

The “W” Word Why We Call Ourselves Witches

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IN A PREVIOUS ISSUE of *Reclaiming Quarterly*, you may have read an article by Sam Webster called “Why I Call Myself a Pagan.” This is my further explanation of why I call myself a Witch, and also why the former Reclaiming Collective (RIP) chose certain terminology over other terminology in the crafting of Reclaiming’s Principles of Unity.

Many people seem to be using the term *Wicca* to describe what has evolved into the Reclaiming Tradition of Witchcraft. This is a misuse of the term. In this article I’m going to try to explain the difference in the meanings of the words *Witchcraft* and *Wicca*, and also why we chose to call our tradition *Witchcraft* rather than *Wicca*.

Old Religion, *Wicca*, Pagan, Neo-Pagan, Goddess Spirituality, Nature Religion, Ecofeminist Spirituality, Craft, *Witchcraft* — we call ourselves many different names.

Just to narrow the field, we’ll say here that Pagan and Neo-Pagan are broader, more encompassing terms than the others above. All Witches are Pagans, but not all Pagans are Witches. Some are Druids or Asatru or something else.

As mentioned above, the words *Witchcraft* and *Wicca* are not synonymous. Though many Wiccans may also call themselves Witches, fewer Witches would necessarily describe themselves as Wiccan. The Covenant of the Goddess, for instance, is an ecumenical organization of Witches, some of whom are Wiccans.

Prospective members must be able to use the term *Witch* to describe themselves in order to be eligible to join.

Starting from the more conservative end of the spectrum of Craft, I offer the definition of *Wicca* put forth by University of Bristol scholar Ronald Hutton. He defines *Wicca* as “a mystery religion developed in England and based upon a rigorous process of training and initiation and a cosmos polarized between equal female and male forces.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Oreithyia calls herself a *Witch*, explaining:

“I am not a Pagan. I am a *Witch*. And for many, many of us, Uncle Gerald and Aunt Doreen have nothing at all to do with how or why we are witches. Over the last ten years there have been women who have cast the circle, howled at the moon, danced the Spiral, . . . None of these women have ever considered what they did as arising from anything beyond the wisdom they find in their own Woman’s soul. They, we, have found our roots in the great Mother Tree, looking back through our

own, our Women’s heritage. . . . And it is from that place we define ourselves as Witches. *Pagan* is a word that some of our kin, for a variety of excellent reasons, have chosen to use. It is not the word we choose. Within this context, Uncle Gerald and Aunt Doreen may be perceived as distant family. Some of us go and visit. Some of us never do. Sometimes the ones who visit return home with stories of what our cousins are up to; how it is sometimes so familiar and sometimes so foreign. Often we return having learned something. Often we have taught something. I continue to enjoy the improved trust and communication between groups of us, Pagans, Witches, Shamans, *Wicce*. I continue to relish what makes us different. I enjoy the visits and honor the lessons. But there is no question that we come to some of the same places along different routes. And for many of us, the word ‘*Witch*’ speaks less about how we do what we do, and more about the fire inside.”

INNER WISDOM

I resonate with Oreithyia’s explanation of herself. When I first began learning Craft, the most powerful lesson I learned from my early working was that if I listened with my heart, if I experienced in my bones and blood, if I could recognize the divine in my own image in a mirror and in the feel of Sun on my skin, wind in my hair, then I could tap into that inner women’s wisdom which was innate. I learned that my sacred ritual acts — however they might be performed, whatever words, gestures, tools, symbols were used — are those of a priestess of the Goddess if I will them to be so. I feel this when the hair on my arms stands up, my scalp tingles, and I feel rushes of energy up and down my spine and throughout my body. In the face of such experience, I *know* that I am tapping into a rich, vibrant source that reaches deep into the center of the earth, far out into the celestial, and to the core of my soul.

My own path to the Craft was via feminism and ecology. Raised female in 1940s-’50s USA in a mixed-Christian family, I had no female image of the divine. Roman Catholics at least had Mary, and female saints (weren’t they

all martyrs who suffered such misogynist torture as St. Agatha did in having her breasts mutilated?). Girl children who were temperamentally unsuited to “Kinder, Küche, Kirche” [*Children, Kitchen, Church* — ed.] lacked role models to help them grow. Boy children who weren’t rough-and-tumble were treated with scorn. Adults who loved people of their same sex almost never revealed themselves. For all of us, and many more, finding a religion, pursuing a spirituality, that honored so much more than the limited roles we were offered as “safe” was a revelation.

