibility of naming myself 'B. Wilder' is still there with it! There was such a high/deep energy within us in this time of transition and wonder, when we were aware that we were both strong and vulnerable. During the next year one of the dreams materialised when some women from this group, together with others, began 'weekends for women'. These were weekends for focusing on spirituality and issues of concern for those present, and they still continue more than twenty years later.

I gifted myself with a year-long 'orgy of study' and then, in 1982, I moved into a cottage by the sea, south of Adelaide. Always keeping the door wide open so that I could see the sea, I set to work on a project for a study unit on symbolism. Enter: not only a constant vision of land and sea and sky but also the Great Goddess as She is so often remembered. As I prepared a set of slides and script on 'Deity Symbolised as Female', image after image of ancient sacred figures appeared before me. They came through books and journals from many different sections of the library: art, history, archaeology, religion, spirituality, poetry, mythology, anthropology, women's studies. As I read about the connections between the ancient images and every aspect of the Universe, I looked through my open door and saw the land and the sea and the sky as the Great Goddess. The door was open for Her! When I went out of doors, I began to see the power of She/me everywhere and I was constantly learning about myself and my environment. As I meditated on the beach, I became both my woman-self sitting on the sand and the waves breaking on the sand: connected expressions of the Goddess energy of creation.

At my desk I discovered that sacred female images and stories had occupied a prominent place in many cultures across the earth

for thousands of years. I sat there and asked again and again: 'Why weren't we told?' 'Why weren't we told?' The stories then became part of a new story for me—a story very different from the story I had left behind me—a story covering 40 000 years, with the female images and symbols central, with the earth and the seasons honoured, with the dark significant in a lunar calendar, with a mythic consciousness evident rather than a dogmatic, with 'ten thousand' faces symbolising the one Mystery of creation, and with ritual places still speaking across the ages. In the midst of this new story, there was 'me', my woman body, my experience, my ten thousand faces, my place on earth, and a different attitude to 'godness'. I opened to the understanding 'You are/I am the Goddess' and to the whole earth as my sacred space.

My energy remained high and focused and 'goddess' and 'woman' were woven together within me in many different ways during the following years. One of my deepest longings was to create my own life; to 'craft' my own being, as much as that was humanly and womanly possible; to move away from developing unconsciously as a product of my family, my educators, my community, my church culture and my Western society. Tarot cards came into my life and journeyed with me. Then, in 1987, a friend and I co-created a set of posters and cards on 'Ancient Images of Women' which were also ever-present reminders that I was on a Goddess/Woman journey.

In my study, books, too, became my friends in a new way. These were books mostly written by women, seeking a history and meaning for themselves, learning from archaeological finds, uncovering unacknowledged books and records telling women's stories, and reclaiming rituals affirming the rhythms of the earth and women's bodies. 'Research' was transformed for me and instead of pouring over books to sustain myself in a given tradition, I read for no other purpose than to connect myself to my own being. At the same time my reading enabled me to make new connections with others. When

I went to the United States in 1984, it was to meet some of the writers whose books I had read. When I left there six months later, the world community I had lost when leaving the church had been replaced in a way I had thought not possible.

All the time I was discovering myself—and sharing with women doing likewise. When my friend and I decided to display our Goddess posters and cards at the Adelaide Show (to help raise the consciousness of the world!) we did not know what to expect but we had some remarkable experiences. A sturdily-built 70-year-old woman, the only female in a large family and always teased about her 'sturdiness' and lack of a beautiful body, looked hard and long at the rounded body of the figurine known as the Venus of Willendorf. Knowing nothing about ancient mythologies, she asked us questions and then left. Later she returned to buy a card of that image, saying: 'Do you know what I am going to do when I get home? I am going to take off all my clothes and stand in front of the mirror and say "You are beautiful".' For 70 years she had lived as a body that had been deemed unbeautiful, and then an image estimated as being more than 30 000 years old changed her life and her relationship with herself! What does that say about the deprivation we all have suffered through the absence of sacred female images? And what more did we need to encourage us to continue on our Goddess path? When I journeyed throughout Australia and New Zealand and revisited America with the posters and cards, I felt that I was not only affirming the power of images but also making a special contribution to my world community.

On my home ground, I kept meeting with others and I learnt in a new way the power of the *circle*. Although I had been creatively involved in contemporary worship services, I had never thought through thoroughly the dynamics of the circle. Now, I met in circles where understandings were developing about the Wheel of the Year, where we visualised all power being available to us from all

directions, and where central symbols of the power of She, of Goddess, of Spirit, both held and stirred our energy. There I began to integrate more clearly in my thinking and my be-ing the All that is One and the cyclical nature of all life, including mine.

The All that is One came alive for me in another way too, with the help of female symbolism. With the Goddess understanding of a woman as 'one-in-herself', I embraced my aloneness as 'all-one-ness' (as indicated in its Middle English form) and I began to think about community as connected aloneness/connected all-one-ness. In keeping with this, the Womanspirit network in South Australia used the word 'connective', because it was more affirming of each woman's unique contributions than the word 'collective'. So it was with an ever-developing sense of individual wholeness that women gathered in circles for rituals and celebrations, for discussions and storytelling, for 'passionate thinking' and dreaming, and, sometimes, for study, workshops or courses. The bringing together of such circles was my chosen 'work' between 1983 and 1993, and I saw a new creativity flourish amongst us as our experiences were validated and a history was reclaimed.

My sense of being in a spacious place continued as I explored Goddess wisdom and ways. In this spacious place I experienced an urgency within me to keep moving both geographically and creatively. At the same time, I felt an imperative to create particular gathering-places in the world to help make visible what was happening for women. My first such project with another Goddess friend was a Womanspirit space in a Women's Wellbeing Place/Health Centre, from which we later moved to establish 'Womandala' as a Women's Spirituality and Study Centre (1985–89). Then, in 1989, having already personally moved several times in Adelaide, I moved to Canberra, where I joined two other women to create 'Gaia Womanspace' (1990–92).

This description of activities and learning could go on and on. What I have presented is simply an illustration of my own energy, and of the way I and other women felt empowered to do 'our own thing' spiritually and organisationally by opening ourselves to sacred female symbolism. Female-affirming images and myths of ancient origin opened our lives in a new way to the mystery of being in a particular form and drew us together, while honouring each woman as free and autonomous. We discovered a new base for ourselves—and really that base was *ourselves* while being *more than ourselves*, which we could name as the Goddess within us *and* as the Goddess within whom we were embodied. The goddess/Goddess pathway was what worked for us in the honouring of all life and the connectedness of all life forms, in developing and maintaining a caring creative relationship with the earth, in living creatively with other human beings, and in reclaiming embodiment and the female as sacred in a society where these have been misrepresented, forgotten or invisibilised. While choosing to do almost all of my Goddess spiritual work with women, I have worked with the knowing that both men and women may develop a Goddess consciousness and that there is no 'one' way for a Goddess relationship. In the spaciousness of our lives, the Goddess may be a Divine person to be worshipped or invoked in prayer and ritual, or She may be nature or the energy within nature to be honoured and connected with, or the Mystery illuminated by metaphors and symbols and myths, or one's deep Self or Self of timeless significance.

In my spiritual journeying with 'goddessing' women, I became part of a community/network/connective without a system of dogma and regulations but 'all one' in a circle. We could turn to the next woman in the circle and hear her say 'You are the Goddess' and then say (or learn to say) those words to her.

A witch: ever becoming

While it was relatively easy to respond to the words ‘You are the Goddess’ in a ritual circle, it was difficult to translate ‘I am the Goddess’ to other people who constantly asked me what I was doing ‘now that’ I had left the church. It was just as difficult for me to name what I was doing in a way that was satisfactory for myself. Before long, however, I changed my own name and a whole new theology was evident to anyone who wished to see it. I legally became thea Rainbow: ‘thea’ meaning ‘Goddess’ replacing ‘Dorothy’ meaning ‘gift of God’, and ‘Rainbow’ linking me to the natural world in a new and ever-deepening way.

What about my professional life? The two of us setting up ‘Womandala’ struggled to name ourselves as workers and finally settled for ‘Womanspirit Weavers’. Later, I usually referred to myself as a Women’s Cultural Worker, while sometimes being both serious and joyous in naming my vocation as ‘Human Being’ or ‘Wholly Woman’. The great challenge for me was to move away from hierarchies and labelling and the institutionalising of spiritual journeying.

In my own journeying, the history of women became as important to me as trying to work out my relationship to the Universe. Two groups I especially connected with were the Beguines and the women remembered as Witches. The creative free-spirited Beguines, once described as being an Order that was not an Order, were finally condemned by the church in fourteenth/fifteenth century Europe. The Witches, the subjects of a powerful and extensive persecution in Europe and the British Isles, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, seem to me to have been mostly what I call ‘grassroots’ women, acting out their wisdom and celebrating their connection to the earth as healers, midwives and carers.

practising the witch's craft

As my personal connections were very much with women leaving behind the teachings of a patriarchal society and the organised religions they had known, I considered my own historical context as being the feminist spirituality or Womanspirit movement, and I did not feel the necessity to look beyond these connections for active involvement with others. While I knew of Wicca/Witchcraft networks and came to realise that my Goddess-centred lifestyle would find much affirmation there, I felt that I already had the focus and the freedom I needed. I had a close circle or coven with whom to develop understandings and a loose rippling circle of women with whom to extend my learning. In this setting I came to know my sacred relationship with the earth, the challenges of changing consciousness and shaping energy, the power of celebrating every aspect of life, the sacredness of laughter and play, and the continuing relevance of ancient wisdom.

Gradually, I opened to the knowing that the wise women of the past were also there journeying with me and in me. In my private mystic musings, I was often Beguine. More overtly I was Witch: in my independence and care, in my love of the mystery and the life-giving power of the dark, in my naming 'between the worlds' as my home, in my awareness of energy changes associated with the earth, the moon and the sun, in my ever-responsive relationship with tarot, in my protective energy work, and in the frequent synchronous events in my life. More and more I was designated 'Witch' by myself and others, and I have responded to this description of myself by using every opportunity to pass on my understandings of history, culture and belief systems. I have accepted the political task of revising learning, renewing words and retelling stories, recognising that all of us have to deal with the history within us as well as our own participation in history-making.

As thea Rainbow, Goddess Woman and Witch, I stepped away from active group work in 1993 for personal and relationship reasons

and in 1994 I knew that I had to change my name again, this time to thea Gaia. Gaia, having come to me via Greek mythology as the Earth and the ancient image of female energy giving birth to life, seemed to be telling me that it was time to bring my rainbow to earth!

Life in the business world (1993–95) and in suburbia (1996–98) well and truly earthed me. I was politicised again as to the economic focus and the power of hierarchies in our society, and I was earthed with deep questions about how to develop a creative caring community. Although I spoke with great passion and certainty about my Goddess path at the Australian Women's Spirituality Conference in 1994, I left a second conference in 1997 with more questions than possibilities, and with a great longing for a written comprehensive Goddess philosophy.

My longing was fulfilled almost immediately by the publication of Carol Christ's book, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, in 1997. Categorised as the first systematic theology (the study of the divine female), its subtitle was 'Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality'. I had the book I wanted without having to write it myself! My vision of everyday possibilities was also renewed by a 'Circle of the Sun' series of rituals, by the formation of a new community/network which we named Sisters of Gaia, and by quarterly workshops, held in eastern Victoria, about living Goddess understandings in the contemporary world. One transforming shared experience, leaving with me a transforming memory, was celebrating Halloween in the dark out-of-doors between guardian trees, opening to the Mystery activating the elements, seemingly gliding above the ground, then walking into the indoor ritual space through countless veils to meet myself as Goddess.

These renewal experiences somehow 'naturalised' the Goddess and the Witch within me and prepared me for a new cycle in my life. They were peak experiences leaving me with Goddess and

Witch as my inner focus in a new way. Through this focus I see myself acting unselfconsciously as Goddess and Witch, knowing that it is my world, and having a sense of place in all time. Living as female in a new millennium, without any role except that which I give myself, may require hard work and new naming but I know that I need to do it with my feet on the earth, in the centre of society as well as on the edge, and with my head in the rainbow, in the context of both history and the mystery of the universe.

Giving an ultimacy to femality through Goddess imagery and being named as Witch now means for me simply being a Woman, for whom I often use the spelling 'womon' to affirm the changes that I have made and that I have seen others make during my journeying.

BE·ing WOMON

As I live my Goddess spirituality answering to the name of Witch, I am a Womon aware of the Earth as a living power. I am a Sister of Gaia—now living in the Blue Mountains. I am a woman who feels stifled by dualistic thinking and hierarchies, and enlivened by holistic understandings in which paradoxes weave and dance together. I am a woman living with the paradox of writing a thesis to help me live unselfconsciously! I am a woman contributing to an ethic and a philosophy based on interconnectedness and createdness, as well as on human uniqueness and creativity. I am a woman with a passionate commitment to developing communities of care, in which both the particular and the whole are taken seriously and diversity celebrated.

I am Goddess. I am Witch. I am Womon. I am a Goddess woman of today walking through life with Witches of yesterday as well as of today. We are accompanied by church-oriented Beguines of yesterday and by Congregationalists I have known in my lifetime

who have a history of being called Independents as well as Congregationalists. So I remember that when the Covenant of the Goddess was organised in the United States in the 1970s, its structure was based on that of Congregational churches, in its acceptance of the autonomy of covens! The wheel turns.

As I walk my walk there may be little to distinguish me from others, for I constantly meet the Goddess/Witch/Womon in the most 'unlikely' of people, both women and men, wherever I am.

further reading

Carol Christ, 1997, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, Addison–Wesley, New York

Mary Daly, 1973/1985, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston

Elinor Gadon, 1989, *The Once and Future Goddess*, Aquarian Press, London

Melissa Raphael, 1999, *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield

Starhawk, 1979, *The Spiral Dance*, Harper & Row, San Francisco



7 sex and death

OLVAR AND YAVANNA

Olvar writes: The first time I made love to Yavanna it transformed me. It was pure pleasure in a way I hadn't experienced for a long time. It was also an emotional high—I felt amazing afterwards. But, when love becomes a spiritual act, it transforms you in another, more profound way. At that time I wrote to her:

I feel healed. I feel at peace in a way that I haven't for a long time. I've not been anxious or afraid. What did you do to my heart?!? It was wonderful, gorgeous, amazing. I still smile when I think of you.

Yavanna writes: For me it was loving and singing and crying and dancing and hurting and loving and softening and opening (some closing) and flowing and yearning and love and music and this sweetness. I wrote to Olvar:

I'm in awe of this unfolding. It seems to have no end to it. I feel all softened and opened up wide to life and it's flowing through

me like never before. It's full and rich and so, so deep. I've also noticed a grasping feeling arising sometimes, wanting to hold on somehow, but the need for emotional security is so small and shallow in the face of the deepening. Who would want to try stuffing Unboundedness into that little box. Overwhelming gratitude comes welling up 20–30 times a day, and there's a sort of divine frustration about where to direct it. It can and does go to the body-mind organism that goes by the name of Olvar, for your depth, for having the gentle persistence to penetrate through my defences and for being worthy of my trust. But deeper it goes to what I saw behind your eyes and what was there when I felt into your deepest heart—the God in his Olvar-form. This is what was making me smile. Ultimately, of course, they are One, because that's all there is.

Olvar and Yavanna write: It seems strange, almost wrong, to speak about things that are so intimate. Perhaps they should not be said in public? But then, that is why we want to say them! 'Sex', we name you, and all the messy wetness of desire and vulnerability of love. 'Death', we name you, and all the pain of loss and leaving. Maybe what we want to say cannot be said, because it is an experience that goes beyond words. How can it be shared? We have a picture, it speaks a thousand words. We could play music and dance. We could caress your arm, no more than the softest touch, and only once. You could look long into our eyes and see the pain of those whom we have lost. We could drink ourselves into abandonment over stories of love, pleasure, loss and leaving. Maybe something like that would leave you with the sensation, with an experience of love, of loss. Maybe.

Olvar writes: At the heart of Witchcraft are a set of seasonal rituals that follow the phases of the moon and the seasons of the sun. Witches celebrate that cycle of physical transformations, social

interaction and spiritual experience. The fertility of a woman follows the cycle of the moon. The life of a man is like the seasons of the sun and the plants of the earth. The earth is our body and we cannot separate ourselves from it. Witches celebrate the cycle of birth, youthful vigour, lustful adulthood, parental responsibility, old age and death. At the core of the seasonal rituals of Witchcraft are the lessons of sex and death.

The journey of a woman through life parallels the phases of the moon. She moves from being a virgin, the waxing moon, through being lover and mother, the full moon, to the dark crone of death, the waning moon. Similarly, in one interpretation of the Wheel of the Year, the journey of a man through life parallels the seasons of the sun. Beginning at Yule he is the child, at Beltane he is the Green Man and lover of the Goddess, at midsummer he is the sun king, at Lughnasad he is the sacrificial corn king, and through the autumn equinox and Samhain he becomes the dark lord of the Underworld. Of course life is not always like this. Some women never become mothers, some people live alone, and others have same sex relationships. The point is that, whatever our life story, there are parallels in the cycles of nature.

Through participating in our rituals, Witches learn to understand the place of sex and death in life. The festivals remind us that we are part of this world, and that spiritual experience and understanding is to be found in living out the physical life of our bodies as part of the natural world around us.

However, Witchcraft is much more than seasonal celebrations. To be a Witch is to immerse yourself in life in all its passion, pleasure, pain and paradox. Witches feel the ebb and flow, the energy and music of the universe in our blood and bones. Sex and death are the two great mysteries of life. In confronting, absorbing and discovering the mysteries of sex and death, the Witch becomes one with the universe, with life itself.

sex and death

In the act of making love I become one with my lover. More than that, I immerse myself in my body, in her body, and together we celebrate a ritual of spiritual worship. We worship each other, but we also worship the cycles of birth and death, we worship our bodies that are part of the earth, and we worship the God and Goddess in all their manifestations.

SEX

Olvar writes:

FOR YOVANNA

Your voice sings melodies that caress my soul.

Your abandonment to pleasure inspires me.

Your directness gives me confidence.

Your generosity disarms me.

Your tears drench my parched soul.

Your pain echoes like a familiar voice in my heart.

Your aching resonates and I ache anew.

Your struggle is my struggle.

Your tenderness taught me gentleness anew.

Your sensuality reminded me of pleasure's call.

Your caress rediscovered mine.

Your embrace encouraged me to embrace others.

Your transitoriness tears at my heart.

Your distance safeguards and frustrates.

You are not mine, and I am not yours, but,

I am part of you, and you will always be part of me.

Olvar

Olvar writes: Doreen Valiente's Charge of the Goddess says, 'Let my worship be within the heart that rejoices. For behold, all acts of love

and pleasure are my rituals.' Many non-Witchcraft religious traditions tend to denigrate sex and the body as merely physical. Witchcraft teaches us to celebrate the body. More than that, the Craft teaches us to see the pleasures of the body as part of spiritual worship. This transforms the role of sex. Sex is no longer something to be ashamed of, or something to be hidden. Rather, sex is something to celebrate, to revel in, to feel the power of life and spirit.

I was walking through a local market recently. A gorgeous young woman was busking, playing her violin. Two young men sauntered past. Their smart dress showcased their muscular bodies. Her eyes followed them, and her music faltered. She dropped the violin to her side, laughed, and sighed, and then continued playing, smiling broadly.

In the moment of sensual pleasure we lose ourselves. This is what 'ecstasy' means: to step outside of oneself. Sex can be a spiritual act, a moment of transcending ourselves. We give ourselves to another. As with the young woman playing the violin, this may simply be a moment in which we lose ourselves appreciating the beauty of other people's physical bodies. The same idea applies, at different levels, through all the subtle sensual interactions, from flirting to the tenderness of the caress to the immersion of oneself in passionate sex. These are not merely physical pleasures, although they are pleasurable. Witches celebrate these acts as part of their worship, as rituals of the God and Goddess.

The pleasure of appreciating other people's sexual energy was a revelation to me. I used to feel guilty when a thrill of passion would flow through my body—as if the intense emotions I felt in the presence of a really sexy woman would necessarily lead to sexual impropriety. Then, slowly, I came to realise that there is nothing wrong with the intense feelings of pleasure that a beautiful woman can generate in me, as long as I celebrate them for what they are—pleasure in being in her presence. I don't need to stare, I don't need

to have sex with such a person. Rather, I try to enjoy the simple pleasure of being near a sensual person.

for a time, beyond time

*An' so I held her tender hand in mine,
Joy! What pleasure, human and divine.
'Til round once and more the circle turned,
Deeply in our hearts the fire burned.
I lost myself to her like no other,
And flew beyond such mortal sight.
Upon that darkened sacred night,
Transformed within my lover.
It was a place where no-one else could come,
A moment when the moon engulfed the sun,
And in the forest's deepest glade,
We reached beyond, we were remade.
An' so I held her hand in mine,
My lover, human and divine.
'Til the circle comes around again,
With longing heart, I here remain.*

Olvar

Witchcraft does not seek equality between men and women by making the two sexes the same. Rather, Witchcraft celebrates the differences between men and women and explores the strengths and weaknesses of both. For example, in some Witchcraft traditions, the athame, or ritual knife, is typically seen as a masculine symbol, mirroring the penis. It represents the authority, in which masculine power is directed and focused. On the other hand, the cup is a feminine symbol, mirroring the womb. It represents the nurturing and embracing nature of femininity that leads to an openness and flow in life.

Yavanna writes: Although not a Witch, writer and teacher David Deida has some ideas about intimate communion between the masculine and feminine in a sexual relationship that fit very well with Witchcraft ideas about the difference between masculinity and femininity. Deida suggests that to be sexually and spiritually fulfilled, men and women must live true to their masculine or feminine sexual core. If they do not, they risk being spiritually handicapped, and unable to open fully in love. For passion to flow between the poles of masculine and feminine, the differences between the two must be magnified.

For the masculine person, the priority is the search for freedom, or the discovery of one's deep purpose. The feminine person is more motivated by a desire for the full and free flow of love in intimacy. The Witch knows that everyone and everything is really an expression of the same Divine love that flows through all. Our hearts yearn to open without limits to the boundless flow of the Divine. The feminine person's open longing for love invites and draws the masculine person into love's depth. The masculine person's direction and focus can be the spine of the feminine's surrender and allow that person to relax further into love. Through the merging of heart and body during lovemaking, the two serve to open each other to that which lives and breathes through us all.

Males and females both have elements of masculine and feminine in us, although the feminine is more commonly found in females, and masculine in males. A woman may spend her day at work very much in a masculine mode, directed and focused on goals, and a man may slip into a feminine mode when comforting someone who is distressed. Deida's point is not that women should be feminine all the time, and men masculine. His ideas also work quite well for homosexual relationships. His point is that, to maintain an intimate communion between two lovers, sexual polarity between masculinity and femininity needs to be heightened.

Olvar writes: The first time I was erotically attracted to another man was a profound moment for me. It opened up another side of me and changed the way I relate to men. I also became more aware of my own body. When Witches celebrate sexuality, they sometimes seem strongly heterosexual. However, the Craft is not heterosexist. People in the Craft are typically very accepting of homosexuality, and a significant number of the Witches I know are bisexual or homosexual. Same sex relationships generate a different type of 'energy', and some people prefer to work magic in same sex circles for this reason. Dianic Witches usually have women-only circles that sometimes work with the sexual energy of lesbianism. Similarly, in one Faery tradition, male-only circles work with homosexual sexual energy. In this chapter we focus on the sexual energy of heterosexuality, because this is our own experience.

The celebration of sex in Witchcraft does not lead people to abandon themselves to sexual pleasure without any self control. (Well, only sometimes!) What I mean is that celebrating the pleasure of sex is not the same as saying anything goes in sexual relations. In fact, once sexual pleasure is seen as a spiritual act, it can lead to a greater sense of reverence and respect. As sex becomes a sacred moment, the act itself is treasured as a moment of Divine communion. Each person becomes an incarnation of the God or Goddess.

In Starhawk's novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, there are two contrasting sex scenes. The first sex scene occurs during a Pagan ritual. Several people are at the ritual and they all decide to have group sex. This is a consensual act that is suggested and then verbally assented to by everyone present. It becomes an act of pleasure and sacred worship. In the second sex scene, a woman makes love to a man when they are travelling together. The man does not reveal that his wife, at home and about to have a baby, would not consent to this. As a consequence the relationship between the man and wife,

and the other woman, break down. Starhawk's point is that the important thing about sex is that it is done honestly, openly, and in an environment of trust. Witches view sex as sacred. Sex is not simply an act of physical pleasure, but a spiritual act that honours the God or Goddess in the person with whom you are having sex.

The erotic writings of Anaïs Nin, particularly *Delta of Venus*, taught me, as a male, a lot about sexuality. Nin reminds us of the importance of the social and emotional framing of sexual encounters. Small acts of coldness, memories of bitterness, can make things empty. On the other hand, it is the gentleness, the sensitivity to time and anticipation, that arouses desire. Nin also emphasises reciprocity. Sex is a deeply emotional engagement with the other person. An unquestionably physical and emotional relationship in which body and soul are inextricably interwoven.

Witchcraft's attitude towards sex teaches self-responsibility. Live with the consequences of your choices. Witchcraft does not encourage a view of the world in which some actions are always right and others are wrong. Sex before marriage, for example, is prohibited in some religious traditions. Witchcraft, on the other hand, encourages people to take responsibility for their sexual choices. If you choose to have sex with someone, do not regret this decision. Rather, take responsibility for the consequences of your decisions.

Yavanna writes: Yes, Witchcraft does celebrate sexual pleasure, however, the freedom to 'go for it' should be balanced with a sensitivity to the difficulties inherent in choosing an active sex life. Sex is a spiritual act. As a consequence there is a sense in which, particularly for a woman, 'giving it away' can result in a sense of loss. Men sometimes use their power in sexual relationships to take advantage of women, and this, too, can be a source of profound pain and confusion. It is easy for men to 'take' from a sexual relationship without feeling, or without being concerned about the effects of their

actions. Sexual intimacy is powerful stuff and its consequences can cut deeply. Both parties must be honest with themselves about their motives.

Yavanna dreams: I am in an old Victorian mansion with a conservatory at the back. There's lots of glass and a mature shady garden outside. I go out through French doors to a paved area shaded by tall trees. I walk along the side towards the front of the building, and Olvar comes out the front door. Next we're on a bench in the front garden, kissing. Stroking his face and hair, drinking him in, I'm licking and sucking his tongue, pressed up against him. I can feel how hard he is. I start rubbing against him and moaning. It feels so good. I know we're going to spend the whole day making love.

I wake up, wet and slide my hand down. Mmm, delicious throbbing, slip one finger inside. But no time! Work, deadlines, scheduling, the report, all due before the end of this week. The clock radio comes on. Time to get up and start the day—sigh.

Olvar writes: Life is full of compromise, of shortfalls. The freedom to discuss, to think about, to feel my sexual self was one of the main things that led me to Witchcraft. Witchcraft allowed me to be honest about my sexual desire, to express it and to celebrate my sexual self. However, I often have to remind myself that Witchcraft also taught me to accept that many of my sexual dreams and fantasies are idealised. Sexual and romantic fantasies promise release and pleasure, but they do not point out that any new situation will have its own difficulties. There is no place where all is pleasure. We often long to escape from where we are now through dreams and fantasies of pleasure beyond. We live in a world where lovers may reside in other cities (as mine seem to), or where the demands of work, children, or mundane tasks leave little space for unrestrained pleasure seeking. These can have very real impacts on people's sex lives. A life is lived, adjusted for what must be done and things that cannot be changed.

Freedom is not to cut the chains, but to be at peace with the limitations. It is after all, what it means to be human!

sex, death and the body

It is late at night. She is gone, barely five minutes ago. I hold the pillow, still warm, against my naked body. I cry and ache in my loneliness. The scent of her perfume lingers, and the dampness of her sex. She is gone, and it tears at my soul. It is not simply her absence that hurts, so much as the tearing apart still not complete. Our bodies may be separated, but our spirits and hearts are still pulling at each other.

Olvar writes: Sex and death belong together in Witchcraft. Sex is not only celebrated because it is pleasurable, but because it is a central part of the cycle of life and death. You cannot have one without the other. The same attitude that leads the Witch to revel in the pleasures of sex also confronts Witches with the reality and pain of death, loss and leaving.

Attitudes toward sex and death reflect our attitudes toward the body. Many people see the physical world of our bodies as a prison. This was the view of Plato, and it has passed into Christianity. Witches do not separate the spirit from the body. They celebrate the body: both the pleasures of passion and eroticism, and the dirt and darkness of dying. Many religious traditions teach that to be spiritual means to try to escape from the influence of the body. Witches find their spirituality in the body.

When the body and spiritual life are split, this leads to sexual problems and repression. We have sexual desires. If we try to deny these, and do not view sex as sacred, then this leads to a deep split in our being. Modern society's obsession with pornography is evidence of this—and perhaps the problem is not that there is too

much sex in the media, rather, the problem is that sex has been trivialised and not valued deeply enough.

Similarly, modern anxieties about dying and dead bodies reflect this split between body and spirit. Everyone dies. This is not a failure of modern technology, nor is death merely the door into a spiritual life 'beyond'. The spiritual life is as much about decay, dirt and death as it is about light, life and pleasure.

As you make love, feel this moment as your last. No future. What pleasure can distract you from this depth? Feel your sexual organs engorged with blood, and feel death. See your lover's beauty, and feel death. Allow desire to move your body, and feel death. Continually remind yourself that this moment could be your last. Maybe there will be no orgasm five minutes from now. Maybe this will be your last kiss, ever. Make love now, as if death were imminent. Give yourself completely in love.

(David Deida, 2000, *Finding God through Sex*)

death

I am walking along a path, the dark closes in. The path becomes increasingly muddy, and descends into a heavily wooded valley. She awaits me. The air is damp, still and heavily scented with sweetly composting leaves. Guessing at shadows, my final steps take me into the darkness of Her embrace.

I raise my arms, circling, invoking the quarters and Hekate, the rotting Goddess of the Underworld. Terror haunts my nerves. My dance evokes the sensuousness of Her presence, the thrill of cold breath on my bared chest, I long to forget life, to be released into death. I long for the dark embrace of moist devouring earth.

practising the witch's craft

As cold fingers prepare my heart, I am, despite, no, because of Death, alive. We know my time is not yet here.

It is a moment of self-surrender to Her. The darkness within me comes clearly into view. Blood from open wounds mixes with the earth. I am not healed, and the pain is greater. But, I own my darkness, my pain, my wounds, my death.

Hail and farewell. It is always soul-tearing to leave Her space. Up on the ridge the dusk is less dark, and the canopy more open. I walk home on a familiar path. Once more I have passed through the valley of death and, as a consequence, I live.

Olvar writes: None of us knows for certain what happens after death, and this can sometimes frighten people. Witchcraft teaches us to expect our death from our birth. Witches do not dream of immortality, of not dying, although many of us believe in an afterlife. Rather, we live life towards death. Death comes to us all. The Dark Mother of the Night, the Lord of the Underworld, they lead us through and back into the light. Without death there would be no life.

I still remember saying farewell to my Great Aunt when she died. She was a profoundly spiritual and mystical woman who knew how to travel in the spiritual realms. As a teenager, I drank deep from her teaching. I cried when she died. It hurt to think that she was no longer there, in her house on the hill. I mourned her passing, but I did not wish anything else for her. Death is part of life. She is gone from this world, but she lives on in her books and my memories and sometimes, particularly at Samhain, I feel her presence in the spiritual realm. Just before she died she cried out: 'Take me Spirit.' Her time had come to go, and she knew it.

Memento mori is Latin, meaning 'remember that you must die'. Some Christians used to say *memento mori* to remind themselves that one day they would face their God, and that the sins committed in

this life would send them to hell. Witches see death in a different way. Remember that you will die, yes, but do not fear death and a subsequent judgement. At least, if you do fear death, do not hide from that fear. Witches allow the coming of our deaths to sink deep into our self-understanding. We do not usually focus on what will happen in the afterlife. Rather, we tend to live our lives remembering that what we do has consequences for our lives now, and knowing that death comes to us all. *Memento mori*.

Some popular Witches have taken to calling themselves ‘White Witches’ and to signing their letters ‘love and light’. To those of us who have studied the Craft, even for only a short time, this seems a very strange approach to Witchcraft, to say the least. Witchcraft is as much a religion of the dark as it is of the light. It is as much ‘black’ as it is ‘white’. Witchcraft is not afraid of the dark or the night. Rather, it celebrates death and darkness as gateways to spiritual understanding and as part of the cycle of life.

When someone dies it is a very painful thing for those who are close to them—lover, carer, family, friends. However, Witchcraft, for me, does not deny the grief of bereavement. When Death rides through our lives, his scythe often cuts brutally into the souls of those left living. A Witch knows that pain, deeply.

Some of the hardest losses are those that are unanticipated, where we are unable to say farewell to those we love, or those who seem to have met death before their appointed time. I still feel her tears, as the young mother talked of her daughter, now dead from AIDS. The rain fell heavily that day. As she struggled to talk, we cried too. Cry! Scream in pain! Sob uncontrollably! For the Witch there is no shame in owning the pain that comes from death.

In one sense, the earth is dying. As a consequence of human activities, many species have already become extinct, and many more become extinct daily. Witches learn to listen carefully to the natural world around us, and we cannot help but hear the groans of Mother

Earth at the destruction humans are causing. For the Witch, humanity is part of the earth. Our souls often groan in anguish at the destruction we see and feel around us. This deep pain and sense of loss comes from the Witch's profound connection with the natural environment.

One day I will die. It may happen suddenly, but it is increasingly likely that I will know I am going to die before I die. Perhaps I will be diagnosed with cancer, or with heart trouble, or with some other chronic illness. I will treasure that time as part of my life. I cannot say how I will respond. Perhaps I will cry, perhaps I will be angry. I hope I will be able to celebrate my dying, saying farewell and holding those I love dear. Like my Great Aunt, I hope to be prepared when Death rides across my path, and willing to say: 'Take me, I am ready to go.'

further reading

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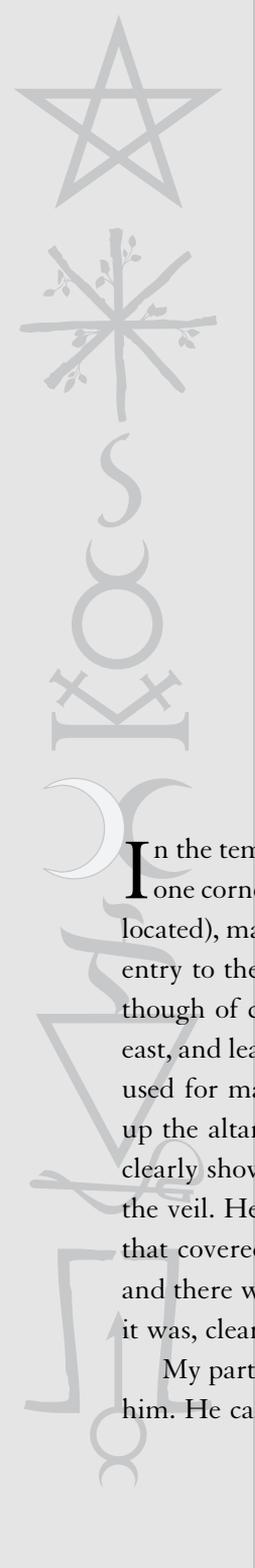
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about the authors

Olvar grew up as a Pagan in southeast Australia. As a child, he learnt to trust and travel in the spirit world from his spiritualist mother, his Grand Mason grandfather, and his mystic great aunt. Since that time, he has spent considerable time studying and researching

spiritual life. He currently works as a solitary and writes poetry and short stories.

Yavanna grew up in Melbourne where she became involved with Witchcraft in the early 1990s. She has been a spiritual seeker from an early age, and currently practises Witchcraft as a solitary. She has been working with a women's circle on sexual spirituality for the past two years.



8

The magical universe

JULIA PHILLIPS

In the temple in my home in London, we had a chiffon veil across one corner of the room (in the northwest, where the doorway was located), making a space large enough for a person to stand to await entry to the circle. You could see anyone standing behind the veil, though of course the image was a bit blurry. The altar was in the east, and leaning up against the altar was a convex mirror, which we used for magical workings. One night after a ritual, I was tidying up the altar, and happened to glance down into the mirror. Quite clearly shown was the reflection of a large person standing behind the veil. He (or she) was wearing a dark cloak, with a hood raised that covered his/her face. I turned and looked directly at the veil, and there was no-one there. I looked again in the mirror, and there it was, clear as day.

My partner, Rufus, had already left the temple, so I called out to him. He came into the room through the veil, presumably passing



the mirror. photo by julia phillips.

straight through whoever was standing there! I asked him to look in the mirror. I said nothing else, just ‘look in the mirror’. His reaction left me in no doubt that he could also see the figure reflected there, and, like me, when he turned to look at the veil directly, there was nothing there. We compared notes, and the figure we saw was identical in every detail.

On another occasion, during the feast after a ritual, two of us sitting in front of the veil heard what I can only describe as ‘angels singing’, though no-one else in the room (about ten people) heard a thing. My belief is that our veil became a true gateway between our terrestrial temple and other realms that could be opened from either side. I suspect a few people might be wondering whether anything unpleasant ever came through, and the answer is no. In fact, the entities that materialised in any form without us calling on them never passed beyond the veil, and were always benign.

This chapter has been written for people who appreciate that

there is far more to life than that which we experience through our basic five senses. The universe is a fantastic unknown with a myriad of mysteries to explore, and perhaps even understand. Possibly this begs the question, 'Why would you want to explore somewhere you can't see in the everyday world?' To which my reply would be, as with any mountaineer asked why he climbed the mountain, 'Because it is there.' The mountain may be more visible to the naked eye but to Witches, the magical universe is just as real as the mountain.

The concept of the universe as a single entity, in which the terrestrial realm is but one of many, leads to the obvious inference that humankind is not alone in inhabiting this place. Leaving aside the instances of close encounters, UFOs, crop circles, etc., there still remains beings known as Gods and Goddesses, angels, demons, elementals, ghosts, elves, faeries, pixies, and so on. Let's call them discarnate entities for want of a better description.

Witches do not believe that these entities are inherently evil, and, whilst the tale of Mephistopheles and others like him are enjoyable as literature, Witches don't sell their souls to anyone to gain access to the greater universe. Mostly it comes through hard work, long hours of study, and lots of practice! This generally takes place in ritual, where Witches will call upon elementals, angels, deities and other types of being for the purpose of learning more about them and where they live.

Witches are not always successful in contacting these beings, but the story that begins this chapter is one example of a discarnate entity that manifested. Another time, with some Witch friends, we laid out a labyrinth maze on a hillside in Wales. We started to walk the maze, but the energy it raised sent my dogs crazy so I left the others and moved the dogs some distance away so they wouldn't get upset. On my return, I saw a small brown figure peering out of a hole in the side of the mountain, watching my friends walk the maze.

As soon as he sensed me, he disappeared without a trace, and I couldn't even see the hole.

These examples all feature entities of some kind manifesting in the physical realm, but, soon after moving to Australia, Rufus and I decided that we would try to obtain a set of symbols to gain entry to each of the elemental realms. Instead of them visiting us, we would visit them. Before we started, we decided that our 'test' for each symbol would be that if we didn't see the exact same symbol in the terrestrial realm within 24 hours of getting the image by scrying (to divine by gazing into a crystal, mirror or similar—see below for a more detailed description) then it would not be a valid symbol.

We worked one ritual a week, starting with the element of Air. For each element we were given a symbol, and on each occasion we saw its exact replica in the physical world within 24 hours. The first I saw in a computer manual when I was asked to go to a department at work that I normally would never visit. The next image I saw in a magazine. The one after, Rufus saw on someone's t-shirt as she was walking towards him, and, as the girl passed by, she said, 'Yes, that's the one'. Obviously, it was part of a conversation with her friend, but curious, nonetheless. The final image we thought had defeated us. All the day following the ritual, we kept our eyes open, but nothing. Then, just when we had almost given up, we were driving through Sydney's eastern suburbs on our way to a friend's place for dinner and we saw the image in a blaze of light as a church that we were passing lit up its stained glass windows. You have to admit, the universe has a sense of the dramatic!

None of these examples offers proof that can be measured, analysed, or stored, but certainly it is a testimony that can perhaps be accepted in an objective sense by people other than Rufus and I.

Ever since Witches first appeared in the public mind, they have been associated with the unseen world and spirits. It is therefore not surprising that modern Witches believe themselves the inheritors

and custodians of the beliefs and practices that have been in development ever since humankind began to evolve into homo sapiens.

The idea that our earth is a part of a greater—albeit mostly intangible—place is not a new perception; simply a continuation of a concept that is as old as humanity itself, which has somehow survived the Age of Reason and all those other purely rational constructs that have been imposed upon us. It is important to consider the continuity of this idea within the context of its development, so I will begin with a brief historical review of how humankind has viewed the universe through the ages. To paraphrase a well-known book, ‘In the beginning . . .’

A brief history of the magical universe

We really know very little about early beliefs, but we can safely assume that formal burial practices (beginning in Europe some 80 000 years ago) indicated an awareness of something that existed beyond the corporeal, earth-bound being. Not necessarily evidence of magical or religious practices, but a suggestion that those early humans did believe in an afterlife, or at least a life beyond the purely physical; an acknowledgment that humanity was part of something greater than the world that could be seen or felt.

Although archaeological evidence suggests that humanity has always been aware of this greater universe, over time humans became more sophisticated in their attempts to contact and influence it. Simple offerings became written pledges or spells and a whole body of knowledge grew up around the processes by which people could affect their environment. This process has been analysed and interpreted by many scholars in the past and although a detailed

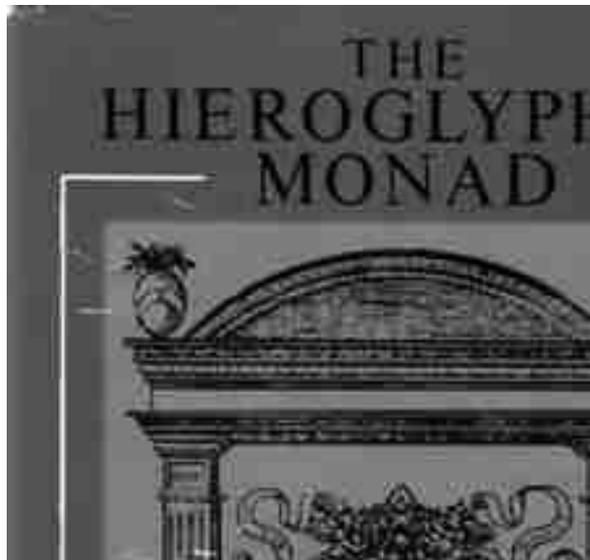
review falls outside the scope of this chapter, several useful works are listed at the end in 'Further reading'.

Unarguably the greatest advancement of the concept of the magical universe took place during the 'Renaissance' period, which is generally reckoned to have begun in Italy in the mid-fourteenth century. The scholars of that time believed that the purest expression of a civilisation higher and better than their own could be found in antiquity. In their quest for this knowledge, they discovered and translated impressive bodies of philosophy and practices from the ancient worlds of Egypt, Greece, Chaldea and Persia, and further developed these ideas into a remarkably sophisticated and integrated corpus. If it had not been for the Renaissance scholars and their patrons, many manuscripts—including those of Plato and the *Corpus Hermeticum*—would have been lost. Nor would we have the inspired original works of scholars such as Ficino, who also translated the *Corpus Hermeticum*; Pico della Mirandola, who introduced practical Qabalah into the practices of the Renaissance Magus; Cornelius Agrippa, who wrote *De Occulta Philosophia*; and Giordano Bruno, in whom the *Art of Memory* achieved its high point. These and other similar texts became the foundation of subsequent developments of magic in theory and practice.

It was also during the Renaissance period that the study of alchemy (derived from the Arabic *al kīmia*) became popular. The primary aim of alchemy was the production of the 'philosopher's stone', sometimes also known as the 'elixir', which was reputed to be able to transform base metal into gold. The process took the basic ingredients (the *prima materia*) of salt, mercury and sulphur, refined them, and then reconciled them in a new and purer harmony in accordance with universal principles. It has been suggested that this was simply an allegorical description of the transformation of the alchemist's own Self; the *prima materia* being the soul, body, and spirit of the alchemist, and the production of the philosopher's stone

being the transformation of these disparate parts into a perfected being. In reality, the literary evidence points to a combination of both purposes, and the importance of alchemy in the development of the concept of the magical universe cannot be overemphasised.

Perhaps the most famous of all Renaissance personalities (to modern occultists, at least) is Dr John Dee (1527–1608). A skilful mathematician, astrologer, navigator, scholar, and perhaps a spy (the first 007 by repute), Dee is nevertheless best known today for the Enochian system of magic that he transcribed from visions received by one of his seers, Edward Kelley. The Enochian system is complex, and is essentially a process to gain access to the supercelestial (or angelic) realm, and thereby to learn the secrets of nature and the universe. Dee's influence in his own time, however, was more likely to be works such as his 'Mathematicall Preface' to the English *Euclide* published in 1570, or his profound *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) which describes in a series of theorems the creation of a symbol (the Hiero-



glyphic Monad of the title) that represents the unity that underlies the magical universe.

Dee was not alone in pondering the relationship between the earth and the universe. Symbolic representations of the magical universe were commonplace in this period. There are numerous examples of talismans and allegorical images used to illustrate manuscripts and tracts, and tarot cards reflecting these same themes appeared in the early fifteenth century (though the earliest reference to a game of cards dates from Germany, 1377).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, documents known as 'The Rosicrucian Manifestos' were published in Germany. Frances Yates (see 'Further reading') has demonstrated very convincingly the role that John Dee played in spreading Renaissance ideas throughout the European mainland, and suggests that the ideas contained within the Rosicrucian documents were influenced by Dee. Indeed, the third of the manuscripts, 'The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz' (published in 1616), is an allegory of the mystic marriage of the soul. It uses alchemical symbolism and is clearly based upon the work of John Dee, as it includes a copy of his *Monas Hieroglyphica* on the title page of the book.

Important as these documents were, it was Freemasonry that gave the context and impetus to the development of occultism (and thus the concept of the magical universe) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rise of Freemasonry in its present form began in 1717 in London, and from there spread throughout Europe and North America. It had an uneasy relationship with the established church as it claimed to have and protect an ancient mystery, but the Papal Bull issued against it in 1738 had little effect and Freemasonry continued to attract followers wherever lodges were established.

Eighteenth-century Freemasonry was offering nothing new in terms of beliefs; its ancient mysteries and powerful secrets were

simply a continuation of those developed in earlier times. What was new, however, was a cohesion and structure that provided fertile soil for these beliefs to take root and grow. The philosophies of earlier ages were retained, but the way in which these were offered was in accordance with the new Age of Reason; highly structured, and containing both esoteric (that is, for the initiated) and exoteric (intelligible to the non-initiate) characteristics. It was the esoteric aspects, however, that ensured the development and proliferation throughout mainland Europe of various occult orders, often using Freemasonry as a structure, but delving far beyond the mysteries that were taught in the Masonic temples. In common with their Freemasonic progenitors though, these occult orders believed that humanity was part of a far greater world than that which could be perceived by the five senses, and that by practising the proper rituals, magicians could influence all parts of the magical universe.

The nineteenth century saw further developments in this line of thought, inspired by the exciting archaeological discoveries being made in the ancient world. As with the Renaissance, attention was once again focused on earlier cultures that were believed to hold secrets and mysteries lost to the modern world. The so-called 'French occult revival' of the nineteenth century rode on the wave of the discoveries being made in the ancient world, especially those in Egypt, with archaeological finds making headlines throughout Europe as temples and tombs were opened up and their treasures revealed to a whole new generation.

These Egyptian discoveries had an enormous influence on the further development of the concept of the magical universe, showing more clearly than ever a belief in a life beyond the purely physical. Many occultists turned their attention to ancient Egypt and its mysteries at that time, but it was the establishment in 1887 of The Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn that enshrined these beliefs in a formal body of knowledge. The Golden Dawn was an incredibly

The magical universe

influential occult Order characterised by complex rituals and degrees of initiation that were designed to assist the magician to contact and experience the magical universe. Its members—including such famous personalities as Aleister Crowley, McGregor Mathers and A. E. Waite—continued the trend of focusing on the mysteries of the ancients, translating and publishing texts including the *Key of Solomon* and the *Goetia*, as well as journals, books, tarot decks and articles.

The Golden Dawn and its members were to be an important influence on the modern Wiccan movement, which was re-discovered and developed by Gerald Gardner in the 1930s. Gardner drew on the work of the members of the Golden Dawn and other occult sources, and then integrated it with other concepts drawn from folklore and mythology, creating in the process a workable synthesis of our relationship to the magical universe.

This historical outline has, of necessity, been very brief. I'd encourage anyone interested to study the historical record to gain a fuller understanding of the many interesting and important people and movements of the past.

The magical universe today

The methods and tools used to interact with the magical universe today vary considerably, but generally fall into two main categories: intellectual and intuitive. Both types assume the fundamental principle that the universe in which we live exists beyond the mere physical senses, and that humans have the ability both to contact, and to influence, this environment.

The symbolic languages, of which astrology, alchemy, tarot and Qabalah are classic examples, can be categorised as intellectual. The practice of these techniques requires at least some academic study,

and, whilst intuition plays its role in the process, intuition alone is not enough.

Most of the practices that are derived from folk traditions and Shamanism fall into the intuitive category. Often these are passed orally, and there are many examples of apprentices learning their craft from an older, more experienced practitioner. Terry Pratchett fans will recognise his Witches in this category!

It might appear as though I am suggesting that these two systems are mutually exclusive, but that's not the case. In fact most Witches use a combination of both, although often there is a preference for one style over another. A detailed survey of the various methods used to communicate with the magical universe would extend far beyond a single book, let alone a single chapter, but an overview of the more common methods will, I hope, prove useful.

intuitive

Intuitive methods require practice, but they do not generally require academic study, nor are they the sole province of the Witch or magician. A custom at Halloween is to peel an apple, and then throw the peel over your left shoulder. As it lands, it will form the initial of the person you are to marry. I doubt that the many hundreds (perhaps thousands?) of people who do this at their Halloween parties realise they are contacting the magical universe for their answer, but of course that is precisely what they are doing. The same principle applies when a child blows out candles on a birthday cake and makes a wish, or wishes upon a falling star.

Birds or animals are commonly thought to provide a means of communication from the unseen realm, and most Witches pay careful attention to a visit from any bird that is out of the ordinary; in particular a day bird visiting at night or vice versa. Of special note is any bird that taps on the window or flies into a room, as this often heralds a death in the family.

Trance and meditation are also intuitive, as are numerous types of what is often called sympathetic magic (poppets, Witch bottles, binding, and so on).

Modern Witches practise a number of intuitive methods to help them to reach beyond the terrestrial realm, including, in addition to those listed above, chant, invocation and evocation, various forms of power raising, and scrying. Our London coven often used scrying when asked to help locate a missing object (at times we thought we should re-name the coven 'The Missing Link', we were asked so often for this service!). I have a small crystal ball that was given to me many years ago, and get excellent results with it. I also get good results with a black mirror that I made some years ago.

To scry is really very simple. Take whatever you want to use as a focus (crystal ball, mirror, etc.), and sit somewhere quiet and dark. Use candles and incense if you want, but it's not necessary. Look into your object in much the same way as you look at those magic pictures that reveal 3-D images. You look *through* the object rather than at it. Keep in mind your question, and, with a bit of practice and patience, images will reveal themselves to you.

Healing is another very common intuitive practice, and probably the most frequent requests that covens receive are for healing. Certainly in our London coven it ran neck and neck with requests to find missing objects, and our Sydney coven did a great deal of healing work. As a result I've had experience with many different methods of healing over the years, and most are effective to some degree. There are techniques that really do seem to be verging on the miraculous, however, and those that work best in my experience are the ones where there is a connection of some kind between the healer(s) and the patient. That said, I do know of several Witches who send healing energy to people they know only by name, and they do seem to have a great deal of success. So, like most things, success or failure depends on those involved.

The most incredible healing my coven ever undertook was in Sydney, when one of our members was involved in a horrific car accident. Her bones were smashed in several places, and her collarbone had been completely destroyed. The surgeons had built her an artificial one based on X-rays of the damage, so we focused our healing on helping it to grow and adapt to its new environment. But, when the operation took place, the surgeon discovered that the patient's collarbone was whole and healthy. This wasn't shown in any of the X-rays, but suddenly there it was, and the replacement was never needed. I don't for one moment suppose that we alone were responsible for that, but I do believe our coven was successful in working through a non-terrestrial realm that enabled us to manipulate power in such a way to assist the re-growth.

intellectual

Any of the symbolic languages—such as tarot, astrology, Qabalah and alchemy—that have been created to communicate with, and influence, the realms beyond the terrestrial one, may need a degree of intuition to make them effective, but they all require a great deal of academic study, hence I categorise them as intellectual.

Astrology is the language that underpins all the others, and a working knowledge of astrology is fundamental to the study of the other disciplines. It is not necessary to be able to construct and interpret natal charts, but a thorough understanding of the symbolism of the planets and signs will certainly help in the study of tarot, Qabalah, alchemy and any other symbolic language.

Astrology in one form or another has probably been around since humankind first looked up at the stars, although the earliest surviving text dates from pre-1600 BCE, the Babylonian *Venus Tablet of Amisadqa*. Astrology in its earliest form was concerned solely with the King and country, and is perhaps the most tangible evidence for belief in the relationship between the earth and the greater, or

magical, universe. Signs of the zodiac first appeared around 432 BCE in Mesopotamia (the area that we know today as the Middle East), but over the next hundred years its development was strongly influenced by Greek thought, and, from that point on, any advances owe much to both cultures. Astrology has remained one of the most enduring of all the disciplines, although its popularisation has sadly overshadowed its more profound uses.