Somewhere in the middle, intersecting at different points in individual lives and in the cultural phenomena that comprise contemporary American Witchcraft, are the influences of many other sources. There are Goddess Spirituality women, who do not necessarily work magic, nor work within the forms of what we have come to know as Witchcraft. They may not ritualize in the same ways (and the ways are multitudinous) as we Witches do. They may or may not create ritual at all. For instance, they may not invoke deity. They may have little or no concern for Elements, Quarters and their correspondences.

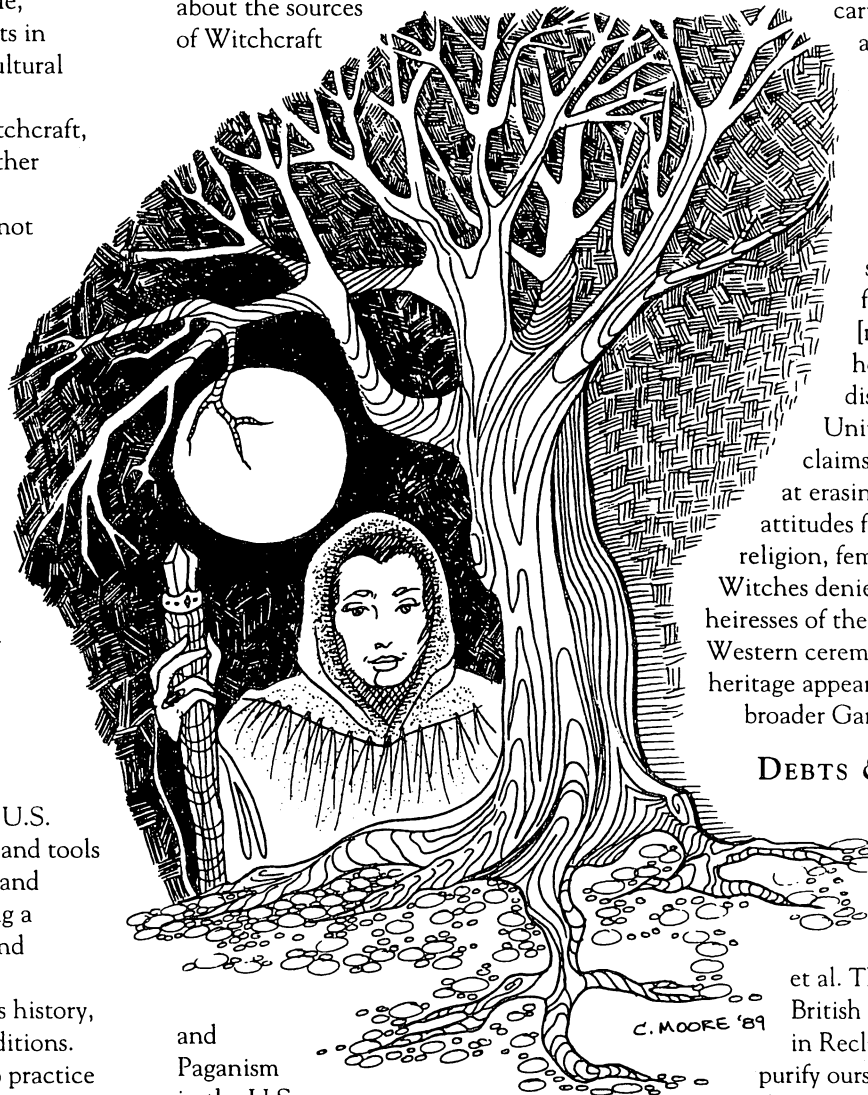
WICCA AND OTHER TRADITIONS

Some Craft traditions in the U.S. find their symbology, deities and tools in a particular ethnic source and reconstruct their rituals, using a blend of scholarly research and intuition. They learn from anthropology texts, as well as history, folklore, mythology, folk traditions. Hence, there are people who practice what they call Strega, Italian Witchcraft. Others use Egyptian, Welsh, Sumerian, or local or personal pantheons and deities in their worship and workings.

In the United States, there are several “lines” of Craft that claim descent or derivation from long-established British traditions. These

practitioners who claim direct or indirect descent from the works of Gerald B. Gardner call themselves Wiccan. Those descended from Alex and Maxine Sanders, Janet and Stewart Farrar, Robert Cochrane/Roy Bowers, or other British-influenced traditions are also generally considered to be Wiccans. On the West Coast alone, in addition to Gardnerians, there are British traditions called Kingstone, Silver Crescent, Majestic, New Wiccan Church, Georgian, and Central Valley Wicca .