Qabalah is a symbolic language that has its origin in Jewish mysticism. No-one knows for sure where or when it was created, but the two books that form the core of the system are called *Sepher Yetzirah* (Book of Understanding) and *Zohar* (Book of Splendour). The *Sepher Yetzirah* may have been written by Rabbi Akiba around 100 CE, and it is thought that the *Zohar* could have been written by one of his disciples, Rabbi Simon ben Jochai.

The Qabalah is the ultimate conceptual language for the magical universe in many ways, as its fundamental principle is that everything in the universe is related and connected to every other part of the universe, with continual interaction taking place between all the parts. It teaches that the unity of the male and female within the Self mirrors the unity of the universal deity, which is a synthesis of male and female energies on a cosmic scale.

Its primary symbol is called the 'Tree of Life', a diagram comprised of ten circles (*sephiroth*, singular *sephira*) connected by 22 pathways. Although simple in itself, the analysis of this symbol is extraordinarily complex, and books written on the subject would fill several libraries. I have listed a couple that I have found useful in the suggestions for 'Further reading'.

Witches explore the Qabalah in many different ways, perhaps the most common being termed 'pathworking', which is a journey undertaken during a guided meditation along one or more of the paths that connect the sephiroth on the Tree of Life. The journey will also frequently include an experience of the sephira found at

each end of the path. Why do Witches do this? Mainly because it is a superb intellectual system for exploring the magical universe, but it is also a useful filing cabinet in which to slot ideas and concepts. A framework, if you like, on which can be hung different ideas, associations, relationships, and so on. It is because of this capability that the Tree of Life has developed a vast array of attributions and correspondences, many of which cross over to other symbolic languages, such as astrology. Therefore, meditation on, say, the sephira of Chesed will also involve consideration of Jupiter and that planet's energies and correspondences.

Alchemy in its traditional form is not something practised by many Witches today, although most of them would be familiar with its spiritual principles which aim to unite the different aspects of the Self into a perfected being. In an alchemical sense, this 'perfected being' is 'like unto god', and therefore able to communicate with deities and explore other parts of the magical universe. The Witch might use different terminology and a different method, but the aim is very similar. As with Qabalah, alchemy has an immense number of correspondences with the zodiac signs and the planets, and to appreciate alchemical symbolism does require a reasonable knowledge of astrology.

The other symbolic language I want to discuss is the tarot. As I said above, no-one knows where it came from, but it was certainly around in the fifteenth century, and many of the images familiar to us today were on those cards. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Frenchman Court de Gebelin published an illustrated book about the tarot, where he claimed it had an ancient Egyptian origin. His ideas were adopted by a French wigmaker named Alliete, who had decided he wanted a new career as a fortune-teller. Renaming himself Eteilla, he changed some of the images on the cards published by Court de Gebelin, claimed they originated with Hermes Trismegistus (he of the *Corpus Hermeticum*) and that, furthermore,

the ten Qabalistic *sephiroth* corresponded with the ten cards of the minor arcana, and the 22 paths corresponded to the cards of the major arcana. Taking Eteilla's ideas even further, the French occultist Eliphaz L . . . vi (Alphonse Louis Constant, born 1810) made an association between the 22 cards of the major arcana and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and related a letter to each card of the major arcana.

And so, from its fairly simple beginnings, tarot developed into a symbolic language that presented not only its own arcane mysteries but also those of astrology, Qabalah and the Hebrew alphabet. This was further developed in 1910, when a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Arthur Edward Waite, worked with artist Pamela Colman Smith in producing the first tarot deck to have a pictorial minor arcana. Until this time, the minor cards had shown only the suit and the number of the card. In doing so, Waite made explicit the relationship of the cards with other symbolic languages. Aleister Crowley and the artist Lady Frieda Harris were influenced by this when they created the 'Book of Thoth' tarot (first published in 1969, although created in the 1940s). Since then, tarot decks have proliferated, and there is one to suit every style and purpose.

Witches use tarot for several reasons: for divination, as gateways to other parts of the magical universe, to explore correspondences (for example, the relationship between The Hermit, the Hebrew letter Yod and Virgo), and for magical ritual. As there are any number of books that deal with tarot for the purpose of divination, I will leave that particular use out of this chapter.

Using a tarot image as a gateway to another part of the magical universe is really quite simple. Basically, it's the same as scrying except that the medium you focus on is the card instead of a crystal ball or mirror, and you 'will' yourself into the picture. This needs some practice, but it's really no more than just imagining yourself stepping through a gateway into the scene that you can see on the card in

front of you. Have a reason for going there, and, if you can, engage in conversation with the people or creatures you meet. Be courteous, keep your eyes open and, if you visit one of the more dangerous places (which might have sharp weapons or tricky characters), keep your wits about you. You won't come to any harm, but I've known people to get some frights.

An interesting way to use the tarot in ritual is to select three or four cards, and allocate them to the people taking part. For example, one is the High Priestess, one is the Magician, one is the Emperor, one is the Empress. Have a fifth person in the middle as The Fool, and ask him or her to question each of the others. I've done this a number of times with different people, and it has always been a fascinating process. If the participants are willing to 'let go', it seems to be a very direct way of making contact with the greater universe.

As I said above, modern Witches believe themselves to be the inheritors and custodians of beliefs and practices that have been in development ever since humankind began its fumbling steps towards becoming homo sapiens. I hope that this brief review of some of the skills and techniques that can be used to explore the magical universe has been both useful and enjoyable. Journey well, and journey safely.

further reading

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about the author

Julia Phillips is a Wiccan High Priestess whose experience includes running both covens and magical lodges in London and Sydney. Her study of the occult began in 1971, when she began to attend lectures at the Society of Psychical Research in London. In 1975 she obtained her first tarot deck, and it was through the study of the tarot that she met the High Priestess of the London coven into which she was subsequently initiated. Julia edited and published *Children of Sekhmet* (1986–90), and *Web of Wyrd* (1990–93), and in 1991 founded the Pagan Alliance and its magazine, *Pagan Times*. She is the author of *Witches of Oz* (1994, Capall Bann), a guide to the practice of Wicca in the southern hemisphere. She has a Master of Management business degree, and is a Chief Executive Officer by profession.



9 spells and magic

DON MCLEOD

With the last of the sunlight reflecting off the rooftops in front of me, I search the skies high and low. It's colder now, and I jump up and down with impatience and with the need to keep warm. As the sun begins to dip below the horizon, its rays reach into the sky and touch the streaky clouds directly above me. They turn gold, then amber, and after this they become like trails of grey ash that lead from the fiery furnace that has been doused by the ocean in the west.

I turn to the east and scan the darkening skies. A pinpoint of light catches my attention. Is that it? It grows brighter as I watch. The warmth of excitement floods through me. Now it twinkles and I know for sure that I am seeing what I have been waiting for. I take a deep breath and say, 'Star light, star bright, first star I've seen tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight!' I close my eyes. From the darkness of my mind I see a bicycle. It is

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blue with chrome mudguards and black handle-grips. 'I wish for this bicycle,' I say to myself. Now I have to wait until I see the second star of the evening, otherwise this wish won't come true.

'Don! Come inside!' My mother's voice calls from the house. I stay silent, looking into the sky for my second star to show itself. I shuffle my bare feet across the concrete driveway, edging slowly towards the house as my head swivels from side to side, then up and down.

'Donald, where are you?' I drag my eyes from the darkening heavens and look towards the house. She's standing at the door.

'Coming,' I yell, but I move even more slowly, returning my gaze upwards. Ah, there it is. The second star has finally revealed itself, and I smile to myself as I swiftly bound towards the front door.

Through fairy tales and seasonal traditions, for example Santa and his flying reindeer, we encourage children to have magic in their lives. Children are taught to *make a wish upon a star*, and to believe that waving a magic wand can make wishes come true. As adults we tend to dismiss such concepts as irrational, but a part of us wants to believe, which is why even adults *make a wish* as they blow out the candles on their birthday cake. So it amuses and dismays me to find that on any day other than a person's birthday, magic and spells are thought of as forms of delusion for desperate people.

What exactly is a spell anyway? Most people probably think it involves clouds of incense and saying foreign words over an assortment of bat's wings and other exotic materials. However, real spells and magic are much simpler than this. In its most basic form, a spell can be defined as words that are spoken or written in order to bring about a specific result.

Spells are as old as religion itself. Wax images and words of magic can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans. In our modern times, very few people would admit to their friends that they had used spells to help them achieve their goals,

but in the past, kings, politicians and noblemen openly made use of magic. The Greek historian Xenophon tells us that Aristotle firmly believed in the usefulness of spells. It is said that Aristotle gave Alexander the Great a box of wax images that represented his enemies. Alexander used these wax figures to render his enemies powerless against him.

Even through the last couple of centuries, magic has been considered a natural part of life: cooks stirred their pots in a sunwise direction, and when the new moon was sighted people turned over the coins in their pockets in order to attract some more.

Who uses magic today? You may be surprised to learn that you use magic on a daily basis. What you think and what you say has more power than you can imagine. I often hear people say, 'I'm always broke, there's just never enough money to go around', then they manifest this to themselves on a regular basis! That's a form of magic that people work against themselves every day. Some other examples that I have heard people say are: 'As soon as I stop dieting, I put weight back on' and 'My car is always breaking down'.

There is a natural law that states that on a metaphysical level, like attracts like. By visualising an object or a situation, and by stating that you expect this in your life, you are sending a message to the universe for what you want, and the cosmos will listen, and a corresponding image to the one you sent out will soon find its way back to you. The universe is a very agreeable force, if you state that you expect to be poor, then it will help you to manifest poverty. Can you then state that you want to be a millionaire? Yes, the universe will then show you many ways to become a millionaire—perhaps through an extra job, or through budgeting and saving and investment and, oh, you want a spell to be an *instant* millionaire! Well, I've heard some examples of people who have used the principles of magic to win lotteries, but certain conditions have to be met in order for this to happen. It's a bit like wanting a gold medal

at the Olympics—certain elements such as timing, physical circumstances, mental focus, determination and desire all need to be present in order for you to achieve a goal of that standard. However, don't let this put you off. Even simple spells can achieve great results, it's just a matter of knowing some basic rules before you start.

Magic is a natural process that can be easily accomplished. It is a wonderful demonstration of the power that we each have to bring about changes in our lives, and in the world around us. Spells are practical tools that help us to attune with our desires, and then, in conjunction with our will, we direct this power outwards to ensure manifestation. If you follow the tips outlined next, you will be immediately effective in your spell casting.

The first step is to think clearly about what you need. If, for example, you need a car, it would be best to do a spell that will help you to bring a car into your life, rather than asking for a few thousand dollars to come your way so that you can buy a car. Magic can work in many ways and you might be limiting yourself if you don't stay open to all possibilities!

Set a goal that is clear, concise and unambiguous. You must be precise with your wording. Send a clear message to the universe, not one that can be misinterpreted. If you need to have a car so that you can take up a courier job that was offered to you, don't just put out the thought that you need reliable transport, or you might find yourself being given a pair of roller skates! If you want a car, ask for a car!

Choose the right timing for your spell. By choosing particular days, and by working in harmony with the phases of the moon, you can enhance the effectiveness of your spell. The days of the week and the phases of the moon all have specific energies associated with them, and by knowing the right time for your spell, you can give it greater power. Working magic is like swimming in the ocean, you will get to your destination quicker and easier if the currents and

tides are moving in the direction you want to go. You can still get there even if everything is going against you, but it will not be as easy to achieve your goal.

Mondays are good for healing, purification, peace and psychic work. Do spells on Tuesdays for passion, sex, courage or protection. Wednesdays are good for divination, wisdom, study and travel. Magic on a Thursday brings prosperity, success in careers, expansion and generosity. Friday is the day for love spells, friendship, beauty and reconciliation. Spells on Saturdays are for endings and legal issues. Sunday is a good time to work on strength and spirituality.

By timing your spell to incorporate moon energy, you can increase the likelihood that your spell will be effective. The moon is said to be *waxing* (growing) between the time of the new moon and the full moon. When the first sliver of the new moon crescent reveals itself from the shadows of the dark moon, there are powerful attracting energies at work. Spells for fertility, romance, success, expansion and growth are appropriate at this time. Feel a sense of new beginnings at the new moon. It is a time for adventure and it is full of potential. Make plans, take the initiative, and by the first quarter put your plans into action. The waxing moon provides inspiration, opportunities and energy for new projects. Sheep are shorn during the waxing moon to ensure rapid regrowth of wool.

When the moon is full, it is a time of powerful psychic energies and is useful for celebration, healing, divination and meditation. It is a time when the Goddess bestows favours to those who worship her—and, of course, it is a time to give thanks for Her blessings. The power of the full moon can be used for the perfection and integration of your plans. It is the high tide of psychic energy and its powers can be used for spells with positive outcomes. The energy of the full moon extends for a few days before and after the actual full moon. It is a time when projects and ideas ripen. Celebrate what you have achieved since the time of new moon. It is a time of

appreciation and fulfilment, and if your goals have not been met by the rising of the full moon, it is a sign that suggests that you should re-evaluate the viability of those goals during the next phase of the moon—the waning period.

When the moon is in her *waning* (diminishing) period, from the full moon to the dark moon, it is a time for elimination, reduction, and introspection. Spells to release things from your life are best done at this time of the lunar cycle. It is a time to break bad habits, for the peaceful ending of a relationship, or to close a business venture that isn't working. The waning phase is a time for letting go. It is a quiet time of withdrawal, or even of the destruction of concepts and items that are no longer required, so that there is room to build new foundations in your life. The energies of the waning period can be used to help things decrease. Slow down. Have a clean out of your house and life, or hold a garage sale to remove the clutter from your life. If a tree has to be cut down, it is best felled at the wane of the moon. At the end of the nineteenth century, invoices for the sale of timber in France still contained an assurance that the trees had been cut during a waning moon. The following English proverb sums up the energies of the waning moon: 'The ebb will fetch off what the tide brings in.'

Use the powerful, introspective energies on the night of the dark moon to meditate deep within your heart to discover what you need to do when the new moon's energies come back into play.

Choose matching symbols for your spell. When doing the spell, have appropriate music, incense, colours, objects and tools around you to reinforce the message of the spell. Tables of correspondences (which show items that have an affinity with other objects) can be found in most books on magic. Check those tables and set up a magical space filled with the vibrations of your goal, so that you are surrounded by images that reflect your desire.

Set a time frame for a result. Include in your spell an indication

of when you would like to see your wish come true. The reason for this is that your current needs are likely to be quite different to your future needs, so if you had used a spell to bring new lovers into your life, it could be very awkward if the spell continued to manifest after you were married! Time frames are simple enough to incorporate into spells, and they are of utmost importance. Since it is more than likely that you will be using particular moon phases for particular spells, it is worthwhile to use lunar cycles for your time frames. For example, you can include wording that suggests that you will have achieved your goal by the next full moon.

Avoid using words that you don't understand. Spell books are great for getting ideas, but the spell will work better if you put it into words that are meaningful to you. Unless you are a particularly fluent linguist, Hebrew wording from an old grimoire won't help you to focus awareness upon the aim of the spell. It is much better to make up something yourself. Some books will tell you that you have to use Enochian invocations, and inscribe on virgin parchment magical symbols and sigils representing the names of particular spirits or demons, but it's much safer and more appropriate to use words and symbols that are significant to you personally. Why invoke forces that you don't understand? The Gods and Goddesses of magic can be invoked with greater effect through simplicity and symbology.

Creating a simple rhyme to use during the spell can make it flow easily—that way you can concentrate on the intention rather than the words themselves. As Doreen Valiente wrote in *The Wiccan Rede*: 'To bind the spell every time, let the spell be spake in rhyme.'

When creating the wording for a spell, make sure that it is phrased in a positive manner. For example, with a health spell, avoid using wording such as 'I don't want to be sick any more'. The universe doesn't recognise words like 'don't want', it can only focus on words that it can put an image to, such as the word 'sick'. Spells are basically affirmations that include images or symbols, so while

doing a healing spell, visualise yourself as healthy and turn this phrase around to something like, 'I am healthy, I am strong—all the day and all night long!'

Use the 'For the good of all!' clause. When creating the wording for your spell, remember to include the phrase, 'For the good of all!'. This phrase will help your spells to enhance your life, without having your good fortune being at the expense of another person. Another useful phrase is, 'This or something better now comes to me.' Often that which you want at this point in your life may be different to what you really need, and it's only when you look with hindsight from a future point in time that you can realise this. So, by asking 'for this or something better', you leave yourself open to greater possibilities becoming available to you. I have heard so many examples of spells going wrong when the 'For the good of all!' wording is not taken into consideration. One person I know did a spell so that she could 'have a break' from work, and she promptly broke her leg, requiring three months off! I have also heard many times about people who do a spell to lose weight and they get diarrhoea, or excessive vomiting, or both. They sure lost weight, but not in a healthy way. Be careful of what you wish, because you may get it!

Realise the consequences of having what you asked for. Apart from the examples just given, there are other consequences to be aware of. When something comes into your life, certain responsibilities come along with it. For example, when doing a spell to get a car, remember that along with the car comes registration costs, petrol and repair bills, perhaps monthly loan repayments, etc. Are you in a position to handle these? A Law of Exchange is always at work when magic is used. Sometimes what you have wished for seems to come out of thin air, with little effort on your part, but often it will arrive from more mundane sources. For example, it may be that after doing a spell for a car, you win \$20 000 in the lottery and

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you can buy it, or it may simply be that you are offered the chance to do extra hours at your work, or a second job turns up so that you are then in a financial position to afford a loan for the dream car. Are you prepared to give this extra energy to the universe/Gods in exchange for the items you wished for?

A final word regarding the steps of spell-work: a magic spell will not work by simply repeating words that you find in any spell book. The magic of a spell is contained within you—your needs, your desires, and the energy you are prepared to put into the working of the spell. If there is no personal power in your spell, it is only words. And remember to be realistic: you can expect miracles, but don't go overboard! A love spell will help you to attract romance into your life, but a love spell to attract a Hollywood movie star as your lover is beyond the bounds of reason.



ingredients being mixed in preparation for a spell. photo by don mcLeod.

spells and magic

Now that you know a little more about effective spell casting, here are some different types of spells that you might like to use to enhance your life.

Candle magic is one of the simplest and most effective forms of spells that you can do. Any shape of candle can be used, and you can choose different colours for particular spells. Here are some examples of the attributes for the various colours: White—psychic development. Red—vitality, health, passion, energy, lust. Blue—healing, peace. Green—fertility, prosperity. Yellow—creativity, clarity. Pink—love, friendship, happiness. Purple—spiritual development. Orange—intellect, optimism.

Here is a basic candle spell that can be used to manifest virtually any goal. You will need a candle of appropriate colour, matches, an ashtray, a pen and a piece of paper. Prepare yourself for the spell, then think about what you really want and write this on a piece of paper. Light the candle and visualise yourself with the desired item. Concentrate on the candle flame (for at least ten minutes) knowing that the desired outcome is being drawn to you. Then take the piece of paper with your wish on it and burn it in the flame with the knowledge that your desire is being manifested.

If women's magazines are any form of gauge to the type of magic that people want to know about, then love spells would easily make the top of the list. Unfortunately, most of the spells offered tend to ignore the concept of ethics. The idea seems to be that if you want someone, then you can have them by some harmless witchery. To my mind, any form of manipulation that is directed at another individual—either physical, emotional, or magical—is an interference with that person's free will. And as such it incurs karmic consequences. The people who suggest such love/lust/passion spells fail to realise that the short term results may be pleasant, but the long term consequences will most probably be devastating for all

concerned. Real love is a complex blend of emotional, physical, intellectual and karmic conditions, it cannot be forced upon another.

If you feel the need to have someone special in your life, it is far better to prepare yourself for love, rather than making someone have an interest in you, regardless of their needs. To make yourself ready to attract romance, you could use the following magic on yourself. The basis of this spell is to realise that to attract love, you must first radiate love from your soul, and to be able to radiate love from your inner being, you must first have love for yourself as a person. This candle spell will help you to enhance the love that is already within you. For this spell you will need a pink candle. Charge this candle with your intentions by holding it while you say, 'This candle helps me to attract love.' Have a rose quartz crystal nearby if you want extra power, and carry it with you after the spell has been completed.

During a waxing moon, preferably starting on a Friday, prepare yourself for the spell and light the candle. Feel the candle flame radiating love energy into the room, then say: 'I feel love around me and within me. I radiate love. Love flows from me. Love comes to me. I love, and I am loved.' Watch the flame on the candle while you fill yourself with loving thoughts. Radiate love around you. When you are ready to finish the spell, say the words: 'I send my love into the world, and I know that it will return to me. With love I now release this spell, for the good of all, so it shall be!' Now extinguish the candle. Repeat this for seven consecutive nights. On the seventh night, let the candle burn itself out (safely), and if the spell has been for the good of all, then results will come within one lunar month.

Bath magic is another form of spell-work. The magic associated with this type of spell is found in the preparation of the bath, the ingredients that are infused in the water, and in the time spent visualising the success of your spell while you soak up the pleasant atmosphere that you have created in the bathroom.

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An example of this type of magic is the following prosperity spell. To gain a temporary increase in finances, this spell should be undertaken on a Thursday during a waxing moon, but do not use it more than once every three months. In a large saucepan, place seven teaspoons of dried parsley, one teaspoon of ground cinnamon, one teaspoon of ground nutmeg, and one teaspoon of brown sugar. Pour one litre of boiling water over the mixture and allow it to cool to room temperature. Strain the mixture and place the liquid into your bath water. Shower before taking this magical bath, then repeat the following phrase while you are bathing: 'I am open to opportunities that increase my financial wealth.' Air dry if possible, or use a fresh towel.

Folk magic, the magic of our ancestors, can also be useful in many circumstances. It involves using objects from our surroundings that symbolise our desires. We then focus our energies upon these symbols to empower them in order to bring about manifestation. An example of folk magic is this spell for a happy home. Mix some fresh mint, a clove, some grated lemon peel and a bay leaf in a china bowl. Place the mixture on a white cotton handkerchief and tie up the four ends with green ribbon. Hang this near your front door while saying: 'This charm that has been made by me, it now protects my family. We live in health and prosperity. By the power of my spell, so it must be.'

The following spell is an example of folk magic that uses sunflower seeds to bring you good fortune. On a Wednesday during the phase of the waxing moon, place five seeds on an orange cloth and leave them in the sun for a few hours to charge them. Then, while facing the sun, hold them in the palms of your hands and say: 'Above me is the sunshine bright, below me is the fertile ground, as these seeds are sown with love, good luck for me will now be found.' Now plant the seeds and know that your luck has already changed for the better.

practising the witch's craft

Knot magic was a favourite of Arabian occultists. Tying knots onto a cord or even on a piece of string can bind magical energies to your spell. Recite the following charm as you tie the knots in the appropriately coloured cord: 'By knot of one, the spell's begun. By knot of two, it cometh true. By knot of three, so mote it be. By knot of four, it opens doors. By knot of five, the spell's alive. By knot of six, the spell is fixed. By knot of seven, by stars of heaven. By knot of eight, by stroke of fate. By knot of nine, the (wish) is mine!'

The 70 x 7 spell is a simple yet powerful form of magic. Think of an area of your life that you would like to improve, and write this down as a positive statement. For example, if you would like to improve your health, write 'I am healthy'. Write this out 70 times on seven consecutive days. Leave this for seven days, then repeat it again if it is still needed.

A magical life can be created with spells and potions, but first of all you must realise that true magic comes from within yourself. Spells are simply affirmations that use symbols, so that the universe can get a clear picture of what you are wishing for. Forget Hollywood's ideas of magic. Their magic is based on special effects. Spells cannot make you invisible, make you float through the air, or make someone truly love you against their will. However, the magic of spells is real! Try one of the spells that has been included in this chapter and you will see how spells can help you to make positive changes in your life. They are an exciting way of demonstrating the magic and power that is within you.

The room is glowing from the flickering of seven candles upon the birthday cake. 'Blow out the candles and make a wish Don.' I look at the cake and take in a deep breath. I close my eyes, but instead of making a wish, I thank my lucky stars for the blue bicycle that I've been riding all day.

further reading

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about the author

As a teenager, Don McLeod became a student of Rosicrucian mysticism. This instilled in him a fascination with ritual and the esoteric. Ten years later, while working in a metaphysical bookshop, he met people who linked ritual with spiritual and seasonal celebrations. These people were Wiccans, and in 1989 he joined a group that regularly worked with magic and ritual. Don McLeod is actively involved in South Australia's Pagan scene through Pagan Alliance SA. He has written a book on tarot, and he contributes articles to various Pagan magazines and newsletters.



IO
bewitched
by tarot

VICKY CHRISTIDIS

I remember the first time I held a tarot deck. I was participating in my first ‘women’s spirituality’ workshop, which I thought would consist of interesting talks and lectures on the topic. I was horrified to discover that it was totally experiential. As a severe introvert, I was deeply challenged and terrified at the thought of revealing any personal aspects of myself to a group of strangers. The other women were not as inhibited and happily ran around the room gathering tools to express themselves. Some women danced, others drew pictures, or played with clay. I quickly, and quietly, retreated to a corner. I looked desperately around for something, anything, to take attention away from me. That is when I saw them. Hidden in the corner of the room was a pack of tarot cards. I reached gingerly towards them, afraid to touch them. You see, for me, they were not tarot cards but the ‘Devil’s Playing Cards’. My former Pentecostal

Christian upbringing chose to rear its fearful head at that moment. Do I dare touch the Devil's cards, or do I join the other women?

I looked to the centre of the room and saw a woman proudly displaying a clay vagina she had just made. Water dripped from it into a bowl. She freely shared her thoughts and feelings about being a woman. I nearly fainted. Did I have to discuss such intimate feelings with strangers? I stared at the clay vagina and then at the tarot cards. In that instant I knew that I would rather face the Devil than talk publicly about my vagina. With only the briefest of hesitations, I grabbed the deck and looked at the cards. My hands shook as I viewed each card in turn. They shook more when I came to the Devil card. There he was staring at me in all his Satanic glory. Do I throw away the cards and publicly embrace my vagina? Or do I continue perusing the cards? I really had no choice. And so slowly I viewed each of the 78 tarot cards on offer.

The workshop facilitator noticed my discomfort and came to talk to me. I explained my introversion and she sympathised, saying that I did not have to do anything uncomfortable. The facilitator also noticed my strange reaction to the tarot deck and asked why I was frightened. I told her that although I was no longer Christian, I found it hard to let go of the fear of being punished for doing something wrong. She asked if I thought that a father God was a punishing figure. I laughed and said 'Of course!' Had she not read the Old Testament? She smiled, and asked if I would be more comfortable and less fearful if God were a female, a mother. A female God! I had never even thought of the possibility. She simply said, 'Think about it', and left me, alone with my thoughts and a tarot deck. I thought about it, but did not realise then that, from the moment I first touched the tarot deck, a door had opened, a veil had slipped and a journey had begun.

Learning the art

Two years after that fateful workshop I enrolled in my first tarot class. However, choosing an appropriate class was not the most difficult aspect of my tarot journey. Choosing a deck was. A traditional tarot deck consists of 78 cards. There are 22 major arcana (arcana meaning mysteries), and 56 minor arcana cards. The minor arcana are separated into four suits, and each suit contains numbered cards from ace to ten and four court cards—the Page or Princess, the Knight, the Queen and the King. Each tarot deck is unique, as the way these cards are depicted is different depending on the deck's theme, style and iconography. There are decks based on ancient religions and cultures, and others on popular myths and legends. I was unaware just how many different decks were on the market and found it difficult to choose a tarot set that suited me.

I was told that the 'Rider-Waite' was the best deck for beginners as it was the most popular, the one referred to in the majority of tarot books, and the one deck most tarot teachers used in their classes. However, when I saw this deck, I did not immediately engage with it. I found the yellows too loud and the imagery did not resonate with me. So, like a true non-conformist, I scoured esoteric bookshops for an interesting and appealing deck. Fortunately I was spared the ordeal of choosing, as my first deck was a gift from a friend. Their choice was the 'Mythic Tarot' by Juliet Sharman-Burke and Liz Greene. They thought it was a good choice for me as I was studying Jung and archetypal theory. Like most Jungians, I was familiar with myths and legends, in particular the Greek and Roman pantheons. The 'Mythic Tarot', based on Greek myths, was therefore an obvious choice. I related instantly to the images, recognising key characters and narrative themes. So, armed with my archetypal 'Mythic Tarot', I attended my first tarot class.

My choice of tarot class was based on convenience. I had no idea

who were good tarot teachers and so enrolled in a class that was being offered as a leisure course at the university I was attending. This weekly two-hour class was fantastic. The teacher was knowledgeable and enthusiastic. I will call my teacher Ana, as I have lost contact with her over the years and therefore do not have permission to use her real name. Ana taught us the meanings of the cards and also how to use them in tarot spreads.

Most tarot consultations involve reading tarot spreads, which is the placement of cards in a particular order. Spreads can vary from simple to complicated and can utilise as little as one card or all 78. A quick and popular spread is the three-card spread, where the first card represents the past, the next is the present, and the final card the future. The Celtic Cross is also a popular and highly used spread that gives a more in-depth look into past, present and future influences. Many tarot books offer a variety of spreads to choose from, or you can devise your own. Tarot books also offer advice on another important aspect of casting a spread and that is shuffling and cutting the cards. Some tarot readers do not allow others to touch their cards and so shuffle and cut them themselves. Other readers will ask you to shuffle and then cut them in a particular order before spreading them for a reading. For personal use, be guided by your own instincts. I have a variety of different ways of shuffling and cutting, depending on the reading, the deck and my mood.

Ana not only taught us the basic spreads and basic meanings of the cards, but she also encouraged us to gain an intuitive understanding of tarot by challenging us to interpret cards based on our own intuitive musings. She would cast a spread then ask us to interpret it without resorting to books. We had to discuss what the symbols were in the cards, the colours, the numbers, and then suggest what we thought the cards were signifying. I found these exercises stimulating but confronting. My introversion made me selfconscious and I was always worried that I would make a fool of myself if my

intuitive feel of the card was way off. Both Ana and all my fellow students were really supportive and we ended up having heaps of fun during our intuitive tarot spread interpretations. Not surprisingly, when we relaxed and became less selfconscious, our intuition rarely let us down. That is one of the many beauties of tarot. The cards themselves contain all the information you need. Just trust your instincts.

Ana also brought along many different decks and encouraged us to explore the symbologies and choose decks that appealed to us. I was overwhelmed at all the different decks and wanted many of them for myself. One of the exercises that we did included going through tarot decks and choosing which cards we liked and which ones we disliked. We were then asked to explore what these cards were saying to us. Why did we like some cards and why did we dislike others? I have often found this exercise to be both fun and useful. Over the years, I have connected with many different cards but some cards, such as Death, remain firm favourites. In fact I will often go straight to the Death card when I am looking at buying a new deck. There are so many decks on the market and new ones keep appearing. It can be difficult to decide which ones to buy. If I like the Death card, I will probably buy the deck.

Many of the skills that Ana taught us in her tarot classes may not be traditional, but they were certainly fun, entertaining, informative and inspiring. I think that if I had a more traditional, conservative teacher, I may not have continued with tarot with such a passion. And so, like my first women's spirituality workshop, my first tarot class led me on a strange and liberating journey.

bewitched

After completing the tarot course, I was surprised to receive a call from Ana. Unbeknownst to me, Ana was a Wiccan High Priestess

who was starting her own coven. She thought that I might be interested in attending meetings. At first I was uncomfortable with the notion of joining a Witches' coven. Although my Jungian studies had introduced me to the concept of female Goddesses and women-centred religions, I was unsure what Wicca/Witchcraft was all about. I could feel my Christian upbringing rearing its fearful head again. However, after attending a meeting, I was reassured that Witches are not the Devil-worshipping murderers that popular culture leads us to believe they are. With my fears conquered, I attended my first sabbat ritual, which most appropriately was Halloween.

Surprisingly, participating in Pagan rituals was less confronting than embracing tarot. Although I had been brought up Christian, I was always in touch with one aspect of Pagan culture—death and the Underworld. No amount of religious indoctrination could ever tear me away from my uncanny obsession with the deities of night. As a child, I secretly watched and studied horror films. I loved the dark and deadly vampires, the haunted werewolves, the ancient mummies and the tragic Frankenstein monsters that populated the horror genre. As an adult, I channelled this obsession into my university course where I was specialising in archetypal film analysis. My special area of study was, naturally, horror film. While university fed my intellectual fire, it was Witchcraft that truly allowed me to embrace and experience the archetypes and deities that haunted my life. By the eerie glow of a sabbat fire in the darkest night, I could fantasise about a world of myths and legends, of deities and monsters. My journey into Witchcraft is an interesting tale, but it is a story for another time. While my paths took me away from covens and onto a more solitary Wiccan path, tarot remained a dominating force within my life. Similar to my experience of Witchcraft, I found my experience of tarot leading me away from people and further into my own inner worlds.

implementing tarot

As a student of tarot, I naturally thought that I would eventually become a tarot reader, so I practised on willing family and friends. I do not have any conscious clairvoyant skills and so my readings were more psychological than predictive. Although tarot has traditionally been used as a divinatory tool, that is for 'seeing' into or predicting the future, it can also be consulted from a psychological perspective. Psychological tarot readings view the cards as archetypal figures that point to key influences and disturbances within the psyche. Although predictions can still be made, the focus of the reading is more on the personal realm. Having a Jungian background helped to steer me more towards psychological readings and I was able to analyse spreads combining tarot and archetypal knowledge. I had some skill and my family and friends often complemented me on my accuracy. However, although I enjoyed the sessions, it was not my forte. I was comfortable with people I knew, but the thought of reading for strangers, and for money, was not something I desired. My love of tarot was more in the area of personal development. It was a tool to help me understand my life and plan for the future. And so I reduced the number of readings I did for others and concentrated on broadening my tarot knowledge and skills.

I was happy to discover that tarot offered many paths to explore and experience. A particular favourite of mine was tarot pathworkings. Guided pathworkings are structured meditations that incorporate the images, themes and symbols inherent within a chosen tarot card into a narrative journey. You can either devise your own structures or consult one of the many tarot books that offer guided meditations. For example, a High Priestess guided pathworking would involve a journey to a wise woman. The pathworking would begin with a journey to the Priestess domain, focus on a meeting with the Priestess where you will hopefully be offered some wise

guidance, and end with a safe return. The type of woman and the surrounds would depend on the card you are using. For example, a pathworking based on the High Priestess in the 'Mythic Tarot' could involve a descent into the Underworld as the Priestess in this deck is Persephone. However, whichever deck you choose, the basic theme of a meeting with a wise and powerful woman would dominate a High Priestess pathworking.

When I first started pathworkings, I would record myself reading the meditation from my chosen book onto a tape, which I then played when I was ready. As I became more comfortable with tarot, I gained great pleasure by writing and recording my own pathworkings. To enhance my pathworkings, I also began experimenting with music, colour, candles and incense. At first I consulted the many books that give multiple correspondences for each tarot card. As I became more knowledgeable, I trusted my intuition and made my own correspondences and connections for the cards. Before starting a pathworking, I would set up my room in ways appropriate for my chosen card. Thus armed, I would journey into the world of tarot for fun, pleasure and insight. For me, pathworkings are one of the most enjoyable ways of learning tarot from an esoteric perspective. Toward the end of this chapter, I have included a pathworking I wrote on the Death card based on the Grim Reaper from the 'Rider-Waite' deck.

Tarot also became a useful tool in constructing Wiccan rituals and spell casting. My love of the darker rituals such as Halloween and the dark of the moon complemented my connection to the tarot Death card. Not surprisingly I have written many Death pathworkings, which I sometimes use during these rituals. One of my favourite Halloween pathworkings is to use the Death card, the High Priestess card and the Empress card from the 'Mythic Tarot' deck as they are represented by the deities Hades, Persephone and Demeter. I can then construct a ritual based on Persephone's descent

into the Underworld. For such a ritual I will decorate my room with things I associate with death and rebirth. I am fortunate that I have a vast collection of Halloween paraphernalia to draw on. I also choose music, and my favourite for Halloween pathworkings is a CD of wolves howling. However, pathworkings are not the only ways in which I incorporate tarot into Witchcraft rituals.

Tarot cards can also be used in spell casting and there are a number of books that deal specifically with spell casting using tarot. Again, as with pathworkings, I consulted books before eventually writing my own spells using tarot cards. To construct a spell, I choose the appropriate card, drawing on its energy to empower my spell. For financial spells, I will use a pentacles card; and for inspiration or energising, I will use a wands card or the Magician card. I devise my own invocation and conduct the spell in the traditional way. To celebrate seasonal and lunar festivals, I again choose relevant cards and incorporate them into the ritual. Doing specific tarot readings is also another way of drawing on the energy of solar and lunar festivals. I either use a traditional spread or, as with everything else, create my own. The yearly spread, traditionally consulted on New Year's Eve, is one of my favourites for Halloween as it symbolises the end of one cycle and the beginning of a new. I have also created my own 'Past, Present and Future lives' spread, which I also do on Halloween, a perfect night for exploring past and future lives. By incorporating tarot pathworkings, spells and spreads into my rituals, I can combine Witchcraft with tarot and celebrate the seasons and the phases of the moon in many delightful and powerful ways.

creating tarot

I have incorporated tarot not only into my personal life but also my professional/creative life. As a writer I am no stranger to 'writers

block' and when I am in one of my non-creative moods, I often turn to tarot. Sometimes I will do a quick spread to see if I can identify my blockage, but other times I use the images of tarot to help me to write stories and thus get my creative juices flowing. Tarot is teeming with images of people and scenarios that can be used to write quick stories. I sometimes shuffle the deck, draw a card at random and write a brief synopsis of what I see. What is the character saying to me? What is the character's situation? For more involved stories, I draw a number of cards and write a narrative that links all the cards together. Tarot has also opened up an undiscovered aspect of my creative writing—prose. I was delighted to discover that I could write poetry and prose based on certain tarot cards, particularly the Death card. Using tarot images for creative writing is productive, extremely fun, and can also be profitable as there are a number of books on the market that use tarot cards as their inspiration.

Creative writing is also a useful way of understanding tarot readings as a tarot reading is very similar to writing a story. The cards are set out in a spread and the reader interprets them into a narrative. If you have ever had a professional tarot reading, you may, like me, sometimes come away from the reading a little confused. Everyone has their own interpretations of the cards and sometimes I disagree with others' interpretations, particularly with cards such as Death, the Devil and the Moon. These cards have been tainted with many negative connotations due to religious and gender bias. Although I would never get into a philosophical argument with someone doing a reading for me, I do like to go over the cards and the reading when I am alone. I have found that a great way of expanding on the reading is to write a story about it. I re-create the spread, with the cards in their appropriate places. I then write about each card, what it means, and what it means in relation to the position it occupies in the spread. I have found this to be a deeply moving and very personal way of understanding a spread. The last

time I did this I was in tears, and I still get emotional when I re-read what I wrote. This exercise is a powerful way of incorporating your emotions into a professional tarot reading.

Having been a tarot enthusiast for more than a decade, I feel as though I have come full circle. Although I own an enormous number of tarot decks, none of them truly reflect my passions or my myths. It is with great pleasure that I have created my own deck—well, I have written it. As I cannot draw, I have joined forces with Anna, an incredible artist who has interpreted my written vision into her stunning drawings. I have finally finished the accompanying book that explains the Gothic myth I am working within and the meanings of all 78 cards. Synchronistically, Anna has also finished the drawings right on cue. I have almost learned more about tarot during the writing of my book than in all the preceding years. I have certainly gained a richer knowledge of tarot and of the myth I am using. It has been a fantastic journey but it is not over yet. We now face the greater challenge of trying to get the tarot deck published, but that will be another saga. But, if it is not published, I will use it for personal work as it is naturally a deck that I can engage with on many levels. It may even inspire me to return to doing tarot readings for others, but I do not think so; I enjoy my solitary pursuits too much.

It seems like a lifetime has passed since I attended the women's spirituality workshop. I did not realise then that Goddess religions, Witchcraft and tarot would become such a fundamental part of my life. Many things have changed since that first fateful workshop and many things have stayed the same: I do not fear punishment from omnipotent deities, the Death card remains my favourite in the deck, and I would still rather face the Devil than talk about my vagina in public.



from A.E. Waite, *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, Parragon Book Service

pathworking death

Decorate your room with fresh or dried dark red roses. Burn black, dark red or dark purple candles. Appropriate oils and incense to burn or wear are cypress, mint and parsley. Play music to enhance the mood. Choose whatever method of relaxation and meditation style that suits you. You may choose to read the pathworking as you go along, memorise it, or record it on a tape.

This pathworking is based on the 'Rider-Waite' Death card so, before you begin, hold the card close to your face and stare at the card until you can visualise it with no difficulty when your eyes are closed. Hold the vision and slowly begin your pathworking.

You are lying, face down, in a dirty, blood-drenched field. You have fought a long, hard battle and now are exhausted. You do not know if you are injured or if you are going to die. You simply taste the dirt and wait to see what unfolds.

As you wait, you think about your life. What have been the high points—what have been the low? If you are to die right now, have you any misgivings? Things you should have done or said? Is your life in order? Have you achieved the things you wanted to, to date? Have you any regrets?

As you relive your life, the cries and moans of the injured and dying gather all around you. You hear their fear and their pain. They are thinking about the loved ones they will leave behind. What will the ones you leave behind feel? Will you have mourners who cry and shriek at your death, or will you simply die with no-one really caring? Have you made an impact on the lives of others? Will your dying have meaning?

You smell death and decay. However, the wind brings a new scent, of rotting roses, sickly, yet sweet. The rose smell is both comforting and frightening for it heralds both life and death. Will you live or will you die?

In the distance, you hear the snorts and hoof beats of a single horse, galloping along the battlefield. As the horse passes, the cries and shrieks of those around you grow louder and more terrified. Some screams continue, others are cut short, as though the screamer no longer has need of a voice. Should you cry for help or pretend to be dead?

In your fear, you decide to sneak a look. As you raise your head, you see a pale horse being ridden by a dark knight in black armour. As he passes the bodies, some look to him with gratitude, some with innocence, but most turn away in fear. Those he touches with his rose banner do not move again.

As he turns to face you, you see the face behind the helmet. It has no flesh, only the dark grin of the skeletal Reaper. The rider is Death.

You bury your head in the dirt, unwilling to face this final fear. No matter what type of life you have led, you do not want to give it up just yet. You hate Death for the indiscriminate way He takes life: women, men, children, the rich and the poor. There is no rhyme or reason to His taking. He simply takes.

You do not want to go. You remember all the good times you have had. All the positive things you have achieved. You want to live, more than you have wanted anything before. And now Death comes for *you*. You think: 'Unfair! Unfair!' You hear the horse's hoof beats bearing down on you, can feel the cold, hard stare of Death. Will you courageously face Death, or hide your face from His awesome darkness?

You slowly raise your head and face Death. The closer He gets, the less fearsome He looks. You can almost see sadness in His grin and for a moment you feel sorry for this dark soldier whose task is so necessary, so natural, yet so despised. As He comes toward you, He says in a gravelly voice, 'I have not come for *you*, not yet. However, having faced me, *your* life will never be the same. You are *transformed*. Live and live well.'

Death rides his pale horse back into the battlefield, touching some, leaving others. The cries and shrieks grow softer and the sickly sweet smell of roses grows fainter. You relish the feel of the earth on your face, thanking Death for His lesson. You are happy to be alive. You slowly feel life return to your body. The warm rays of the rising sun envelop you. You are ready to live—refreshed, renewed and reborn. Your journey has ended.

Always finish your pathworkings with grounding food and drink. This is a great pathworking to do at the dark of the moon, Halloween, New Year or whenever you need to clear away old patterns to make way for new growth.

further reading

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about the author

Vicky Christidis has studied tarot from a psychological, mythological and personal perspective for more than a decade. She has also been a practitioner of Witchcraft for many years. She completed her PhD thesis in Education, where she explored the archetype of the Witch as Warrior in film. She was the editor of a tarot journal called *The Magician* for two years. Vicky now writes full time, exploring esoterica, horror and feminist psychology. She is also putting the finishing touches to her own tarot deck.

II The sabbats

CAROLINE TULLY

Have you not gone naked in the forest, with the wind over your body, and felt the caress of Pan? And your heart has swelled with spring, blossomed with summer, and saddened with the wolf of winter. These things are the covenant, and in them is the truth that is forever.

(Jack Whiteside Parsons, *Freedom is a Two Edged Sword*)

what are the sabbats?

The notion of a Witches' sabbat can conjure up all sorts of outlandish images: wanton orgies, bizarre rites and strange Gods. Sabbats have been portrayed as degenerate banquets, as parodies of Christianity, and even as black masses presided over by the Devil. However, such hysterical descriptions are a legacy from the European Witch trials of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and are far from being accurate. The Witches' sabbats are, in fact, much older than Christianity. They derive from ancient pastoral and agricultural

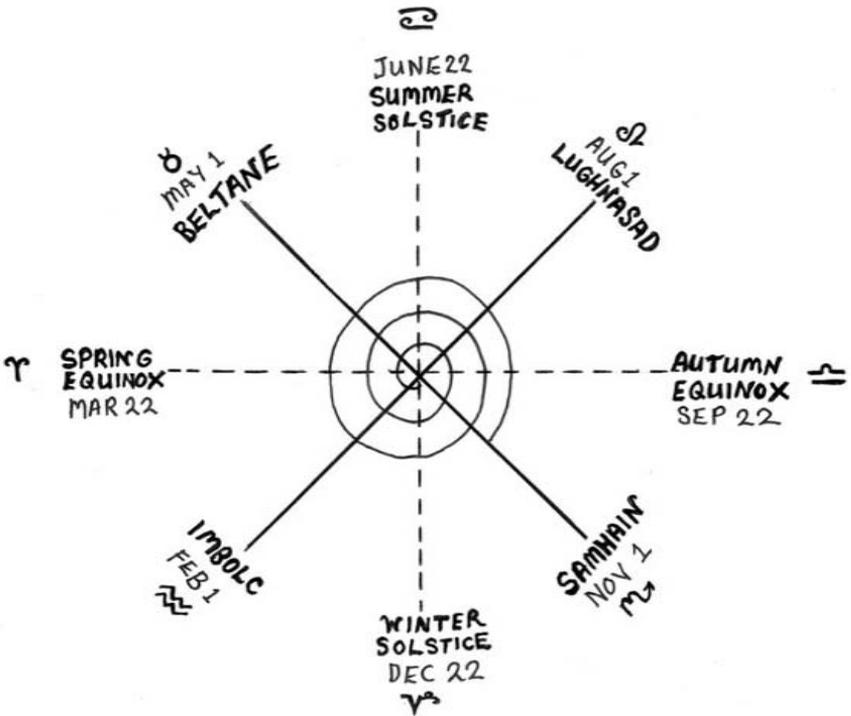
festivals, and are more concerned with nature and fertility than with anything sinister.

The sabbats evolved from the four Celtic seasonal festivals of Beltane, Lughnasad, Samhain and Imbolc, which divided the pre-industrial farming year into quarters. These festivals were essentially about the climate and its effects upon the land, marking points in the year when certain farming tasks were necessary. For example, Samhain marked the end of the grazing season when animals which were not going to be kept and fed over winter were slaughtered. The polar-opposite festival, Beltane, signified the beginning of the warm season, when the cattle would be driven out to open grazing. Imbolc was connected with the lactation of ewes, and Lughnasad was an agrarian festival. These major calendar points revolved around the seasonal availability of food, the obtaining of which in ancient times required much more effort than it does today. So important were the seasonal changes to people directly dependent on farming that they acquired an aura of sacredness. Religious rites were performed to ensure the changes occurred and that the land produced food. Ritualising the turning of the seasons became an essential, life-preserving magical act.

what do the sabbats mean for witches?

In contemporary Witchcraft, the four Celtic seasonal celebrations are known as the greater sabbats, and the four astronomical observances of the solstices and equinoxes, which occur approximately midway between each greater sabbat, are called the lesser sabbats. Together they make up the eight sabbats, or Wheel of the Year: celebrations of the solar, floral and faunal aspects of nature. The Celtic festivals represent the changing of the earth's seasonal

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northern hemisphere wheel of the year. Drawing by caroline tully.

garments and focus on the Goddess, while the solstices and equinoxes, being essentially solar, focus on the God.

Modern Witches realise that our ritual observances do not cause the seasons. Rather, the contemporary sabbat cycle is an opportunity to attune with the earth and to live and work mindfully alongside the subtle tides of nature. The sabbats are the points where we connect our personal cycles with the greater universal ones; the Wheel being a metaphor for the human lifecycle of birth, growth, sexuality, decline, death and rebirth, as well as the everyday cycles of planning, creating, enjoying, ending and letting go.

Sabbat rites are celebratory, they are parties, but they are also serious mystery plays that attempt to explain nature's processes. Often perceived as the 'outer court' or exoteric aspect of Witchcraft, sabbats can be semi-public, community-oriented events where the sincere newcomer meets genuine Craft contacts. By initially attending public sabbat rituals, an aspirant is usually, in due course, able to penetrate the concentric circles of Witchcraft-participation to the more secretive, lunar esbat rites, and thence to the very core of initiation.

celebrating the sabbats in Australia

In Australia, the sabbats occur at the opposite times of the year from those in the northern hemisphere, and it is this 'southern hemisphere issue' which has frequently proven confusing for the person new to Witchcraft. The usual remedy is to adjust the traditional sabbat dates by six months, moving them halfway around the Wheel until they align with the Australian seasons, as this provides a semblance of accuracy. However, close inspection reveals that the issue is a little more complicated.

Australia was once part of the great southern supercontinent, Gondwana, and our flora, fauna and weather behave completely differently from anywhere else. By merely transplanting the sabbats, we impose a veneer of imported tradition on top of the Australian landscape, denying the existence of the Spirit of Nature arising from within the land itself. Stubbornly sticking to a European-themed seasonal calendar is a way of ignoring the often harsh and confronting aspects of the Australian landscape, and merely playing at being in an imaginary 'Celtic' land. The physical fact that we, the practitioners, are situated within Australia is the fundamental core of the matter. It is within this country that the European Witchcraft concepts and practices must be grounded for them to become truly meaningful, not just theoretical or anachronistic.

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One of the goals of Witchcraft is to get in touch with and learn from the earth itself, and this cannot be done without actually exploring the seasonal round. The sabbats are special points in time where earth and Spirit can meaningfully relate to each other, enabling us to forge a deeper relationship with this country. As Australian practitioners of this religion, which is imported from the northern hemisphere, we must ask ourselves how we can truly connect with this land through the calendrical festivals of the Wheel of the Year. To create meaningful contemporary sabbat rituals, we need not abandon our inherited traditions, nor usurp Aboriginal spirituality. Instead, we can combine our own ancestral wisdom with the experience of living in Australia. An inspired synthesis can result in ritual that is both traditional and relevant.

australian wheel of the year. drawing by caroline tully.

This chapter concentrates on the history and folk practices of the original sabbats, as well as on what happens in northern and southern Australia at these times. Just as we can hardly expect the sabbats to manifest in Australia as they do in the northern hemisphere, nor are they identical in places as distant from each other as, say, Darwin and Melbourne. The sabbats' characteristics are essentially local, not national, unfolding uniquely in different parts of the country, as well as in the bush, on the farm, in the suburbs and in the city; and each Witch will perceive the Wheel differently depending on where they live. The material included in this chapter is not intended to be comprehensive or prescriptive. I hope that it will inspire people to get out in nature and make their own observations. What do you notice about the lifecycles of animals and plants, the behaviour of the weather, and the movements of the stars throughout the year?

Traditional rúle: 22 December

The winter solstice is the first sabbat in the Witches' cyclical year. It is a time of new beginnings and the start of a fresh cycle. For the Pagan Anglo-Saxons, Yule was the 'Night of the Mothers', the longest night of the year, when the Goddess laboured to give birth to the infant Sun God. Across many cultures this Child of Light was known by such names as Horus, Osiris, Helios, Dionysus, Mithra, Aeon, Pryderi, Mabon, and Christ (whose nativity is still celebrated on the festival of Christmas). For agricultural societies, the rebirth of the Sun signified renewed hope and continuity of life for crops, animals and people.

A time for feasting upon preserved foods during the midwinter scarcity, Yule has always been a festival where family and friends gather amidst the darkest time of the year to celebrate the returning light. In ancient Rome this was the festival of the Saturnalia that consisted of banqueting, merriment and gift-giving. Pine trees were decorated with sun-symbols, and Saturn and his wife Ops were

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honoured as the God and Goddess responsible for agricultural abundance. In Germany, the decorated solstice tree was brought indoors as the domestic Yule log, large enough to burn all night. It was lit with remnants of the previous year's log, and the resultant ashes put on fields to fertilise them. In Britain, houses were decorated with evergreen branches, holly, ivy and mistletoe, symbols of the re-greening of the land after the bleakness of winter. Going from house to house, singing songs and wassailing, or ceremonially toasting people, animals and crops with drink, ensured their good health for the rest of the year.

Australian Yule: 22 June

During this season of long, dark nights, the constellations Sagittarius and Corona Australis can be seen rising in the east. When observing these stars, we face the very centre of our galaxy, the Milky Way. In southern Australia this is a time of reasonably cold weather but it is not exceptionally wet and almost never snows in the lowlands. Australian plants do not require a winter dormancy, although in Tasmania, our only deciduous tree, the deciduous beech, loses its leaves. Winter is a time of fecundity and growth, many trees are flowering and various animals, including the lyrebird and the sugar glider, are either mating or giving birth. In northern Australia it is the time of the cool dry season. The Bougainvillea festival is celebrated in Darwin and the bright purple flowers are characteristic of this season. Brolgas begin dancing, cassowaries start egg-laying, and white-cockatoo chicks hatch. For many northern Aboriginal people, this is a harvest time associated with abundant traditional foods.

Meditation

The June-flowering Cootamundra wattle is the universal axis tree, its tiny yellow blossoms symbolising both the infant sun of the earth-year, and the multitude of sun-stars in the cosmos. Wattle reminds

us that although we are as small as dust motes on a universal scale, at a human level we are all potential. We perceive the local and the infinite, the microcosm and macrocosm. We are stardust. Every man and every woman is a star.

Yule. The dawn procession moves silently except for the muffled crunch of boots upon the damp forest floor as we approach our regular winter ritual site, a large, circular clearing amidst the eucalypts. In the centre, the Cootamundra wattle planted so many years ago is once again covered in joyous little yellow blossoms and we place candles in a ring around its feathery skirt.

A mother cradling a sleepy baby stands close to the wattle, within the circle of candles, and a libation of golden mead is poured on the earth at her feet. Linking hands, we dance deosil around the tree, chanting: 'The Child of Promise, the sun's new light, begin the year, emerge from night.'

Traditional Imbolc: 1 february

Imbolc marks winter's end and the beginning of spring. It is the time when greenery emerges from the snow-covered landscape, and in warmer climates seed can be sown. Also known as Oimeic, meaning 'sheep's milk', this is the time when ewes start producing milk. In addition, this festival is also sacred to Brigid, the Irish Goddess of poetry, smithcraft and healing, who visits households on the eve of her feast to bless the inhabitants.

A traditional Brigid folk custom involved making a decorative straw figure called a 'brideog' and laying it in a specially prepared bed alongside a wooden club or wand. The women of the house

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would say 'Bride is come, Bride is welcome', calling Brigid to inhabit the figure overnight and bless the house and land. In the morning they would look in the fireplace ashes for the imprint of footsteps or the club. If there were footprints or club marks, the omen for the rest of the year was good; if there were none, it meant that Brigid had not visited. Omens for the weather were also taken at this time: if it was sunny, then winter would continue awhile longer, but if the day was cloudy and raining, spring was imminent.

Australian Imbolc: 1 August

In the night sky, Aquila the Eagle rises in the east, succeeded by Capricornus and, later, Aquarius. This is early spring when the weather oscillates between the cold of winter and warmer spells that herald true spring. The bush is a riot of flowering wattles, many birds are nesting, tree ferns unfold new fronds and eucalypts display new growth. Sheep in various southerly parts of Australia lactate at around this time, fitting in nicely with the traditional symbolism of this sabbat. In northern Australia it is the start of the hot dry season; the weather feels stuffy and the earth begins to dry up. Creeks, waterholes and swamps evaporate, grass shrivels, and the native vegetables of the previous season become more difficult to find. This is the time when dingoes give birth, turtles and snakes lay their eggs, and freshwater crocodiles start nesting.

Meditation

The first butterflies emerge now. It is said that the flutter of a butterfly's wing in one part of the world can cause a cyclone elsewhere. Small efforts can produce great results. Insignificant actions can manifest in strange futures. All beings and phenomena on earth are connected; touching one strand of the Web of Wyrð can affect the entire structure. This is a time to be alert, refreshed, lucid, to act mindfully and to cultivate forethought.

Traditional Eostre: 22 March

The festival of the spring equinox is one of the two times in the year when day and night are of equal length as the sun crosses the celestial equator. A traditional time for sowing and transplanting, spring is characterised by virility and fecundity, when the increasing warmth causes animal and plant life to respond vigorously; mating and blossoming. Easter eggs and bunnies are fitting traditional symbols of spring's potency.

A traditional Mediterranean equinox custom is the cultivation of Gardens of Adonis, which are dishes filled with earth in which seeds such as barley, wheat, lettuce, fennel, lentils, and various kinds of flowers are sown and then tended for the fortnight prior to the equinox. These 'gardens' are kept in the dark and watered every two days. As the plants rise up, they are tied into bunches with red ribbons and a lit candle is placed in their centre. They are then placed upon the graves of the deceased to encourage rebirth, or alternately they can be 'slain', like Adonis himself, and ritually consumed to internalise the essence of the spring equinox.

Australian Eostre: 22 September

The constellation of Pegasus and the brightest star in Andromeda are rising in the northeast at this time. In southern Australia, spring can be a changeable season and is often characterised by warm days interspersed with wind and rain, vigorous plant growth, abundant flowers and nesting birds. Young koalas leave their mothers' pouches and mature koalas begin mating. In northern Australia this is the hot dry season; the atmosphere is sticky, water dries up and the ground is very dusty. Swamps and waterholes evaporate, and birds and animals gather around the shrunken billabongs. Aboriginal people burn off the dry grass which flushes out game such as

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wallabies, goannas, snakes and lizards. Emus are laying their eggs now, and several turtle species, as well as brown snakes, mate.

meditation

According to Aboriginal legends from the Murrumbidgee area of NSW and from the Murray river area in NSW and Victoria, the sun is created from the yolk of an emu egg which was thrown up into the air where it struck and then ignited a pile of kindling. Emu breeding habits display cooperation between the sexes: the female lays the eggs and the male hatches and rears the chicks which are striped dark and light like the year. The emu's egg, laid during the time of the equinox, signifies harmonious balance, partnership, sharing, polarity, duality and androgyny.

Traditional Beltane: I MAÿ

Beltane means 'bright fire' and signifies the beginning of summer. On the eve of this festival, all household fires were extinguished and on the next morning the materials for a huge communal bonfire were collected. These traditionally came from nine different trees: birch, rowan, ash, alder, willow, hawthorn, oak, holly and hazel. To increase its magical potency, the bonfire was kindled by the friction method so the fire seemed to come out of the very wood itself. People and animals jumped the fire, both for blessing and protection; each household took some coals home to kindle their new hearth fire; and the ashes of the bonfire were scattered amongst the crops. Other well-known Beltane customs are the erection of a Maypole around which dancers frolicked amorously, the honouring of a May King and Queen who preside over the events and games of the festival, and a Jack-in-the-Green, a character who wears a costume covered in greenery and flowers representing the Spirit of lush, verdant growth, the Green Man.

Australian Beltane: 1 November

The constellations Cetus and Eridanus appear in the eastern night sky followed, as the season progresses, by Taurus and the Pleiades. In southern Australia this is early summer; warm, even hot in the day, but still quite chilly at night. Many trees and shrubs are in flower and the song of cicadas heralds the imminent summer. Birds are feeding their young and mountain pygmy possums give birth. In the north, it is the 'build up', the time of the pre-monsoon storms, characterised by hot, cloudy, humid weather, flickering lightning and intermittent rain. When the first rains fall, the dry earth rapidly becomes green, frogs are heard croaking, and the land regenerates after the fires of the previous dry season. Wallabies and tree kangaroos give birth, and estuarine crocodiles and turtles begin nesting.

Meditation

Like a cicada who leaves behind its brown underworld shell, as the weather warms up we eagerly strip off our winter coverings to reveal an invigorated summer self. Unveiled, pale-skinned, singing of the green season which will be over all too soon, we venture out to greet the sunlight. This is a time to make offerings to tree spirits, to listen to the earth, and to celebrate the life force. Scarab-like, the cicada symbolises the eternally returning sun-cycle, his shell a talisman of infinity.

Traditional Litha: 22 June

Midsummer is the high point of the sun's cycle and the longest day of the year. After the solstice the light begins to wane and the Sun God correspondingly decreases in potency. Traditional solstice customs centre primarily around fire in the form of bonfires, fire-wheels and torches. Sun- or fire-wheels, circular frames covered with

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dry vegetation, were lit and rolled down hills and then omens were taken according to whether they reached the bottom alight, a good sign, or were extinguished, a bad sign. Solstice bonfires were lit by the friction method and dancers circled around them wearing herbal wreaths of rue, roses, St John's wort, trefoil and vervain, later throwing their garlands across the flames to their lovers. Couples jumped the fire for fertility and protection, flowers were strewn amid the flames accompanied by a blessing, and weeds were thrown in with a curse. Divination concerning love was practised. Midsummer was also an excellent time for communication with the Faeries.

Australian Litha: 22 December

The night sky unveils Orion the Hunter and his dogs, including Sirius the brightest star in the sky, rising in the east. Summer is Australian society's festive time, school holidays begin and workers take time off. Down south, many native plants are flowering and fruiting, pygmy possums, kookaburras and sacred kingfishers are attending to their young, and dolphins can be seen along the coast playing and hunting near the shore. In the north, it is the time of the early monsoon. The wet season begins after the summer solstice and is caused by seasonal change in the direction of the winds. After the sun moves south of the equator, Australia warms up while Asia cools down. Dry, chilly winds blow outwards from Asia, gather warmth and moisture from the oceans, and subsequently bring summer rains to northern Australia. As the season progresses, heavy rains fall daily and plants grow quickly. Freshwater crocodiles hatch, blue-tongued lizards and bats give birth, and the dangerous box jellyfish wash out of creeks into the open sea.

meditation

In the south, the increasing heat summons the cold-blooded snake to bask in the sun and outdoor revellers must give him a wide berth,

his fangs more immediately dangerous than the sun's harsh rays upon the skin. Up north, the Rainbow Serpent revitalises the land with the first monsoon rains, greening the flora and bringing fertility to the people. At the sun's zenith, the twin snakes encircle the arms of the primordial Goddess, delivering creation and destruction. Revere the double serpent-power, giver of life, bringer of death.

Litha. We sit on the dusty earth, fanning out in concentric circles around the Priestess who stands alone in the centre.

'Close your eyes,' she instructs, 'and look within'. Continuing in a slow meditative voice, she says: 'Focus your mind inside your body, at the base of your spine, the area directly connected with the Land. Two snakes are becoming restless there. The cool, white moon snake on the left side and the hot, red sun snake on the right are stirring tonight. Allow them to uncoil and begin rising up your spine, rising, rising. Now they cross sides, the sun snake to the left, the moon snake to the right, rising, rising. They cross back again. Let them continue up, crossing, returning, crossing, returning, making a double helix pattern, all the way up your spine to the back of your head. Rising over your crown they come down to rest at your third eye.'

We stand, linking hands. Accompanied by a slow drum-beat, we spiral deosil in a snake-dance toward the centre. The Priestess, whirling widdershins, leads the spiral back out again. In, then out, in, out. Visions arise, time slows down, and above us wheel the starry arms of the Milky Way.

Traditional Lughnasad: 1 August

Lughnasad is the celebration of early harvest or the first fruits. The reaping, threshing and winnowing of the pre-industrial cereal

harvest continued through the month of August, and was an occasion involving the whole community. In Ireland this was the festival of the god Lugh, patron deity of all human skills, and his foster mother Tailtiu who died of exhaustion after clearing the land for raising crops. In Tailtiu's honour, Lugh founded an annual fair on 1st August, at which craftspeople sold their wares, feasting, assemblies and games were held and marriage contracts signed.

In Anglo-Saxon custom, loaves were made from the first-cut sheaves, blessed, and then crumbled into the four corners of a barn to make it a safe place to store the grain. It was also believed that the Harvest Spirit resided in the fields and that, as the reapers cut the grain, the Spirit was forced to retreat further into the ever-dwindling remainder. No-one wanted to be the one responsible for destroying the Harvest Spirit's refuge and so the reapers took turns to throw their sickles at the last stand of grain. It was then woven into a corn-dolly which was set in a place of honour at the subsequent harvest supper.

Australian Lughnasad: 1 February

Gemini is high in the eastern night sky, followed subsequently by Cancer, and Leo's brightest star appears low on the horizon. In the south this is late summer, often much hotter than Litha itself, and bushfire danger is high. Some birds begin to fly north, bogong moths emerge and are preyed upon by kestrels, the beautiful gum emperor caterpillars inhabit eucalypts, native trout spawn, and Tasmanian devils begin mating. In northern Australia it is the time of the late monsoon. In January, February and March, the weather can manifest in furious cyclones that may last for several days, bringing torrential rains. Forests can be devastated, large trees uprooted or stripped of nearly all their foliage, and animals have difficulty finding food. The heavy thunderstorms mean that the land is rapidly flooded, it is the maximum growth period for native vegetables although they are not

ready to harvest, magpie geese and broilgas lay their eggs, estuarine crocodiles hatch, and platypus juveniles venture out of their burrows for the first time.

meditation

This is a season of extremes and contradictions. Bushfires in the south and cyclones in the north threaten to engulf the land, and yet, the water regenerates indigenous plant life and so too does the bushfire: many native seeds require burning before germination. Life and death dance upon the same ground. This is a time to appreciate the inscrutable wisdom and power of nature. Earth is the cauldron and all beings are transmuted by her alchemy.

Lughnasad. The drums beat out a steady pulse as we move deosil within the circle's boundary, round and round we dance. Hands rise, clash the cymbals, shake the tambourine. Arms outstretched, whirl on the spot, hair streaming. Oscillating between two poles of consciousness: the drums a lulling heartbeat, the percussion a harsh awakening. Drum—clash, step—whirl, rise—plunge, relax—tense, calm—storm.

Into the circle spin Bushfire and Cyclone, volatile deities of the season, one clad in raggedy red, the other in tattered dark blue, costumes trailing behind them like two Chinese dragons. Travelling widdershins, dancing separately and then together, they rush the perimeter, circling the edge and returning to the centre, creating a chaotic vortex of energy.

Arms linked, we dance back-to-back, the ground tilts, the sky is inverted, and the elements mix in the topsy-turvy world of the sabbat.

Traditional mabon: 22 september

The autumn equinox marked the completion of the harvest that begun at Lughnasad and was a time of celebration, feasting and thanksgiving for the abundance of food which sustained the farming community through the winter. At this festival the sun 'sets', or crosses the celestial equator, towards the dark half of the year, and the Sun God descends into the Underworld to await his rebirth at Yule. Ancient 'slain' harvest gods personify the actual harvest crop, for example, the figure of John Barleycorn is the spirit of barley, Dionysus is the personification of grapes, and Osiris is that of hops. Mabon customs resemble Lughnasad ones, such as the belief in a grain deity dwelling within the harvest, the fear of the last sheaf and the making of a corn-dolly. After the harvest was over, there would be a rollicking communal supper presided over by a Queen and King, representatives of the bounty of the land.

Australian mabon: 22 march

Corvus the Crow is visible at night in the east and Spica, the major star of Virgo, is on the horizon. Down south, the weather is still quite hot and often does not begin to cool until a week or two after the equinox. Many birds begin their migration north to Asia, skinks and tortoises commence hibernation, and bilbies, flying foxes and dingoes mate. Up north, the late monsoon progresses into the 'break up', or end of the wet season, as April approaches. This is a transition period between early and true autumn, the rains are ending, the land is drying out, vegetable crops are maturing and lots of bush foods are available. Ibis, broilgas and Burdekin ducks are sitting on eggs, and on the mid-Western Australian coast, corals spawn, attracting huge, gentle whale sharks. The tail-end of the monsoon is interspersed with fine, hot periods which gradually progress into cooler, windier days. At this time, the sight of an orange or red sunset tells Aboriginal people that the dry season is imminent.

meditation

As the Sun of the year sets and enters the Underworld, the seemingly motionless, rock-hugging lichen has a growth spurt. When our dreams, plans and lives seem unbearably slow to bear fruit amidst the impatience and instant gratification of modern life, honest evaluation reveals that in fact much has changed. This is a time to ponder personal transformation, both evident and subtle, to give thanks for all that has happened in the year, and to meditate, ruminate, digest and wonder.

Traditional samhain: 1 november

Ploughing the fields and sowing the next crop during October marked the close of the pre-industrial cereal cycle, then during November animals were slaughtered and salted in readiness for the lean time of winter. In Ireland, offerings to the beloved dead and the faerie folk were made at this time, and places were set at the dinner table for the recently deceased. For the Anglo-Saxons, this dark, chilly season was a prime time for sightings of Frau Holda leading the hoards of the dead across the night sky in the Wild Hunt.

Also known as the Feast of the Dead, Third Harvest and Halloween, Samhain is the Witches' New Year, a liminal point in time between the old year and the new, when the gates between the worlds are open, enabling the easy passage of supernatural entities. It is therefore an excellent time for divination, communication with the spirit world, and otherworld journeying. In the guise of Halloween, ostensibly part of the Christian calendar but essentially a secular festival popular with children, houses are decorated with skulls, cobwebs and Jack-o-lanterns, and games such as apple-dunking and blind man's bluff are played.

Australian samhain: 1 may

Scorpius rising in the eastern night sky followed, as the season progresses, by Ophichus herald winter, and towards the southeast,

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Sagittarius returns to complete the star-cycle of the year. In southern Australia, the weather really begins to cool down, birds fly north, and fungi emerges from the forest floor. However, it is a fertile season: there are many flowering and fruiting plants, quolls breed, the dingo mating continues, and whales migrate along the coasts to calve and mate. In the north, it is the end of the wet and the start of the dry season; the rains are diminished, the days are hot, but the nights are cool. The land is covered in long grass and in some areas the Aboriginal 'firestick farming' method of burning the grass begins. At this time goannas mate, the eggs of magpie geese hatch and many other birds begin nesting. As May progresses into June, the cold season approaches and it is the start of the great harvest of bush vegetables.

meditation

Mysterious fungi sprout above the earth's surface in faerie rings while the greater part of their plant-body remains beneath the ground. These portals to the Underworld beckon to us; mushroom doorways leading to secret passages within our consciousness. This liminal season stands between the old year and the new; it is a time to traverse the otherworlds, greet the dead, and divine the future. Enter the dark tranquillity and explore the mind's labyrinth.

Samhain. The altar is draped with a cloth the colour of midnight and covered with numerous candles. 'One light for each Spirit here with me tonight,' whispers the Witch. Magic mushrooms steep in a goblet of red wine and a crystal ball rests nearby on a black cushion. Sipping from the concoction she stares fixedly at the orb and as it begins to cloud over, utters a greeting to her ancestors.

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about the author

Caroline Tully was initiated as a Witch in 1985, in 1992 she became a member of the Church of All Worlds, and in 1993 she became involved in the Ordo Templi Orientis. Since 1998 Caroline has been concentrating on the harmonious integration of northern hemisphere seasonal festival concepts into a southern hemisphere context. Caroline has had articles on Witchcraft, Paganism, astrology and other topics published in more than twenty international Pagan and Witchcraft magazines including *The Cauldron*, *Green Egg*, *Pagan Times*, *Pagan Dawn* and *Witchcraft Magazine*. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art and currently works as a tapestry weaver in Melbourne.

12 sacred landscapes

YARROW

Your true self and the land are one.

(R.J. Stewart, *The Way of Merlin*)

‘Sacred sites!’ the big man leered. ‘If all what them says was sacred sites, there’d be three hundred bloody billion sacred sites in Australia.’

‘Not far wrong, mate!’ called the thin Aboriginal.

(Bruce Chatwin’s report of an outback pub conversation, in
The Songlines)

Shallow is the shadow world . . . deep the world of earth and stone, where the Seasons turn.

(John Matthews, *Breaking the Circle*)

There is a particular river in a rural location that I know. On the walk to the swimming hole, only a couple of hundred yards off a bumpy dirt track, you can usually hear the dogs yapping away at the nearby farmhouse, and sometimes see the farmer driving around the paddocks in his ute. Despite various incursions by

humans, including an old dam not far upstream, the river is still relatively clean and the Water Spirits alive and well.

I'm alone at the river in autumn. The weather is still hot, but the river is already nearly too cold to swim. The water in this part of the river is clear and shallow, meandering in and out of small grassy islands, winding down towards a small waterfall. I remove my clothes and slide down the smooth rockface into the whirlpool below. Even at this time of year, before the rains have started, the flow is still fast enough to propel me out of the pool again. There are several deep holes worn in the solid rock of the riverbed, just large enough to fit a person standing up. It feels strange to stand in one of these with water up to my neck, watching the rest of the river rushing past just six inches deep. I climb into each, then glide down over the rocky creek bed, dreaming that I have somehow transformed into a fish as I am washed into a large and deep green pool. Emerging into its stillness, I feel as if I have grown a new skin and have been reborn. Drifting slowly downstream, I watch the clouds moving overhead, eventually clambering out just before a lip of rock where the water tumbles over into the next series of pools. The first of these is a perfectly round hole, partway down the waterfall. The water here churns fiercely, and I slide into it to be bobbed around like a cork. I check it for unseen obstacles and climb out, back to the top of the falls, working my way carefully across the slippery ledge, and then I leap into the hole. My heart is thumping—it seems a long way down, especially the first time, and the hole isn't deep.

I slip back into the water—I'm like a fish again, tumbling and sliding down into the large shallow pool at the bottom of the falls. This one is warm and muddy, and its rocks are slippery. Standing guard over it are half-a-dozen giant brooding rocks, almost like standing stones. Below is yet another waterfall. I hide behind it, peering out through the curtain of water pelting down in front of my face. I feel afraid as I work my way around to sit directly

underneath the narrow chute of the cascade itself, feeling the power of all that water now thundering down on top of my head. If I'm not careful, I could easily hurt myself under here. The river becomes shallow again, winding its way down past a campsite, now closer to the road. Further downstream is another series of cascades, a long waterfall streaming into a narrow steep-sided pool, and below that, a gentle refreshing one, with thousands of tiny bubbles drifting up from underneath to form a natural spa. Further down is another campsite and then the river winds on and on, down into the flatlands, slowly weaving its way into the nearby town.

I have been acquainted with this river for more than twenty years now, and in the past I have lived at different locations along it, using its waters to wash in, to water my gardens with, and sometimes to drink from. I have always felt a certain sense of 'ownership' of this stretch of river, or perhaps 'custodianship' is a better word. Sadly, in the years since I moved from the district, I have been unable to visit very often, but somehow its landscape seems to have worked its way into my very being.

Whenever I do manage to return, it takes a bit of time to become acquainted again. I observe the changes, check whether the river is high or low for the time of year, watch the skinks scuttling in and out of the cracks in the rock, dodge the small spiny spiders—'Death's Heads'—stringing their webs in between the shrubs on the path. I see how the site has recovered after drought or bushfire, mourn the demise of a wild peach tree that had once established itself in a crack in the rock and used to feed us with its fruit each year. Occasionally, I have hiked far upstream, into the bush, learning about new places that I have never before seen. Each time I visit, I take out everything that I have brought in, and cart out any rubbish that others may have left. There is not a lot, as most of those who visit love this place and wish to leave it untouched.

Does all of this have anything at all to do with Witchcraft or



the river. photo by yarrow.

Paganism? Actually, it does. The current within Witchcraft and Paganism that concerns me here is often a hidden one, and is about having a right relationship with the sacred land. This undoubtedly doesn't fire the public imagination to the same degree as visions of Witches working magic and spells, or of groups of people dancing naked around bonfires. However, within Witchcraft and Paganism, there are also those who have an ongoing intimate relationship with the land on which they live. The public face of this is the environmental and political activism of groups and traditions such as Dragon Environmental Network, Reclaiming, and others of a similar nature, which often concern themselves with civil disobedience and working magic in an effort to prevent inappropriate development of particular locations. The more hidden face takes the form of a direct and intimate relationship with the very land itself. Many people might label this as Shamanism or Druidry rather than Witchcraft. I find these sorts of distinctions are

often rather arbitrary, as many Witches freely acknowledge the Shamanic roots of their religion and practice.

The basis of my own Pagan practice is attempting to rediscover something of that original Shamanic world view, once a given amongst tribal and traditional peoples but now becoming increasingly rare in the face of advancing technology and urbanisation. Unfortunately, this world view may not actually be all that common within Paganism itself. It is a subtle irony that while Witchcraft and Paganism are generally acknowledged as earth religions, they have immense appeal amongst a largely urban population, whose only direct relationship with the land or with natural phenomena may be on weekends, or perhaps even less often.

My Pagan world view has developed very slowly. Unlike many others now in Paganism, I certainly did not know that I was a Witch or a Pagan from early childhood. However, I did grow up on a farm, where I spent long hours walking, unconsciously absorbing the lessons of the land. After a stint of several years in the city where I was theoretically studying at university, but actually spending far more time doing other things, my first impulse on completing my studies was to leave and head for the country again. Much of my time in my last few years in the city was spent growing vegetables, alternating with escaping nearly every weekend and often mid-week as well to go bushwalking. Since those days, there have been many long years of attempting to find some sort of balance between the need for financial survival and the desire to live close to the land, which has often meant some very unsatisfactory compromises.

During that time, my understanding of the land has grown steadily—witnessing the effects of drought and bushfire, windstorms, erosion and floods, travelling through the desert, homesteading in the tropics, on an island off the coast of South Australia and in many different places in rural Victoria, growing and harvesting vegetables and fruit, and collecting the firewood to cook them with because

sometimes it was the only means of cooking we had. My understanding has developed from trudging through remote bush country in the searing heat of a 43-degree day, or from walking in the mountains in thick freshly fallen snow where every sound becomes pure and clear, listening to the invisible lyrebirds calling out their songs. It has grown through establishing a sense of belonging in each place that I have lived, beginning with exploring the landscape of the immediate vicinity, and gradually venturing further and further afield. At some stage during this process, I discovered Paganism after a number of near misses, having already met several people who I later discovered were Witches (they were not interested in advertising the fact).

After coming into contact with the Pagan community, I realised I had found my spiritual home, and enthusiastically embraced what it was that Witches seemed to do. However, after a fair bit of experimentation over a few years, I realised that while I was undoubtedly going to remain a Pagan, neither group work nor elaborate rituals seemed destined to be an integral part of my path. I began to move back towards an individual practice, perhaps most closely related to that of the Hedge Witch. This was exactly how I had started out in the first place, long before I had the slightest understanding of Paganism, or for that matter even knew that modern Pagans existed. I felt comfortable living the rural life, in proximity to the tall trees, immersing myself in the life of land and the seasons, growing and collecting herbs and wild fruits, making potions with them, and finding and caring for special sites in the local landscape, sites which I began to view as sacred, regardless of whether they were generally acknowledged as such.

In Australia, the only generally recognised sacred sites tend to be famous ones under Aboriginal guardianship—places like Uluru, or perhaps isolated sites in the remote Kimberley. Few of us, particularly those who live in urban areas in the southern states, will even get to

see many of these sites in our lifetimes, as they are so very far away. However, while in no way underestimating the significance of well-known sacred sites, it seems to me that recognising only these few as sacred is a very limited outlook and completely misses the point.

Bruce Chatwin, in his travelogue *The Songlines*, summed up concisely the dissonance between the world view that recognises only famous sacred sites, or perhaps none at all, and the Aboriginal world view, which sees virtually the whole of Australia as a sacred landscape. This is quite apart from the reported inaccuracies in his depiction of Aboriginal beliefs and traditions. There are literally thousands of locations, which, regardless of whether they are officially recognised, or even if there is no longer an Aboriginal community left alive to care for them, ought to be treated as sacred sites. All that is required is the eyes to see them with, and the will to visit and care for them. However, in Australia, ultimately I believe it is up to non-Aboriginals to find their own ways of relating to the land, rather than attempting to emulate or appropriate Aboriginal ways.

A sacred landscape is generally considered to be a landscape that still retains most of its features of wildness and grandeur. However, on a much smaller scale, a sacred landscape might even be consciously created in an urban or semi-urban environment. One only has to think of the gardens created by the monks of the Japanese Zen temples—austere in their simplicity, but definitely sacred. Sacred landscapes are becoming more and more difficult for city dwellers to have access to these days, and those that remain often suffer badly from over-use and disrespect, such as thoughtless ‘improvements’, littering, and people trampling carelessly all over them. Sacred landscapes do exist quite close to huge cities, but people may have to exercise some lateral thinking to find them. Within about an hour’s drive of most of the large cities in Victoria, there are very many places that I personally view as still having some of the qualities of sacred landscape, despite the best efforts of humans to destroy them.

A sacred landscape can be something as apparently insignificant as a small, wild, section of creek winding its way towards a country town, or a parcel of bush on Crown land. It does not necessarily have to be large, or famous, or part of a National Park.

In this respect it is perhaps fortunate that Australia is both a huge and arid continent, with large areas of country that, for various reasons, are often left more or less alone. There are still reasonably accessible places that have an element of the wild about them, which are somehow managing to survive the damage that thoughtless humans inflict on them. On the other hand, the Australian landscape is both extremely fragile and unique. It is an ecosystem that has developed to cope with generally low and erratic or intermittent rainfall on shallow soils that are easily eroded. Totally unsuitable land-use practices imported from Europe, the widespread use of chemicals in agriculture, and the voracious appetite of cities and agribusiness for water are wreaking havoc on the health of this land. The old view of the land as sacred, and a living entity in its own right, is something that seems to have largely disappeared from European-style culture, and only relatively recently has it been discovered again when it is very nearly too late.

Treating a landscape as sacred involves practical tasks that Nigel Pennick refers to in *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* as 'spiritual gardening'. Some of this involves picking up litter, removing noxious weeds, restoring damage, adding only those man-made things that are strictly necessary and in keeping with the environment, and removing those things that aren't. It also means ensuring that biodiversity is retained and helping the right species to grow. These sorts of activities can be easily undertaken on either an individual or a group basis, and many 'friends of' groups have been formed to care for particular reserves, rivers and other sites.

Using and visiting a sacred site requires some form of repayment, and lugging several huge sackfuls of other peoples' rubbish a

kilometre or more up a dirt track often feels like payment enough! However, some Pagans also leave coins or offerings of flowers, fruit or foods that wild animals can eat. But sensitivity to the site is important, and we need to consider if we might be leaving foods potentially harmful to wildlife, or seeds that may turn into yet another noxious plant. I like Pennick's suggestion that any form of ritual at a site ought to be one that the site itself demands, rather than pre-conceived ones imposed by humans. Also, cluttering up the countryside with imported crystals and candle stumps, the remains of spells and whatnot, is definitely not a practice to recommend. I find particularly grotesque the end result of the European practice of tying rags and other human debris to certain trees, often those surrounding healing springs.

Unfortunately, the magnitude of the task facing those who wish to treat the landscape as sacred often seems overwhelming. One day when I was still fairly new to Paganism, I was taking a trip to the city. It was an extremely hot summer's day, so I decided to take a break halfway to get out of the heat for a while. I had a copy of Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* with me, and so I made my way down to the river to sit amongst the trees and watch the cool water. I was simply horrified to see the vast amounts of styrofoam cups, papers and other debris that had blown down to the river from the nearby fast-food outlet just up the bank from where I was sitting. I was contemplating the amount of time it was going to take to pick up all this mess when I opened the book at random. The page I alighted on was one where Starhawk paints a vision of a Pagan society at an unspecified time in the future. In her scenario, there is a custom before every public ritual of picking up all the rubbish lying around the ritual site, a practice already current amongst many Pagans. In Starhawk's future vision, however, there was no rubbish to pick up, because the custom had been going for so long that most of it

had been cleared away. In her future society, nothing is made to be wasted, nothing is carelessly tossed away.

To me, the very fact that Starhawk saw the necessity of writing this passage sums up the essence of the current dilemma we face in relation to the land. The landscape has been desacralised to the point where much of it now resembles a rubbish dump, or perhaps, as Nigel Pennick has pointed out, the Wasteland of Arthurian legend (*Celtic Sacred Landscapes*). Walking along a river or creek in an urban setting is often a particularly depressing experience, witnessing some of the worst results of the neglect and desecration of our natural heritage. The water itself will appear dirty and lifeless, quite unlike streams in wilder parts of the country. Although these non-urban streams no longer teem with eels and other life, as they once did within living memory of people who grew up on the land, they still retain some of their original lifeforce, provided they are largely left alone.

In an urban setting, the water will be far from drinkable, and the banks of the creek will be lined with exotic species, noxious weeds and garden escapees, perhaps still with the occasional indigenous plant here and there. There will be great hunks of concrete and rusty pipe, broken bottles and plastic bags, discarded clothes and car tyres, even supermarket trolleys lying around, waiting to be picked up maybe once a year on 'Clean Up Australia Day'. This is truly what Mary E. White has referred to as 'turning rivers into drains' (*Running Down: Water in a Changing Land*). It is remote indeed from the days of people worshipping the spirits of the rivers, or of the great Neolithic earthworks, when humans fashioned the landscape in the image of the Goddess (Michael Dames, *The Silbury Treasure*). It is also a long way from the Aboriginal Dreamtime, where the landscape is a shimmering network of Dreaming tracks in which the ancestors left their trail.

In some parts of Australia less influenced by European culture,

Aboriginal people still have access to a living tribal tradition, despite the efforts of white settlers who had no wish to understand the societies they encountered and too often destroyed (whether deliberately, or occasionally unwittingly). There is still a strong relationship with sacred sites which form part of the territory of a tribe and are under the traditional 'ownership' of particular individuals. However, even in the most isolated parts of Australia, this system has been breaking down virtually since the beginning of white settlement, and continues to do so, although now in less obvious, but no less destructive, ways.

Each time the Aboriginal peoples' ties with their land are weakened, further sites become endangered, although surviving Aboriginal communities still retain many stories and songs describing the journeys of the ancestors, which explain how certain features of the landscape were formed. In addition to their religious significance, these stories and songs would have fulfilled a vital practical purpose in a nomadic society, that of preserving detailed knowledge of particular features of topography. They were also central to the delicate business of balancing out competing claims to the land. With the fragmentation of Aboriginal culture, the traditional owners or custodians of a site may no longer be able to get to their sites on a regular basis. Indeed, some of them may have to wait half a lifetime to visit certain ones. When they do, there are particular procedures associated with visiting a site and getting re-acquainted with it, and particular songs to be sung (Peggy Brock, *Women, Rites and Sites*).

In the Western tradition, the echoes of the old world view are also still to be found in traditional stories and songs, many of which have been painstakingly collected from the oral tradition by anthropologists and antiquarians. Thus we have a vast repository of lore associated with rocks and mountains, springs and trees, and fantastic tales of water creatures and Faeries, and various other-worldly beings which haunt the wild places and are often dangerous

to humans. In the British Isles, Traditional Pagans in rural areas (who may refer to themselves as 'Guardians', abhorring the term 'Witch') also seem to have something of that original Shamanic vision of the land. Some still remember the Old Ways that they were taught, even if urbanisation and the accompanying fragmentation of communities means it is becoming increasingly difficult to practise them (David Clarke and Andy Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*).

In Britain, traces of Pagan traditions relating directly to the land are still seen in such customs as well-dressing, the maintenance of chalk figures on hillsides, the painting of particular stones, or gatherings or festivals at particular sacred locations on certain days. Many of these festivals have had to be consciously revived as urbanisation and the breakdown of long-term family associations in particular districts have taken their toll. The character of many of these festivals has probably also changed significantly over the centuries, not least of which is the connection with the very land itself. Many festivals with recognisably Pagan themes often take place in public, in distinctly urban areas, sometimes even on the asphalt of pub car parks! The 'real thing'—consciously interacting with the actual land itself—tends to remain private, small and often secretive, as probably it always has. It consists of practices undertaken by individuals or small groups in specific rural locations that are not likely to be famous or even especially well known. Whether the 'real thing' is ancient beyond the reckoning of time or invented last week ultimately becomes irrelevant, as it is the connection with the land itself that counts.

From my contact with Pagans in the British Isles, it seems clear that, despite all the obstacles, the concept of custodianship of the land is with us still. But perhaps even now there is no longer anyone young enough or interested enough to practice it amongst traditional rural communities, as described in *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*. Be that as it may, it does live on in a different form. Particularly amongst the

membership of the various Druid orders, there is a strong relationship to sacred sites, and not always those of nationally recognised importance. There are various environmental organisations, often with a large Pagan membership, which continue to care for the land in general and sacred sites in particular, as best as they are able within the strictures imposed by the various ‘authorities’. Some of these ‘authorities’ often seem to demonstrate an almost wilful misunderstanding of the associated issues. There are still regular confrontations on various levels between the ‘authorities’ and those Pagans who feel an obligation of guardianship towards particular sites, or even wish to gain access to them at significant junctures of the year.

Aside from the more obvious purposes of learning about the seasonal cycles and the landscape in order to better understand the basis of Paganism, conserving sites of significance or going out into the wild to collect supplies of herbs, this work ultimately has no other purpose than its own. Eventually, we will regain the way of looking at the world that most of us in industrialised Western nations have sadly lost. We will gradually develop an innate understanding of the natural world, and bridge the artificial gap between us and the land imposed on ourselves through our modern urban lifestyle (Nigel Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes*).

Sitting on the banks of a small, wild stream, observing the flow and play of the water, immersing oneself in it, lying on the ground feeling the pulse of the earth, leaning up against a huge and ancient eucalypt, perching on a granite rock face high above the surrounding countryside, watching a distant bushfire at night—getting in contact with the actual, physical elements helps us to understand their power and the underlying principles behind them. The world of nature is both a microcosm and a macrocosm.

In this world view, ‘how-to’ books detailing the complexity of Pagan rituals are really not necessary. The only books that are necessary are reference books—plant identification, natural history,

maps and guidebooks—as well as any surviving records that concern the mythology of particular localities and allow us to gain at least a partial understanding of how the original inhabitants may have viewed them. Eventually, we will see the land as numinous and alive. A tree is no longer just a tree, a hill not merely a hill. Trees, hills, landscapes and sacred sites have an inherent power, and pilgrimages to certain sites at particular times of the year will also form a part of the practice. However, it will not be necessary to perform complex rituals, merely to be present and aware. Any rituals performed will be in direct response to the site itself, and will usually be simple in character, with a distinct lack of complex props. They may also be enacted specifically for the protection of the site.

When interacting with the landscape consciously, we need to become aware of what it is actually telling us. In neo-Paganism, people often talk of concepts such as ‘asking permission’ to a tree, for example, when cutting a wand. The underlying assumption seems to be that permission for our activities will inevitably be granted. Sometimes, however, it is not, and we need to become more aware of that possibility. Similarly, permission to go into certain locations may not always be granted, even to someone who has been there many times before. If there has been a long absence, it may take time to become re-acquainted before the place will accept someone. Likewise, it is wise to consider whom you take to certain locations. Is the person likely to respect and understand the location? If not, it is better to leave them behind.

Extended periods of time spent out in the wild will eventually be rewarded by some understanding of what nature has to teach us. I am not talking about nature romanticism—nature is indeed ‘red in tooth and claw’. Immersing oneself in the natural world on its own terms can at times be dangerous. The natural world is not inherently benevolent to humans, and some landscapes seem not to particularly care to have us around. Certain places in the wild will

make it quite clear that humans are not welcome at that time, or perhaps at any time, and all of the elements are potentially dangerous.

Mindfulness of exactly what we are doing there, why, and how, becomes important. Even how we move through the landscape becomes a consideration. Thundering through the bush talking loudly to one's companions about inconsequential matters is not conducive to seeing and hearing what is actually there. Seeing, hearing and understanding what is there is something that is best done alone, or perhaps with just a handful of other people. Walking through the landscape in this manner becomes something of a moving meditation. Spatial sense can alter, sense of time can alter, and we can slip into an altered state before we are aware of it.

As this work continues, the land will develop a 'pull' from which it is not easy to escape. There may come dreams of particular landscapes. If at all possible, it is beneficial to explore the landscape in the specific region of your birth. If a person finds themselves by circumstances far from their location of birth, then a relationship can be developed with the new location, although it takes time—starting with the immediate vicinity, an exploration of the wild places nearby, then venturing further afield as places become known.

However, once a relationship is developed with a site or sites, it becomes an obligation to continue that relationship, with visits as often as possible. This may end up being only once per year, or perhaps less often for sites far from one's home district, but in each case, the site needs to be honoured in an appropriate way. Practically, this often means weeding and rubbish collection; esoterically it means approaching the site in the way that it wishes to be approached, or leaving it alone if that is what it tells you. It will involve taking time to get to know its flora and fauna, observing the changes over the seasons and years, listening to what the site says, and paying attention to what it has to teach. However, once the mindset has been acquired, it is not something that can ever be lost again. It may be temporarily

forgotten, perhaps, when the demands of our modern lifestyle get in the way, as they are prone to, but ultimately the land seeps into one's bones, and after that, life is never again quite the same.

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About the author

Yarrow grew up on a farm in country Victoria where she first began to learn about the land and its rhythms. She has since lived in many different locations in her home state and in other parts of Australia, and is now almost back where she started from, in Victoria's Central Highlands. She took her first steps on the esoteric path more than twenty years ago, finally discovering the Australian Pagan community in the early 1990s (she still wonders why it took her so long). She classifies herself essentially as a Hedge Witch who spends much of her spare time talking to Druids, but also has a strong interest in Tibetan Buddhism. She has a degree in European languages from La Trobe University, and currently works in the alternative health industry. She has previously had articles published in *Pagan Times*, the magazine of the Australian Pagan Alliance, and *Shadowplay*, an online magazine.



13

A witch's garden: herbs and incense

LESLEY-CARON VEATER

Still your thoughts for a moment and take this journey with me now, through the garden gate. Let us wander the stone paths at our leisure. We walk through rose arch and past lavender hedge. Breathe the fragrant headiness of honeysuckle and jasmine, and the citrus sharpness of melissa and pineapple sage. Thyme and basil leave a pungent aroma as they are crushed underfoot. The warm sun and our passing combining to draw fragrant oils to the surface. The drone of bees and the warm heady perfumes draw us on to an altered state.

The feast for our eyes is no less. Under shady bowers of climbers, the catnip, mints and hellebore crowd. The path winds through huge hedges of lavender, the heavy flower heads drooping over the stone wall. Bees hover and hum. Tall borage, like 'triffids', lean over eau-de-cologne mints and sages at the back of a bed, their blue star flowers bringing smiles and thoughts of long cool glasses of punch. A mass of butterflies rise at once as we pass, landing on shoulders and hands to our delight.

A witch's garden: herbs and incense



Drawing by feral.

We catch a glimpse of secret places, between the shrubs and under the hedges. Here grow monkshood, vervain and skullcap with foxgloves all round the edges. The entrance to this section is hidden. Slowly we wander past a mound of nasturtiums. Nodding their heads in the breeze, they have climbed right up the side of the house and fall all over an ash tree nearby.

Roughly painted old pots spill johnny jump-ups from atop another field stone wall. Lumps of driftwood are woven together to create another gate. Large sandy hagstones line a trodden earth path toward a group of oak and ash and thorn.

Mullein already in seed nods heavily among hardening stalks of poppy heads, indicating that summer is at its peak. Gentle comfrey bells speak to us of faerie visits, and wonderful false balm of gilead leans over the path with its clean, fresh camphorous fragrance.

Musky roses nod everywhere, heavy with scent. The ladybirds feast on the last of the aphids.

We sit now, cushioned on mounds of carpeting thyme, amid a lawn edged with chamomile, not speaking. We are still, breathing and sensing the garden about us. As we begin to drift, becoming quite small, the garden's presence fills our senses. We doze under a group of red-flowering gums where honeyeaters chat and the magpies warble their gentle song. We drift on the scent of thyme; *Thymus vulgaris* enables one to see the Faeries.

When I first visited the house where I now live I was dismayed. I thought, 'They couldn't have meant *this* house surely!' I'd been shown the place in a dream and as usual I'd only been given the basic bones of it, the style of house and location. I had been able to identify it by telephone with the agent but upon inspection I was disturbed to say the least. What had I signed up for? I had done it again, hadn't I? Leaping in without checking first. Still, I thought, perhaps something could be done with it—the streaming wet walls could be dealt with, roofs could be fixed, the kitchen repaired. Strangely there were no doors.

The poor garden was the worst of it though. An absence of garden, it seemed. Dead. A dustbowl of grey 'soil' and weeds where once perhaps a decent garden had been. No sign, however, of surviving shrubs at all.

On moving in I gathered bags of horse manure from farms in the neighbourhood and dumped the mounds upon the garden. This was followed by bags of green mulched prunings thrown on a foot thick. All were unceremoniously dumped on top of thigh-high weeds and grass. 'Sleep,' I said, 'no going to seed! Sleep now and we will talk again later.' Spring and summer then passed as we cleaned up the inside of the house, painted and made plans for repairs and alterations.

cleansing spray

- 500 ml apple cider vinegar
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried lavender
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried rosemary
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried sage
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried thyme
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried wormwood
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried rue
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried mint
- 2 teaspoons chopped and dried hyssop
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and bruised

Combine the vinegar and dried herbs in a glass jar or bottle with an air tight lid and leave in the sun for two weeks. Strain the liquid and dispose of solids, bottle and label. Add the garlic and allow it to steep for several days, then strain and bottle the liquid. Melt paraffin wax around the lid to preserve the contents.

Use as a general household cleanser to disinfect. Place in a spray bottle with water, and use to clean door handles, windows and doorways. (Rue can be irritating to the skin so use caution.) Some of the herbs are used to expel 'the unwanted', providing a level of protection.

With the arrival of autumn came the call from the garden. I could no longer ignore the pull to 'go and see' what could be done. A strange quiet had befallen. Not a bird, nor bee, not a frog nor spider. An eerie feeling, it seemed as if no creature had lived here for some time. Still, I felt 'their' presence quite strongly, the garden



practising the witch's craft

elementals, Faeries, call them what you will. They called and they had a thing or two to say indeed!

I was saddened as I walked about. The neglect in the garden seemed to me more awful than that in the house. I believe that the state of one's garden can reflect the state of one's heart, one's spiritual wellbeing. I sent a thought of healing on after those who'd vacated some years before.

*Barefoot, barehead, keen sense of smell,
Tread carefully for here do dwell,
The devic realm in Lady's lap,
So much to do no time to nap.
New life comes forth such songs to sing,
Through glade and glen the call doth ring.*

(from 'Cernunnos Calls' by Lesley-Caron Veater)

The garden dwellers. How extraordinary! I caught a glimpse here and there of stick figures unlike anything I'd seen before. They crooked their fingers at me and pulled odd faces. I soon took a chair and a cup of tea outside and sat, just to get a feel for the place. I slept.

I'm a dreamer, I should mention that. I've dreamt since I was a child, often prophetically, often of mundane matters, often of the great sabbat, although I did not know it was called such when first I visited! While I do get glimpses of the sight here and there and can be quite clairaudient at times, the fuller picture or story comes through in dreams.

Well, the garden dwellers crowded around my chair and were so glad I had come and excited that things would be renewed, only, would I please listen and they would tell me what was wanted. They took me under the hibiscus and asked me to sit there and 'see' what should be. In this manner we covered the garden and I had plenty to go on with. To my surprise, the instructions included the removal of some trees. They told me this was for the good of all and that

they would die anyway. I couldn't help feeling resistant to their removal but, sure enough, the trees concerned, every one of them, were dead within those first three years and had to be removed anyway.

I awoke full of ideas and with great excitement. I crouched under the hibiscus 'just to see' and felt their presence once more. This would become my place of offering.

The soil came first. Another load of horse manure was dumped on the garden to rot down. (No, they did not require me to dig, ever.) All the saved newspapers were laid *very* thickly on top, followed by yet another load of horse manure. This was finished up with a thick layer of mulch and left for the winter. In the meantime I did some tidying, and cutting back of creepers on fences uncovered some lovely old-fashioned roses. All was left to rest but I found the garden entering my thoughts often that winter. I thought of spring plantings of my favourite herbs and I experienced visuals of the garden at maturity. Each full moon an offering was left and slowly the energy began to improve.

The Faeries and elementals will aid you in the garden and appreciate your attention. Old faerie lore says that they love silver, so a nice idea is to make a simple offering of milk or ale, with perhaps honey and almonds or hazelnuts, charge it in your silver cup under the moon and leave it for them in your garden.

The winters are mild and dry here and spring comes early. Soon enough I began to plant. I had put around a call for cuttings and seedlings and the gifts were coming in beautifully—rosemary, comfrey, thyme, lavender, sage and mint. I began to toss around the seeds I'd collected from previous gardens and search out nurseries for some of the rarer herbs for my medicinal and magical needs.

However, first came the plants for the garden dwellers. Some of their favourites are: apple, hawthorn, mandrake, snowdrop, rosemary, thyme, beans, roses and elder. Plant ferns near thyme and

the Faeries will make their beds there. Also include nightshade, honesty, oak (it's believed that holes near the bottom of old trees are the doorway to faerie land), forget-me-nots (hold the blue flowers and wish, and if you are pure and true, the keys of faerie land will come to you), hollyhocks, foxgloves, ash, bramble and clover (the four-leaf variety!)

I planted a dwarf apple in a tub, with baby's tears and ferns under the shade, edged with rosemary and thyme, and I knew the garden dwellers were dancing with joy. Summer would see the winter plantings of foxgloves and sages blooming merrily as well. An often quoted faerie chant of unknown origin goes:

Four Leaf Clover—Faerie Favour and Good Luck!

One leaf for fame,

And one leaf for health,

One leaf for a faithful lover,

And one to bring you glorious wealth!

I wandered the streets nearby, 'harvesting the suburbs', collecting cuttings here and there whenever I spotted something unusual. In my

faerie salve: to see the faeries

Gather marigold and rose petals and steep in good seed oil or almond oil in a sunny place for a few days. Gather sprigs of thyme, more marigold petals, quantities are not important, the buds of hollyhocks and hazel and add to the strained oil. Again steep on a sunny windowsill for a few more days. To equal parts of melted beeswax and honey, add your strained oil and leave to set for a few days. Store in an airtight glass jar in a cool dark place. It will keep for about one week.

travels I came upon a neglected site by a watercourse somewhat polluted by rubbish and refuse. Having returned to suburban life only recently, I recalled the importance of looking after the land and the responsibility that we all have to play a role in this, unfortunately so often forgotten by city dwellers. I began to visit the site regularly, collecting rubbish and replanting. I must have looked odd, carting my large garbage bag back to the house! I planted some small natives here and there but nothing would grow in one particular part so one day I planted some nasturtiums and when I look now, the hillside is covered with them! They are helping to prevent erosion and now the council have stepped in and have put in retaining walls and walkways. What once was private becomes more public as people begin to 'discover' this odd little area in the midst of the suburbs.

In some small way I was discovering that one can honour that sacred connection to the land even while living in a fairly large regional city. I felt powerfully drawn to personalising that insight within my own small suburban 'plot'. I realised that this needed to include preserving wild spaces within my own garden, and learning to really listen for guidance from those wonderful beings who had made themselves known. Although my garden is small, I realised it didn't matter. What was important was nurturing this wonderful connection that helped to shape my identity as a human being. It is a connection that keeps us aware of our broader responsibilities in caring for our environment, but it also feeds the soul in a way that enriches one's life and nurtures one's being. I realised that were I to find myself living in an inner-city apartment, I would still seek out and 'adopt' wild places to care for, and seek sacred places to both soothe the soul and develop the spirit.

An important part of fostering 'wild' places in one's own garden is allowing plants to re-seed naturally. Nature sure can surprise us with new growth in areas that we would not have thought 'suitable' and yet are obviously right and natural. The evidence is in the energy

created and the 'feel' generated in such gardens. The use of organic mulches and sprays and companion planting bring harmony and balance not only to the garden, but to ourselves and the food and herbs we use. A more organic and natural approach akin to those fostered by the permaculturists and biodynamic gardeners and farmers of the twentieth century helps us to find our way again toward this sacred connection and, therefore, a sense of wellbeing and centredness.

The ways of the modern age have been based on classical dualism: the notion that mind and matter are separate, rendering us powerless. The postmodern approach to creating our own reality provides choice, however, just altering one's thinking is not enough. The 'new' approaches to farming and gardening require change and action. Many have already made this shift—taking responsibility for creating their own reality, health and wellbeing, and therefore that of their environment. The approach is a holistic and inclusive one. The frustrations and powerlessness that many feel when faced with day-to-day problems, which lead to anger and depression, are directly related to our identification with an outmoded world view which denies individual power through a sense of isolation from the world. It is a separatist world view that measures success in terms of material wealth and power via competition and oppression.

This rather more 'quantum' approach to gardening allows us to explore a reality that unfolds from a deeper realm, a realm of possibility that underlies all form; a wholeness to which we also belong, are a part of, and from which our power for positive change springs. Is this new? Is anything on earth new? Witches have always known it. Is it a 'new' movement, a 'new' awareness, or simply a return to the old ways? Witches acknowledge and celebrate the seasons, the turning of the Wheel. Our seasonal celebrations through ritual are not simply an excuse to dance about, although feasting, dance and song enhance our sense of community and the joy of life,

for sure. They are, at a deeper level, about connecting with the power of the earth and acknowledging that we are a part of the whole and participate in the cycle of life and death. This is never more evident than in our own gardens, in nature around us. Witches are empowered by this conscious awareness of our participation in the whole. This very state of awareness of our participation rather than separateness fosters an openness that can be quite startling. We begin to relate to our environment differently, to 'listen' to the trees, the wind and the rocks, to note what the animals in our environment are doing, to draw meaning where none was seen before.

According to ancient beliefs still evident in old farmer's almanacs, the moon regulates all plant growth. The moon's magnetic force controls the tides, affecting all that contains water: the oceans, the blood and fluids of our bodies, and all plant life. It lets us know when to sow, when to gather and when to weed. By learning to flow with this rhythm, we are ensuring the best growth in our gardens. This, in turn, will resonate within us, to enhance our connection with the earth in a way we may never have known before. It will enrich us spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally.

A waxing moon, which is increasing in light, will be beneficial for planting plants growing above the ground. A waning moon is best for planting root crops and for harvesting. You can speed lawn growth by cutting during the new or first quarter. Our hair and nails can be encouraged to grow by trimming only during the waxing phase. Of course, trimming during a waning moon will slow their growth. Some excellent moon charts on planting are available and these give details of the phases and astrological signs through each month (the moon spends about two-and-a-half days in each sign), indicating the fertile and barren times for appropriate activities. Of course, the development of our intuition through time spent in our wild gardens and sacred places will key us in to what is needed in the garden, and where and when to plant.

Herbs

Herbs have been grown and used since times of old. In leaf, bud, root and seed lie the secrets of the ages. They have been used for flavouring, healing, beauty treatments, aphrodisiacs, incenses, perfumes and magic. They still are, by many, including Witches.

A Witch's garden is likely to contain a variety of herbs grown for both their beauty and their value in the kitchen and the circle. Each herb has a planetary governance and elemental correspondence referred to by the Witch. Earth, Air, Fire and Water govern our practical magic and, along with the chemical properties of the herb, guide the Witch when choosing appropriate ingredients for a salve, a tea, an amulet or incense.

A caution here to those unfamiliar with the use of herbs. Please research your ingredients! There are many excellent reference books detailing the active elements and physiological effects of herbs. Be aware that not all are completely harmless and some indeed can be toxic if used incorrectly. Check their proper usage, some are most definitely harmful if used inappropriately. For example, ensure that the herbs you plan to use for an ointment or tea are safe to be absorbed through the skin or taken internally.



drawing by feral.

Healing oil for gardener's hands

From comfrey, you can make a comforting oil that softens skin and helps to heal a gardener's chapped, reddened hands. Cold storage can help to keep the oil from becoming rancid but adding vitamin E oil will also assist. Comfrey contains allantoin, a substance that stimulates cell division and an active ingredient often found in modern skin creams and lotions.

Finely chop 1 cup of fresh comfrey leaves and pack thickly in a jar. Cover with 2 cups of olive or almond oil (carrot or calendula oil would add further healing elements but are rather expensive). Put the lid on the jar and leave it in a sunny place for two weeks, shaking occasionally. Strain and discard leaves. Store in a dark (blue or brown) glass container in the fridge.

A sacred milk and flower bath

- 1 litre milk (cow or goat, but not soya milk)
- 10 drops orange essential oil
- 6 drops ylang ylang essential oil
- 2 drops jasmine essential oil
- 2 drops patchouli essential oil
- 4 drops neroli essential oil
- 4 drops sandalwood essential oil

While the bath is filling, gently warm the milk and mix in the oils. (Do not boil!) Pour into the bath and then soak in it for at least 20 minutes. This bath is pure bliss and total indulgence, allow it to put you in touch with yourself as Goddess and with your innate beauty.

Medicinal teas (infusions or tisanes) are becoming more popular again in the kitchen, and a good rule of thumb is to combine one part of the active healing herb or herbs, one and a half parts of one of the calmative herbs (such as dried borage, coltsfoot or comfrey), and one and a half parts of a complimentary flavouring herb. A tea popular among my friends demonstrates this. I call it 'Headache Tea'. Combine one and a half parts peppermint leaves (flavouring), one and half parts feverfew leaves (calmative) and 1 part rosemary (healing). Warm your teapot and pour the boiling water over the herbs. Steep for five minutes. Feverfew is especially good for migraine headaches, but if you are pregnant, make this tea with just the peppermint and rosemary.

Brews

There are many recipes to be found for wines, ales and cordials incorporating various herbs. The herbal contents will, of course, add particular properties and can be used for sabbat feasts, healing and such.

damiana whisky

This is a strong aphrodisiac that may take a couple of weeks to prepare.

Soak 30 grams of dried damiana leaf, 2 tablespoons dried saw palmetto berries, 2 tablespoons dried angelica root, and ½ tablespoon vanilla pods in 750 ml whisky.

Leave for one week in a sealed jar away from direct sunlight and out of reach of children and then strain, reserving whisky.

Resoak herbs for another week in 750 ml distilled water, in a sealed jar away from direct sunlight, and strain again.

Heat the second solution of water to about 80°C, add 1 cup honey and dissolve.

Remove from heat source and allow to cool; add reserved whisky to this.

Age the final mixture at least one month before using, in a sealed glass jar away from direct sunlight.

Take two tablespoons daily for a few weeks to see some interesting results.

Aqua vitae

For hundreds of years, this liqueur has been considered an excellent elixir for health. It may be prepared and taken once a day, like a tonic.

1 litre brandy

2 teaspoons fennel seeds, dried or fresh

6 dry bay leaves

2 teaspoons dry licorice root

1 teaspoon dry cardamon seeds

2 teaspoons ground nutmeg

1 teaspoon ground cloves

2 teaspoons cinnamon

2 teaspoons angelica

slices of ginger to taste

2 teaspoons chamomile

handful of juniper berries

2 teaspoons lemon zest

honey or brown sugar to taste

Combine all the ingredients and warm over low heat in a pot for 2 minutes to incorporate the herbs or place in a sealed jar in a sunny place. Leave for a month, then strain and reserve liqueur.

Herbs for rituals

Herbs are used in rituals for incenses, spells and brews and they are often incorporated into foods for the feasts that follow. They are chosen carefully to correspond with the particular sabbat energy or working requirements, and many useful correspondence tables have been published.

Particular herbs, oils and gums are best used at the esbat (full moon), such as myrrh, ylang ylang, lotus and jasmine for incenses. The cycles of the moon are as important to Witches as the cycles of the seasons and we time our work accordingly. For instance, the full moon is understood to be the time of peak lunar energy and is utilised for all manner of activities such as scrying or healing work. The new moon is the time of new beginnings, growth and learning. The dark of the moon, when the moon is not visible for about three days, is for endings and completion, a useful time to deal with addictions, banishings and the ending of relationships. Were you to be undertaking a particular working, you will wish to incorporate herbs or oils for that purpose in your incense and candles, or in a talisman or sachet.



healing candle spell

oh magick herbs of root and flower, give this candle healing power,

Let all evil sickness flee when it's burned, so mote it be!

Make your selection of appropriate healing herbs (a pinch of each is all) and add to melted beeswax. Make a candle using the herbs and the melted beeswax. Charge the candle during the waxing moon using the chant above. Burn it during the waning or dark moon to decrease fever or pain. A bought beeswax candle could be anointed with appropriate oils as an alternative.

Observing the seasonal cycles helps one to stay in tune with the natural cycles of life, death and rebirth about us. Gardening Witches will be in touch with this and will intuitively feel the turning of the seasons often well before the overt signs are apparent in nature. The sabbats are celebrated at each turn of the Wheel and naturally each has a quite different feel according to what is going on in the environment around us. Through these changing cycles of life, death and rebirth, the stories of God and Goddess are told and Witches observe the festivals accordingly.

sabbat herbs

Samhain is the end of the year and the beginning of the new, the descent of the Goddess and her joining with the God in the great rite. The land is quiet as seed and nut come to rest in the fertile soil. A time when the veil is thin and one may walk with those gone before. For Samhain: acorns, apples, broom, oak leaves, patchouli, pomegranates, pumpkin seeds, sage, wormwood, thistle and nuts.

At the winter solstice or *Yule*, the Wheel turns towards the light. This is the time of the rebirth of the sun. For Yule: ivy, holly, frankincense, juniper, mistletoe, moss, pine cones, bay, oak, rosemary and sage.

Imbolc is the feast of lights, the first stirrings of spring, when the land stirs and begins to awaken. This is the time for women's rites of passage, first menstruation, sexuality and birthing. For Imbolc: snowdrops, bluebells, rowan and myrrh.

At the spring equinox or *Eostre*, the sap rises and virile new shoots appear. The young God becomes aware of his future potential. For Eostre: elder, mugwort, rose, thyme, St John's wort, vervain and woodruff.

Beltane marks the beginning of summer, the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage of the God and Goddess, the understanding that we are one with the land, fertility rites and handfastings. For Beltane:

practising the witch's craft

hawthorn, ash, meadowsweet, blackthorn, primrose, marigolds and daisies.

At the summer solstice or *Litha*, the growing season is at its peak and the Gods celebrate together, the Wheel turns towards the dark and the light is challenged. For Litha: fennel, larkspur, oak and yarrow.

Lughnasad is the feast of Faerie, John Barleycorn, sacrifice, celebrations following the first harvest. For Lughnasad: cornstalks, crab apples, heather, sloe and wheat.

The autumn equinox or *Mabon* brings the balance of light and dark, life and death is seen clearly at this time, and here we must face death manifest in the land and also in our lives. For Mabon: acorns, autumn leaves, hazel, honeysuckle, benzoin, wheat, corn and aster.

Witches have traditionally used herbs, oils and gums in their magical practice to promote clairvoyance, astral travel and for conjuration. They can be a most useful aid in achieving altered states of awareness. A few recipes follow as an example and once again I encourage further study in this area if you are inexperienced.

'Second sight' can be assisted using a variety of incense and herbs. You can make an incense for 'far seeing' by combining good sandalwood or dragon's blood, mugwort, St John's wort, coriander, black poppy and dittany of Crete. A friend recommends a herbal tea (called Ryan's Psychic Tea) using wormwood, mugwort, loosestrife and chicory.

sabbat oil

A traditional recipe follows and I include it here in lieu of the usual mention of flying ointments. Care is needed when handling the more baneful herbs. They should be cut when the moon is waxing, crushed and steeped in purified vegetable oil.

Combine and steep in oil: smallage, wolfbane, cinquefoil,

henbane, hemlock, mandrake, moonwort, poppy, balm of gilead (poplar buds), tobacco and saffron. It can, of course, be converted into an ointment if one wishes. Small quantities only are required; dab a drop on wrists, temples and soles of feet to prepare for the sabbat.

I recommend storing all your dry herbs and preparations in clean airtight glass containers safely away from curious children.

Incense

Incense has an enchanting allure there is no doubt! Its use is found in the rites of Pagans, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus alike, and a whole variety of ingredients are employed. There are many excellent references available for those who wish to explore further and I would highly recommend the study.

We know already the influence a stroll through the garden can have on one's state of mind and sense of wellbeing; the heady fragrances both sweet and pungent can immediately transport us, evoking memory and emotion, changing one's sense of awareness. Old recipes exist that are purported to have been in use for centuries. Incenses are used for meditation, cleansing and healing, ritual and magic.

One of the delights in having one's own herb garden is the ready availability of organically grown ingredients for making teas, salves, brews and incenses. They may be harvested at the appropriate phase of the moon or season and stored carefully for such purposes. To see jars of one's homegrown magical ingredients gracing the kitchen shelves is a delight in itself!

In addition to the use of leaf, bud, flower, stem, root, seed and bark, the preparation of incenses uses balsams, gums, resins, oils, spices and minerals. They may be loose—that is, ground and blended and smouldered upon blocks of charcoal—or made into cones or sticks. The recipe that follows is intended for use on charcoal blocks.

For your experiments with aromancy you will require a good mortar and pestle (preferably one of stone or ceramic rather than glass or wood). I recommend keeping a notebook handy to record your progress, as there is nothing more frustrating than having created a wonderful result and finding that you cannot be not sure of the quantities used along the way or even some of the ingredients! Do test as you go when experimenting and you can even begin by asking the assistance of the 'aromites', those little sylph-like beings who delight in such things. Make sure you keep your charcoal blocks wrapped tightly in foil and stored in a dry place: charcoal is incredibly absorbent and will deteriorate rapidly if not stored correctly. To burn the incense safely, you will need a decent thurible or censer. These can be purchased or easily put together at home. I have used small pottery bowls or brass pots filled with a small amount of sand to place the charcoal upon, but be aware that containers can rapidly get *extremely* hot once the block is lit and burning so you will need to place them on a heatproof surface and do not touch (or use a thick dry cloth to do so) once lit. A most successful alternative to these, and my preference, is to use an old brass rose bowl (often found in opportunity shops) and simply flip over the wire lid so that it is concave when placed on top of the bowl. The wire lid allows the charcoal block to be easily and safely lit from underneath prior to replacing on the bowl. The bowl itself can contain a quantity of sand to assist with keeping the whole thing cooler, enabling one to carry the censer about the room as required.



kyphi incense: traditional egyptian incense

Different versions abound and it is unclear which ones most accurately reflect original recipes. However, it is a delicious blend and well worth experimenting with.

A witch's garden: herbs and incense

- 2 parts benzoin
- 4 parts frankincense
- 3 parts sandalwood
- 2 parts copal
- 2 parts myrrh
- 1 part dried ginger root
- ½ part calamus
- ½ part dry cardamom
- ½ part dry cinnamon
- ½ part orris powder
- ½ part dried cypress or pine needles
- ½ part dry or fresh juniper berries
- 7 raisins
- 1 drop rose essential oil
- 2 drops jasmine essential oil
- 2 drops ylang-ylang essential oil
- ½ teaspoon honey
- red wine to moisten

Grind the benzoin finely and set aside. Then separately grind each of the solid ingredients thoroughly; the raisins and berries will have to be chopped finely by hand. Then mix together groups of ingredients by nature—for example, mix the essential oils and the honey, and then the powdery ingredients, and so on—except for the benzoin and red wine. Finally, mix all the groups together, and add red wine to moisten. Roll into balls 2 cm in size and then roll balls in the benzoin. Lay out on waxed paper for a week or until firm. These do rather look like sweets when finished so please store away in a sealed jar in a safe dry place where they will not be mistakenly eaten!



Return to the garden

A frog croaks loudly and something crawls across our feet. Our toes are dipped in the soil and we recall where we are beneath the red-flowering gums, our journey complete. Spending time in the garden and in sacred spaces in the wild attunes us naturally to the spirits of place. No effort is needed to develop this contact, only an open heart and mind and a genuine desire to seek harmony; regular time spent in such ways will provide the rest. We plunge our hands into the soil, feeling its wonderful texture and breathing that earthy aroma, recognising and thankful for the rich store of knowledge and insight gained in this way.

Since those early days, my garden now has frogs, butterflies, ladybirds and spiders in residence, a sure sign of balance and harmony. Bats even take up residency in the trees across the road, swooping over my garden at dusk to sample the insects hovering there. I wish you all the rich pleasures of your Witch's garden, may Brigid's blessings be yours.

*May your garden be blessed, with your hummers well fed,
And the bats flutter softly about your sleepy head.*

further reading

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About the author

Lesley-Caron Veater was born in Brighton, Sussex, United Kingdom and came to Australia as a child. Of Orcadian and Irish parentage, Lesley has grown up with an appreciation for the stories of the Celts, their music, myths and legends. An early interest in researching her Pagan heritage drew Lesley ever more towards an exploration of the other world right from childhood. Lesley identifies strongly with the sacred landscape and honours sacred sites and trees in her neighbourhood. She lives in an 'end' house by the Barwon river (Victoria) where she cultivates her own herbs in a wild little garden. Lesley works in social work education and is a Traditional Witch, qualified masseuse and healer. Lesley has written a variety of short articles about elemental gardening, herbs and natural healing. Her book, *The Wild and Sacred Places in your Garden—a Look at Sacred Garden Spaces in Australia* (working title) is her current work in progress. Lesley is a passionate gardener and artist with a zest for life, art, writing, good food and wine and good men, not necessarily in that order!



14

Training and finding a working group

GABBY CLEARY

Over the past three years I have been celebrating rituals and sabbats with the same set of students. During the last two of these years, the students have been individually writing the rituals for the group. For the final ritual in this sequence, two of the students chose to write as a team and the experience has proved to be very worthwhile for everyone concerned. One was a female who embodies the qualities of Earth and Fire, the other a male who embodies Water and Air, unusual combinations of energy that worked really well together. They created a ritual that not only took the group to a different level of awareness and experience in the power of journeys, they also managed to tie their ritual into the past experiences, history and practical magic of the group itself.

As we began our journey, we were presented with dried sunflowers to take with us into the darkness of the year. These sunflowers had been planted by the group during the previous spring

and harvested at the sabbat just past. For that ritual, we planted the sunflowers in the Otherworld as a magical reminder of the potential of spring's return and all that grows from darkness and decay. During the ritual we were anointed with two ointments, both of which had been made by the group in previous circles, as had the cords with which we were spun by Death himself. We shared our journey, our history and our future as we felt the powers of the Gods around us and within us.

This is what working with a group is truly about. The years of shared experience and knowledge builds to create awesome acts of worship and ritual. It is the melding of individual epiphany into a rush of energy and understanding experienced by everyone present, and the magical moment when hard work, practice and inspiration comes together.

We are always learning and we are constantly being trained, either by ourselves or by our interaction with others. As Pagans we have chosen to tread a path of *experiential spirituality*, which means that we take responsibility for our own spiritual path and we experience it in a practical way. It also means that our spirituality grows with us as we learn more about our relationships with our Gods, our environment and with ourselves.

Whilst most forms of Paganism are ultimately a private and personal journey, it is our interaction with people of like minds that can stimulate us, enhance our perspectives, and provide a social and spiritual family. For me, this interaction is just as important as my own spiritual path and allows access to an entirely different set of experiences and spiritual practice. All of these experiences, both solitary and with a group, add up to training in my path. They provide challenges in absorbing the experiences and help me to understand my own spiritual, physical and mental reactions.

Ultimately what we choose to learn is up to us and we can accept help where it is offered or work only by ourselves, with our Gods

and our intuition as our guide. I prefer a balance of working with groups and solitary practice. In working with a group I get to experience the wonders of group energy and group mind and I also receive stimulation to delve deeper into the mysteries. Group work allows me access to those keys, which can help to unlock mystery, allowing me to pursue those mysteries through solitary work. Even when practising mostly within a group structure, participants will be expected to do some of their own research and tasks, which enhances their own spirituality and the cohesion of the group, and this leads us back to personal responsibility in *experiential spirituality*.

Most of us need some kind of training, even if it is just to exercise our mental muscles. I prefer to give my intuitive side some kind of secure base in knowledge and practice. This way I get the best of both worlds in that I can refine my technique and focus whilst still enjoying the rush that intuition can bring to a ritual or act of worship. Training oneself to visualise clearly, to interpret messages and divinations, to manipulate energies, to train memory and to meditate are just some of the skills employed by both solitary practitioners and group workers. It is easier to be trained in these techniques by someone external, as a guide can help you to avoid some mistakes and give you access to tried and true methods. However, not everyone wishes to be trained by another person, or has access to a teacher; in these situations we have to rely on our own discipline and interpretations.

When I was first starting out along my path, I found, as many others had before me, that a mix of book learning, ritual practice, intuition and meditation worked well for me in my solitary environment. I read books and I practised the circle casts, rituals and spells that I encountered. Not all of it worked or made sense but I muddled along and learnt what I could. When I did finally meet a group and started working with them, I already understood a lot of the basics and, although I had to re-learn some techniques and adapt

to a different set of rituals, on the whole the transition was relatively smooth and clarified a lot of half-formed ideas for me. In essence, I found my teachers and they found me when I was ready to move into a different sphere of practice. Many Pagans start off as solitaries with some staying solitary all of their lives, but others do wish to be involved in a group as well. As previously stated, I like a balance between the two.

I surveyed a mixed group of Pagans and asked them their opinions on how they trained themselves as a solitary. This is what they had to say.

Adrienne: ‘Regarding teaching myself what I needed to know: I read books, magazines, articles, any skerrick of information I could find and every web page that ever existed; meditated at length; and thought and thought some more about what made sense. I looked for signs and omens everywhere I went. I looked for mystery in everything. I made friends with the birds, trees and insects. I sent out calls to the universe to guide me on my path, and I listened for clues from the earth. I heightened my senses and waited for a teacher to be revealed to me, as I know that being solitary is but the first step of the journey. I also learnt to be patient, and this was the most important lesson of all—ten years is not a long time in the grand scheme of things.’

David: ‘Books and meditation. In many cases books just don’t cover what you need to know, they can give you a point in the right direction but the rest has to be discovered by yourself through experimentation and lots of communing with deities.’

Rhiannon: ‘While I haven’t done a great deal as a solitary, my path is slightly different from even those who are closest to me, spiritually. The method I used was going to university and doing a degree in Celtic Studies, leavened with a bit of Latin, Medieval History, English and World Religions.’

Whilst these Pagans started as solitaries, they eventually moved

on to experience group work. Each experience brings with it a different dimension of practice.

Group training is not to everyone's taste as some people feel that group work can be restrictive to them and is not needed to enhance their spiritual path. Others feel that group training will work only to the lowest common denominator and even a consensus of what work should be undertaken does not give them the freedom to practise when and how they wish. However, for many people, working and training in a group environment can be a very rewarding and highly spiritual experience. Depending upon the hierarchy of the group, there may be a specific teacher or a shared knowledge base and common practice amongst members. Being trained by a group may mean sacrificing some of your more personal views whilst working with the group, but there is also solitary practice outside of the group to address these issues.

Training with a group can be beneficial by opening you to different ideas through interaction with others. Group work allows participants to learn together and draw upon everyone's individual strengths to create a whole group mind. The group mind is achieved when the energies and understanding of all participants are joined to create a power and knowledge base that is more than the individual parts. It allows the rituals to flow with a deep awareness of the group as a whole. This concept of the group mind is what differentiates some of the techniques used by solitaries and groups.

Sometimes there is a set curriculum for the group's training and by participating in this, each person will have a shared body of knowledge to draw upon and work on at the same pace as well as having a shared experience. The curriculum may be created expressly for the group or be part of the traditional training practices utilised by a specific path.

In an open group it is important to achieve a balance between covering basics for newcomers and challenging the regular participants.

This can be difficult and takes effort on the part of all participants. How this balance is achieved can depend on the structure of the group, whether there are active leaders (either permanent or rotating), committees or a flat structure. Sometimes this balance is achieved by splitting the group into two sections for teaching purposes, with any rituals and celebrations attended by everyone. In one group with whom I was involved, everyone attended the circle cast and then the group would split into two with one group participating in a 'Magic 101' type class and the rest working on more advanced activities. The group would then come back together for cakes and ale, feasting and the closing of the circle.

In any training, or indeed any ritual situation, whether group or solitary, formal or informal, you only get out of it what you put in. If you want a direct spiritual experience, you have to take some responsibility for making it happen and also take responsibility for the end result. A Pagan ritual requires the input of all those present; even when there is someone 'leading' the ritual itself, the leader is most often there only to hold the ritual together, not to provide all of the energies required. The same goes for teaching. The teacher is there as a guide, not to do all of the work. The students need to give as much as they can to the lesson and the group energy for it to work. In a good training situation between teacher and student, the student is encouraged to do their best and the teacher will catch them if they fall, until such a time as the student is required to use those lessons to go it alone and take full responsibility. There needs to be both safety and challenge within a training situation.

I asked the survey group how they felt about being a student on a Pagan path.

Adrienne: 'It's very important from my perspective. I think it's all well and good to be a solitary, and follow a path dedicated to the Gods, but to join an existing tradition, with history, and with a scheme for developing and training individuals is very important.'

I also think it's important to have only one or two of these experiences, but that they should be lengthy and challenging. The student must be prepared to show dedication, discipline and patience. I almost think an apprentice type system would work well. I think contact and training under someone who has also been trained is very important.'

David: 'If it is formal training it can be tedious and drawn out, and therefore difficult to put behind you what you have already learnt. But if you need the constant discipline then it is a good thing.'

Rhiannon: 'Training can only go as far as you let it. You have to have both an open and a critical approach. This does not mean challenging every word that your teacher ever says, but testing its authenticity, exploring and experiencing for yourself.'

Louise: 'I love training. I feel that we are in a constant state of both learning and teaching, and that the lessons we experience are virtually constant. I really enjoy those moments of "Ahhh!" when I realise something for the first time.'

I have been both a solitary and part of a group, a student and a teacher, and I relish all of these experiences. As a student I too really enjoyed the 'Ahhhh' moments, and the constant input of new information. As a teacher I experience the same thing and I find myself exploring the mysteries further than I ever have before because I have to come to terms with them if I am going to teach them. I have to find my own perspective and this can be a challenge in itself, to be able to explain something coherently that one feels as an intuitive concept can be a hard skill to learn. I also find that I am being trained by my students as they teach me concepts and perspectives that I had never before considered. I also really enjoy the moment when someone accesses a mystery or a new skill and you can see it in his or her face. That for me is what teaching is all about, not trying to mould people but allowing them the freedom to explore within a challenging environment.

So how do you come up with a training system? For solitaries, the first thing I would recommend would be to write down all of the areas that you are interested in and the skills that you already have, as well as ones you may need. Work out whether you are happy with your own skills or if there are some that you would like to improve upon. Ask yourself questions like: 'Is this skill something that can be used in other areas of my practice, and can I adapt it?' 'Do I wish to be able to intuitively access information about a certain subject, and, if so, do I need to study and learn about that subject first?' This may seem paradoxical but much of the spontaneous and intuitive side of ritual practice comes from being able to pull appropriate snippets of information from within memory.

If you already have the names, attributes and order of astrological signs within your memory then using those astrological principles intuitively will be much easier. The same goes for divination systems. Yes, you rely on your intuition to read and interpret the cards or stones but most people would like to at least know the names of the symbols they are working with. After all, some of those symbolic names have a power all of their own.

Goal setting is another training technique that you can look into as a solitary. It may seem better left to corporate-training gurus, but when you are training yourself, knowing that you have achieved what you set out to do can be very empowering. After all, spellcraft is really just goal setting in disguise. You cast a spell to achieve a specific goal; why not apply those principles to your personal training? Constantly assessing how you are going with your training can give you insight into what you wish your path to be, whether you mould your path to suit yourself or vice versa. However, remember that this is 'assessing', not 'obsessing'; there is a difference. I would also recommend that you undertake one area of study at a time, especially if you are looking into a variety of paths.

If you are researching from books, you will find many conflicting

ideas and principles that can become very confusing. It is then best to go with one concept (or set of rituals and philosophies) and stick to it until you feel you understand it as much as possible, then you can move on to another idea. This way you have a solid base for comparison without getting yourself tangled up in merging philosophies, and you can use your intuition and understanding about which ideas you wish to keep or throw away.

In designing or adapting curricula for groups, I feel that each area of study should form a basis for the next. Some groups subscribe to a 'throw everyone in at the deep end and see who sinks or swims' philosophy. Personally I prefer to use training techniques that offer the trainee a way to build experience, understanding and mystery layer by layer. By keeping a strong base of learning, one can draw upon past experiences and keep adding to the mix in a safe but still ultimately profound way. I find that even if people do try to dive into the heart of a mystery or technique straight away, most will still only come away with surface ideas, which can lead to frustration if they are seeking a mind-blowing type of experience. By slowly building up the knowledge base, while still creating a challenge, we can keep a sense of achievement and epiphany but also have total understanding of what is actually happening.

To create a training curriculum for a group, list all of the areas of study that the group needs or wishes to undertake, then go through the list looking at which techniques are actually combinations of other techniques, and order them accordingly. You want a mix that includes group exercises as well as solitary practice and homework, and also tasks that involve using previous lessons in a practical situation. For example, in the curriculum for my teaching circle, *The Circle of the Hearth*, I have smaller topics that build to a large practical exercise like circle casting. The order that I work with is: ethics, altars, tools, energy sensing, power raising, visualisation, elements, deities and then circle casting. This means that by

the time the student arrives at the circle casting stage, they are just putting all of their previous lessons into practice. We did a similar thing with talismans. The students had already studied correspondences, symbols, spellcraft, cords and timing, so talisman making, which encompasses all of these areas, was a natural progression, including the making and empowering of magical inks. For me, an ideal training situation will give the individual a chance to grow and explore themselves, as well as giving the group a chance to work together in ways that everyone understands. Working with a group is to create more than the sum of its parts.

From observation I would say that most informal working groups have an average lifespan of one year before they either change direction or dissolve. Being able to change direction in either practice or structure can keep a group healthy and it hopefully means that the group has learnt by its mistakes and is willing to adapt and change to suit the needs of the participants. It shouldn't be looked upon as a sign of failure even if the group does dissolve—just because everyone in the group is a Pagan does not mean that they can work together. Remember that even though everyone has come together to celebrate his or her mutual paths, human nature can play a big part in the success or failure of a group. Politics and internal relationships can have a devastating effect on the mental health of a group and it is very hard to work positive magic in a negative environment.

Even in an informal situation, participants have to take some responsibility for helping the group to run, not leave it to just one person, even if that person is the 'leader'. Helping a group can be anything from volunteering to make biscuits for the ritual or car pooling to making decorations or costumes or cleaning the altar equipment. Even if you don't feel that you know enough to contribute to writing or teaching, there are still some things you can do as you will learn from these actions and contribute to the success of the group. So many groups fail because the organiser becomes

burnt out and fed up either mentally, spiritually, physically, financially or sometimes all four.

At the beginning of this chapter, I used the term *experiential spirituality*. If you attend a group and expect someone else to do all the work for you, how will you ever experience any personal spiritual growth?

In looking for a group to join, you must be aware of the role that personality and structure can play, as well as the spiritual side of things. Even the best groups, with wonderful rituals and great organisation, can be brought down by relationships that overshadow what the group is actually about.

Do you like these people? Could you trust them enough to work magic with them? Is there a guru-like figure running the group that expects total obedience no matter what the consequences? Could you deal with that and should you? Does the group embrace a particular pantheon or spiritual attitude that resonates with your own path? These are some of the questions you should ask yourself before becoming involved. Even with a group that has secret or oathbound ceremonies, the heads of the group should be able to answer questions on structure and expectations. Many oathbound groups will ask you why you think you should join and why you shouldn't. This will at least help you to put your own reasons into perspective and help the group to weed out prospective members who are just on a power trip.

Participants should have respect for each other as well. If a leader of a group expects discipline and practice from the group, then they should display those characteristics as well. This includes having respect for spirituality and acknowledgment of goals achieved.

To conclude this chapter we will look at some of the positive and negative experiences that the survey group has encountered when dealing with groups.

Rhiannon: 'Something to look out for in a working group are

people with absolutely no control over their lives. Of course everyone has their idiosyncrasies—some people are unemployed, or have a messy house, or can't cook, or pay their bills late, or dropped out of school, or take drugs more than they should (and that includes alcohol and prescribed drugs), or something. Any one of these things is relatively harmless, but when someone has all of them, they are almost certainly dangerous to work with magically, because ordinary life and magic are inseparable, or *should be*! And someone who cannot keep afloat normally will not do so magically.'

Craig S: 'Each group has had its up side and its down. Some have provided networking with others of like mind but have failed to provide much else. Some groups have failed because of internal power struggles or teachers who will not learn from their students. Other groups provide an interactive learning experience for student and teacher alike. These groups, to me, are the most interesting as they are not chained to one particular dogma.'

Craig M: 'As an example of the Good—a stable group of people who are all committed to what they're doing and respect and trust each other enough that folks can let their guard down and be honest with each other without having to worry about getting hurt; a collection of trustworthy friends who happen to do magic work together. The Bad would be groups where folks don't respect/trust/like each other; groups where the interests are too diverse to work collectively; groups with insufficient commitment to maintain focus.'

So, after all of the discussion about training and group politics, you decide that being part of a Pagan group is what you would like to do—how do you go about it? Most major cities in Australia have some kind of regular Pagan social event or discussion meeting, like Pagan Picnics or Pagans in the Pub. These are great for making contacts and observations about different people and paths. Social contact and networking with other Pagans can be very important when you are looking for a group as many circles and working groups

do not advertise their existence and it is by meeting other Pagans at events that you find out about them. You can also join discussion groups online, and attend Pagan gatherings and workshops in your area. You can find out about these events by becoming a member of one of the community groups like Pagan Alliance or Pagan Awareness Network, both of which have regular newsletters with 'coming events' guides. There are also online email lists that provide updates of events in Australia, such as <PaganEvents_in_Oz at yahoo.com>.

Being part of the Pagan community and sharing ideas with like-minded people can be a very rewarding experience. However, remember that not everyone is going to be nice or ethical just because they are a Pagan. Set your 'flake' detector to maximum, learn what you can, and enjoy the experience of your path. Don't join a group for the sake of being part of a group, listen to your intuition and ask questions. I hope that you, like myself, will find training and working with a group a rewarding experience, take the highs and lows as they come, and celebrate all that your path has to offer.

To quote Doreen Valiente's beautiful Charge of the Goddess—'may there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, and mirth and reverence within thee.' This goes for groups as well.

further resources

Applegrove site:

<<http://www.fortunecity.com/bally/westmeath/24/homepage.htm>>

Pagan Alliance:

<<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Thebes/4320/>>

Pagan Awareness Network:

<<http://www.paganawareness.net.au/>>

Pagans in the Pub:

<http://www.pagan.drak.net/publinks/index_ozmoots.htm>

About the author

Over the past nine years Gabby has been involved in Witchcraft, Wicca and Paganism in most of its shapes and forms. She has been a solitary, part of an open grove, an initiate, a High Priestess and a teacher. She has also run more than twelve public Pagan gatherings and many private gatherings as well as presented workshops and rituals at Pagans in the Pub, Pagan Summer Gatherings, Gathering of All Tribes, Gateway, and Magick Happens. Gabby is a founding member of Applegrove and the Circle of the Hearth, its teaching circle. She hails from Sydney and is keenly interested in natural magic and magical herbalism as well as Celtic spirituality. She is also a Pagan singer and songwriter.



15

pagans in the bush

LEWIS

We are a couple of mature country Pagans (mature in years, that is, not necessarily in temperament), who live a quiet life on a relatively remote bush block in the mountains. In earlier times we enjoyed much more social interaction when we created the Eco-Pagan magazine *Kindred Spirits Quarterly* and more recently through our involvement with the magical journal *PanThology*. But now as the years mount up and our combined total of them passes 125, it seems sensible to lead a more sedate existence and just enjoy what we have here at home.

There is not really much to tell about our beliefs and ways of doing things. One would have to be an extremely talented writer to be able to convey in words the manifestations that are better experienced in reality than written about on the page. It is good fun to have a ritual celebration at the appropriate moment and give thanks to the Goddess for being so unbelievably generous. But, for us, most of what we call ritual is at a minimum. This is, if for no other reason, because ritual serves, in part, as a substitute for the real

thing. For example, when the night is dark and the weather is right, we go up to our favourite ridge. There, defined by forest flowers and eucalypt sprigs, the sacred space is laid out on the ground. After settling down, we sit comfortably on the grass, put out the candle and, in complete silence, wait. Gradually, with the cessation of our own noise (for we humans are the most noisy and intrusive of all beings), the night sounds become audible. Because we remain still and silent within our circle, the forest community—the animals, the birds, the insects, the frogs—is untroubled by our being there. It carries on with its nocturnal business and treats us as part of the landscape. Sometimes, as a whisper of air passes through the trees, just for a fleeting moment when it is least expected, a great hush descends upon the forest, and the presence of very special company can be detected.

‘Go on, that’s not a proper ritual,’ some would say. Well maybe it is, maybe it isn’t, but best try it a dozen times before passing an opinion. Remember, when you have the real thing all around you, ritual tends to become superfluous. The ‘real thing’ you ask? Well, for us, the real thing (which obviates the need for over-elaborate rituals) is a couple of hundred acres of magnificent forest on a pristine watercourse, backed by a 250 000-acre National Park. Our bush block is home to native animals like kangaroos, wallabies, wombats, red-bellied black snakes, goannas and platypus, as well as an unbelievable variety of bird life from the tiniest fairy wren to the most majestic wedge-tailed eagle. This is an earthly paradise.

We travelled a lot when we were younger, and lived in a number of different countries before coming to rest in Australia nearly 30 years ago. We were afflicted with a wanderlust that is quite impossible to describe to the sedentary mind. We have since worked out that this wanderlust was in part fuelled by a search for the perfect place to settle down.

After our early life as a pair of rolling stones, we one day

discovered we had stayed around long enough to experience in the one place the full cycle of the natural year. Then later on we saw our children born, grow up and in their own time go off with their partners to plan families of their own. We have been in the one place long enough to see good friends grow old and die, and to learn to live without their company. Indeed, to grow old ourselves and realise that the life now left to us, this time around, is relatively short.

So, to a brief chronology of our journey. In 1968 we found ourselves in London. The student-led demonstrations that burst upon the streets of Paris, London and numerous other European cities in May of that year had, by the end of October, all but petered out. With the onset of winter, the revolution was bound for cold storage. The oncoming chill and the realisation that there would not be even the dying embers of a revolution by which to warm our fingers and toes filled us with anxiety. We had already suffered two English winters since arriving from Africa in 1966 and could not face a third. So we decided to move to somewhere warmer and soon left London to set up house on the small island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean. At that time it was a relatively unspoiled place but we have since heard that in the intervening years it has turned into an over-developed tourist nightmare.

It was then that an already healthy appetite for the esoteric, folkloric and anything remotely connected to magic, Witchcraft and the occult coalesced. The previously disconnected strands of hard knowledge, speculative information, and (with the benefit of hindsight) superstitious nonsense became woven together to form a firm direction. This was shaped by ephemeral instinct and blind confidence, both tempered by down-to-earth commonsense.

Travellers came from all over the world to Ibiza, home of the Goddess Tanit. They formed the nucleus of an outburst of creative energy. There was music, literature, poetry, drama, spirituality and an abundance of all things magical. It was impossible to remain

untouched by the vibrancy of the place. We took it on ourselves to devise rituals, create affirmations and incantations; we genuinely believed there was nothing we could not achieve!

High on the list of memorable happenings during the Ibiza years were the semi-spontaneous gatherings at the time of the full moon. These celebrations always featured a circle; sometimes large, other times not. They were invariably of an ecumenical nature, with participants coming from any number of spiritual traditions as well as many different nationalities. There were people from the Eastern traditions (which were very popular at that time), others from New Age sects, and a sprinkling of incipient Witches and Pagans. Also among our most cherished memories of that time are those that relate to the atmosphere of the place. This was engendered by the general spirit of tolerance, absence of dogmatism, good humour and a sense of discovery. Naturally there would be the occasional attempt at over-orchestration by some spiritual prima donna, but such types soon cooled down and joined in. This was probably made easier by the fact that the sacred circle itself is the ultimate configuration of spiritual democracy—quite the reverse, say, of the pulpit.

On our eventual return to London we were filled with nervous excitement. This was because toward the end of our stay on the island we had formed a very close friendship with a couple who had been members of a Wiccan group in England. At last, through them, we would get to meet people who were ‘officially’ connected and who were ‘real Witches’. And meet them we did. However, probably because of our unreasonably high expectations, we were quickly underwhelmed by the whole experience. Analysing things sometime afterwards it became clear that chief among the factors contributing to the let-down was our own unsuitability for a group attachment.

With that coven there was little or no scope for experimentation or refinement. This was strange because the man from whom this group claimed its authenticity, Gerald Gardner, stated quite openly

that although the Wiccan tradition he presented stood on a bedrock of genuine ancient knowledge, much of it was his own creation, and he was nothing if not a creative spirit. Apparently though, in the twenty-odd years since its arrival, Gardnerianism had already become immutable!

It was the stifling of the creative dimension, though, that gave rise to the most frustration. The individual members of the group were first-class people and our time with it was well spent. This was in part because it proved to be a defining experience. It convinced us that, from then on, ours would always be the solitary path. Our association with that group lasted on and off for about a year before a convenient and amicable break came with our departure for the other side of the world. We were then free again to make our own mistakes and enjoy the occasional triumph. As experienced with that particular Wiccan group, from a purely personal viewpoint, Wicca of the doctrinaire, suburban variety could be described as an approach to Witchcraft—an approach, yes, but by no stretch of the imagination an arrival.

What we were left with from that time was a lasting respect for Gerald Gardner. It was his book, *Witchcraft Today*, first published in 1954 just three years after the final repeal of the Witchcraft Act in Britain, that opened the door through which the Pagan revival has returned—as if from the grave—and begun to flourish. Laws can be changed by a stroke of the pen, but public opinion is much harder to turn around. His action in publishing that book back then was a brave one, and for it he should always be honoured.

So off we went to Australia and on arriving headed out to the country, and there we have lived ever since. The land is a great teacher and after 30 years we are still learning so much that it is obvious that a single lifetime would not be sufficient to understand the subtle complexities of the bush. Through this we gain some small

appreciation of how the Aboriginal people relate to their land as a living spirit bonding each generation to the next in its turn.

Australian witchcraft

Over the years we have got to know many colleagues of the Craft; they come from every social, financial and educational level. However, what they have in common is an underlying quality of taking their attachment to the Craft very seriously. Not all, of course, but that is the general make-up of the ones who are dedicated to Witchcraft for its own sake. They aspire to be the direct working descendants of the Witches of old, in a sense by regarding them as their role models. And providing the intent is sincere and pure-hearted—as it should be with all magical voyagings—it is not difficult to connect with ennobling archetypes of our ancestral co-religionists.

Since human beings first began to organise themselves into communities, they employed the skills of specially gifted individuals. These were the Witches—or whatever other title we choose for them. High among their responsibilities was to be the gatekeepers to the Otherworld. Invisible to ordinary folk, this was—and still is—the place of those who have gone before and of those who are still to come. They were also the midwives, healers, agronomists, the rain-bringers and stargazers, as well as the priestesses and priests attending to ceremony, ritual and celebration as the custodians of community law. They were individuals of high degree and, as indispensable spiritual intellects, occupied the most respected positions in their communities. What better role models could today's aspiring Witch want to choose from?

Their contemporary successors keep themselves busy as therapists, psychics, healers (both natural and mainstream), social workers, environmentalists, artists and even the odd academic. Some

of these—the canner ones whose life-changing visualisations have been effective—have removed themselves body and soul to the country. There they follow such pursuits as organic fruit and vegetable production, bee-keeping, herb cultivation, animal husbandry, and reforestation. All of them though, town or country, know that the quality of their work is enhanced by their commitment to the Craft of the Wise—Witchcraft.

To digress into a purely personal viewpoint: Contentment-wise, one of the greatest advantages of being a solitary couple—as any who enjoy that status will confirm—is to be free from the distractive attention of competitive scrutineers. We have the Goddess-given ability to set our own standards and select our own role models. With regard to those three most important elements in the pursuit of the Mysteries—contentment, standards and role models—we are answerable only to each other.

We all acknowledge that Witches are a rare and, until quite recently, rather endangered species but the barometer has been indicating positive change. We're not alone in being pleasantly surprised by the upsurge of interest in the Craft. These past few years has seen a proliferation of things 'witchy'. The description 'witchy' is intentionally frivolous and describes a genre of publications and products, like magazines, films and books, that use the twin themes of Witchcraft and magic for purely commercial purposes. The most important difference between the current crop of such offerings and those of the past is that the new ones are *sympathetic*. They mostly present the Craft as positive, benevolent and caring, which we all know it is. Not so long ago, most of what the mass media presented as Witchcraft was hostile. The older stories about Witchcraft were silly beat-ups rooted in the negative images foisted upon the Craft by those who conspired to eradicate it, and all other vestiges of the Old Religion, from the face of the earth.

This current, commercially inspired promotion of 'Witchcraft

with a friendly face' is just one of the factors contributing to the arrival of the Old Religion at the threshold of revitalisation. Another, at the other end of the intellectual scale, is the comprehensive failure of the established, mainstream religions to honestly confront the environmental, social and psychic crises now looming on the horizon. We see ecologically aware people realising that the Old Faith offers an appropriate alternative to satisfy their search for spiritual meaning. This is because it is rooted in nature, whereas the new ones, such as the patriarchal belief systems Christianity, Islam and Judaism are firmly rooted in anthropocentrism. This is an all-embracing term of disapproval used by the 'Deep Ecologists'. Another way to convey the anthropocentric ideal is through the old adage 'Man is the measure of all things', which means, more or less, the same thing. Basically the New Religions are human centred. By contrast, the Old Religion is without a centre. Or perhaps we should say, its centre is everywhere!

We recall being at a motley gathering of environmentalists nearly 20 years ago. We had come together in an attempt to prevent a magnificent stand of old-growth forest from being turned into woodchips. At the inevitable discussion circle, one veteran of many forest actions spoke up when his turn came. Gnarled as one of the great trees around us, he called himself a Deep Ecologist. He was unequivocal in his opinion that demonstrations and direct actions were not enough. What was required, he said, to save the forests—not only in Australia but all over the world—must have a religious dimension. This would be a protective spiritual injunction similar to the type that Hindus have for cows, the Aboriginal people have for the land, or the ancient British Druids had for the trees. We have found that Deep Ecology has always been ahead of its time and shares much in common with Witchcraft—in many respects there is a convergence of belief. It can easily be found on the Internet and

is well worth the consideration of anyone who is interested in serious (as opposed to recreational) Witchcraft.

Witches, by nature of their calling, are perceptive folk. So it is no great surprise to us to hear some of those who live in the city quietly express the intention to pack it all in and go off to make a home in the country. And who can blame them? The subliminal niggings of their survival genes must be difficult to ignore, even if these are being all but swamped-out by the psychic noise that is common to built-up places with masses of people. Few ever do make the break, of course, because it is something easier said than done. Uprooting oneself from good friends and familiar surroundings is no light task and one that can, with the minimum of effort, be put off indefinitely.

Now listen up. Whether you are a lowly apprentice or greying elder, be assured, if your discovery of the Craft is to develop into what you dream it should be, you'll eventually have to fold up your tent, saddle the camel and move off to somewhere rural, and the more rural the better. It is no exaggeration to state that working to develop Craft skills in the city is like practising your cello in a panel-beater's workshop. But, on the other hand, our own experience is that the bush can be a lonely and frustrating place to live if the company of like-types is desired. Witches and Pagans tend to be very thin on the ground in rural Australia. City-based colleagues who are planning a move to the country should get into the habit of speaking about their spiritual beliefs in euphemisms. In the bush, everyone is to some degree a 'personality' and the benign curiosity of neighbours is impossible to avoid. It's quite the opposite of city living where virtually everyone seems to exist within their private capsule of anonymity.

As far as leaving town goes, some poor souls have no choice in the matter because of family, university, or career commitments. But even they can easily get a good taste of the country. Our suggestions

are WWOOFing, which involves staying on an organic farm in exchange for your labour, and bushwalking. Now to the dedicated townie, neither of those sound wildly exciting. But both are guaranteed to serve their purposes: either by making for a less abrupt transition for those planning to do a holus-bolus relocation, or by just providing a good time over long weekends for urban Pagans trapped in the bowels of the monster. One not-to-be-sneered-at advantage of both WWOOFing and bushwalking is that they cost nothing more than travel expenses.

The WWOOF (Willing Workers On Organic Farms) network has a membership of about 10 000 WWOOFers worldwide and about 1500 host properties here in Australia. We have been both WWOOF guests and WWOOF hosts and have never been disappointed with the exchange. The many benefits of WWOOFing include the opportunity to spend quality time in the country, learn the secrets of organic gardening, and make firm and lasting friendships with some very decent people. Some WWOOF host properties are owned by Pagan folk—but, like everything else in life, most aren't.

Our all-time favourite pastime is bushwalking. It represents for us something of a leap into the unknown. The unstructured surroundings of the bush demand self-sufficiency, with no facilities and only one's companions to turn to for help. (Note that solo bushwalking is only for experts and is not recommended, even for the most intractable solitary Witch.) Witches unacquainted with the do's and don'ts of the pastime should buy a 'Bushwalking for Beginners' type of manual from any good specialist camping shop. *Don't Die in the Bush* by Sven Klinge and Adrian Hart is a good example. Such books offer basic advice and list indispensable items. Also, there are other books that can add interest to the walk such as *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds* by Peter, Pat and Raoul Slater, and *Mammal Tracks and Signs* by Barbara Triggs.

Unlike, say, some people in Europe, most Australians seem to be quite reserved about nudity. Witches and Pagans, by contrast, don't appear to have any hang-ups about human nakedness. This is, of course, because many of them enjoy doing their magical working skyclad. One of the main advantages of living on a remote bush block is that clothing is optional just about any time when the weather is right. At the end of the working day, we might take a walk along one of the trails through the forest, shedding clothes as we go and retaining only our boots and sunhats. To top this off, the finale is to jump into a chilly mountain creek.

Nude bushwalking is highly recommended to Witches and anyone else who yearns for a truly liberating experience. For the record, nude bushwalking is not so unusual as it may sound. Until a short while ago, a mere 200 years, nude bushwalking was the universal fashion in Australia. Every body did it. Now there are nude bushwalking networks again in Australia and they can be accessed through periodicals such as *Australian Sun and Health* and *The Australian Naturist*. The wheel, it would appear, has turned full circle. Nude bushwalking is back.

One of the most gratifying experiences for older people is to be able to offer some of the knowledge of their personal life-endeavour (whatever that might be) to the rising generation. They pass the baton, so to speak. To achieve this for Witchcraft is not so easy. It is probably—without exception—the one area of human interest most thoroughly dogged by misinformation, misunderstanding, and fanciful notions both positive and negative. By way, to some extent, of unravelling this tangle, the young (and for that matter, not so young) person who feels a more than passing interest in Witchcraft, and who seeks a genuinely knowledgeable and level-headed introduction to the subject, can do no better than refer to the essay below that first appeared in *The Grail Directory*.

Making Contact and Beyond
by Genista Ryder

There is no hard and fast rule to making your initial contact except possibly: Don't hurry. Take your time. Prepare the soil before planting your garden. Read books. There are many good books available by people of knowledge and known integrity. Each of them should in turn, through their bibliographies, direct your attention to further reading. Some of these titles will be available at your local public library.

Pagan newsletters too are an excellent way to get an overview and generally sort out in your own mind which direction best suits your interests. Many of them have a readers' letters section and some offer a contact ad service. Personal contact ads can be a very effective way of connecting with like-types, either through correspondence or through personal meetings.

Remember, do not be in a hurry. It is preferable that you take plenty of time to develop and discover your innate magical potential. Become sensitive (or more sensitive), and the inner-self will be better able to direct you to that which fulfils your deepest desires. There is a multitude of schools of magical thought, Witchcraft being only one of them. In no particular order of importance they include: Druidry, Kabbala, Goddess worship, Shamanism, Alchemy, Women's Mysteries, Ceremonial magic, Ritual magic, Men's Mysteries, Wicca, Experimental magic, Voudoun, Eco-Paganism and so on. It should be borne in mind too that each of these paths is multifaceted, having innumerable methods and means of expressing themselves. They can range from complex choreographed rituals, requiring elaborate robes, jewellery and magical tools, all performed in a replica ancient Egyptian temple, through to a small coven of good friends dancing naked beneath the full moon. The variations between are endless.

The path of the solitary is often appropriate here in Australia, because the old tyranny of distance can leave little choice. This path can also be the most fruitful. It is often the path of the mature seeker either alone or as a solitary couple. This last status being common for people of mature years who have lived their lives together and spent time developing a knowledge and understanding of the mysteries. However, the solitary path is perfectly suitable for younger, less experienced people, especially if the person concerned is genuinely dedicated, diligent, and not expecting any miracles in the short term.

Good luck in your personal quest, and remember, the first path that you choose to tread is rarely the one that you will eventually discover to be the most spiritually sustaining and rewarding. Be prepared to find the courage to make a change, stay flexible, retain your mental fluidity, go with the path of least resistance and always trust your inner-voice. A large part of good magic (like many of the better things in life such as music and art, fine food and drink, gardening and a love of nature, relationships), is as much a matter of and for the finer senses as anything else. To become calm is the secret. Though it is not so simple in this frantic, noisy world. Then, when the quietness has arrived, listen to what the finer senses are counselling through the inner voice. If it feels right, then it most probably is right.

Witchcraft, Paganism and associated pursuits naturally attract a wide cross section of human society. By their very nature though, they do tend to attract a higher proportion of thoughtful individuals. On the other side of the coin, because of historical misconceptions, they unfortunately attract a minority of thoughtless people as well. These are invariably the sensation seekers, or the power-hungry, trawling for followers. They, it must be stressed, are a tiny minority. It follows that some of their number (a minority within a minority) will be the type who court media attention. There develops a

symbiotic relationship between some individuals who present themselves as spokespersons for Witchcraft, and the popular press. Garish, garbled and self-serving interviews are offered for cash payment to the tabloid newspapers and sensationalist magazines. These, as commercial ventures, are required to make as large a profit as possible for their shareholders, and the truth is never allowed to spoil a lurid tale, no matter how inaccurate or unsavoury it might be. Thus through this process, many of the historical misconceptions are perpetuated and reinforced.

But times are changing and the real story is gradually becoming understood and accepted by people of goodwill. It is worth noting that only a few decades ago (well within this writer's lifetime), the publishers of this book could have been prosecuted and possibly even imprisoned for offering it to the public. It is our fervent prayer that such a shameful state of ignorance should ever again blight our society.

The foregoing is intended mainly to inform newcomers to Witchcraft and the Mysteries. It is unlikely that they will be disappointed with the company they eventually find. For all of us though, both newly arrived or long-term seeker, the golden rule is: *Be comfortable in your situation*. You are continually honing your magical skills and understanding. Learn to recognise your inner-voice, and when it speaks, have the good sense and confidence in yourself to act upon what it says without hesitation or self-consciousness. It is as simple as that!

Your pursuit of Witchcraft will be only half realised if it does not lead you to self-possession, freedom and the control of your own destiny. It can often be a lonely search but never boring. Groups, covens or just a circle of connected friends all help, but ultimately you must depend on yourself. Best of all (if humanly possible), with the company of a long-term loving partner to share the quest.

coda

You don't need the perspicacity of a Witch to know that we are now living in a deeply troubled world with a multitude of problems facing us. At their very core is a single factor and that is humanity's alienation from nature. This is because the natural universe—source of all life—is no longer seen as being worthy of reverence. So what to do? Go, roll out your swag, lie beneath the night sky as a mere speck of stardust that has become timeless. Hear again, exactly as our ancestors did 50 000 years ago, the great silent voice of Earth and know then that in this place and for this moment, by your presence, the Goddess has not been abandoned. Nor has She been abandoned in the hearts of your fellow Witches because, although their ancient religion has no name, it has a multiplicity of descriptions. None more so than the celebration of Life.

So mote it be.

further reading

The Grail Directory, contact the Australian Pagan Information Centre, GPO Box 1444, Canberra, 2601

Sven Klinge and Adrian Hart, 2000, *Don't Die in the Bush*, New Holland, Sydney

Peter, Pat and Raoul Slater, 1996, *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*, revised edition, Lansdowne, Sydney

Barbara Triggs, 1984, *Mammal Tracks and Signs*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne

WWOOF Network, PO Buchan, Victoria, 3885