Discussions and papers abound about the sources of Witchcraft



and Paganism in the U.S.

Some say we all owe a debt to the British, specifically to Gerald B. Gardner, Doreen Valiente, and others. We can trace some practices, such as Elemental correspondences, to Western ceremonial magic. The Elizabethan John Dee spoke of Watchtowers. Pentagrams appear in the Key of

Solomon. The concept of the Triple Lunar Goddess — Waxing-Maiden, Full-Mother, Waning-Crone — was formulated by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*. In feudal England, serfs, who belonged to the *land*, and whoever “owned” the land (as opposed to slaves, who belonged to other *people*), who ran away and were not apprehended for a year and a day were thereafter considered to be freemen. As a sign of their freedom, they were entitled to wear a double-bladed knife (dagger, athamé) in their belt. Sound familiar? Other customs, like jumping the broom,

carving jack-o-lanterns, and painting Easter eggs, come from folk tradition.

Jone

Salomonsen, a Norwegian scholar who produced two studies of Reclaiming for her master’s [mistress’s] thesis and her doctoral dissertation at the

University of Oslo, claims that in our attempt at erasing patriarchal attitudes from our new religion, feminist Reclaiming Witches denied our own history as heiresses of these influences from Western ceremonial magic. This heritage appears chiefly within the broader Gardnerian revival.

DEBTS & DIFFERENCES

I certainly agree that all Craft traditions in the U.S. today owe a debt to Gardner, et al. The influence of these British traditions is evident in Reclaiming practice. We

purify ourselves and our working space. We work in a sacred circle of our construction. We call the Quarters. We honor the same Elements of Magic, and we use nearly identical corresponding tools — sword (or athamé or knife — a blade of some kind), wand, cup and pentacle. Most

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Toronto Raver Info Project

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a shift in the community's response?

Older ravers (22 and up) are very supportive of TRIP's presence and services in the rave scene. They see us as a necessary "check and balance" for the younger ravers. Adults who work at service agencies in Toronto, like Public Health or the Addiction Research Foundation, are generally supportive of TRIP. As for the generalized adult community, it's hard to know. We're pretty much only at raves, so unless you're a raver, you're not going to know about us. Harm reduction programs in general can seem counter intuitive to some people until they know a bit about the theory and research behind the approach.

How has this work changed you? Do you see a connection with your spirituality?

Without sounding too flaky, my connection with spirit (including my experience with Reclaiming) has led me to this work, and it has been quite affirming to see my spirituality and politics come through the work that I do. It's also extremely empowering to see that I can make a positive contribution, to see that I can indeed create change. But, as I get to know the issues more, I also get more angry and ashamed about how some members of our society are treated, and become more committed to doing the work. I realize, however, that I've got to pace myself so I don't burn out.

My involvement with the rave scene has

been phenomenal, absolutely one of the peak experiences of my life so far. I'm so hopeful and in utter awe at the power and magnitude of this youth subculture. Think about the politics and forces of change that came out of the 1960s — I suspect the rave movement will have even bigger after-effects. What is happening there is so beautiful and so enormous, just thinking about it makes me tingle. I've been so privileged to be a part of it.

What's next for TRIP?

We're starting the "TRIP sidekick" pilot program in the fall, so more ravers can become involved. We're also in the process of developing a web page. We certainly need to create more harm reduction literature for ravers, as drug trends fly through this crowd, but it's difficult to get funding to develop and produce print materials since politicians are wary.

As we get so many requests to help set up other rave outreach projects, we'd like to develop a manual or start-up kit, which again requires a bit of funding. A comprehensive evaluation of TRIP's services would be great, and while funding isn't yet available, we can probably find it. On an even broader scale, a number of us are dreaming about developing a new drug education curriculum for teenagers in school... For that, we'd need a whack of time, and, probably, funding as well. So, we're able to act on some of our vision; the rest we'll sit on, for now.

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The "W" Word

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importantly, I believe what demonstrates our kinship is that we all speak some form of The Charge of the Goddess, which derives ultimately from American folklorist Charles G. Leland in his book *Aradia: The Gospel of the Witches*.

However, our practices are informed by so many other things. Our magic is strongly influenced not only by our politics, our concerns for a healthy planet, for social justice, intellectual freedom, personal autonomy, interconnectedness, but also by our various heritages. While some or all of these characteristics may also be true of Wiccans, Reclaiming is the only Craft tradition of which I am aware that consciously and deliberately espouses direct political action — and the use of magic — to change the world, "to bring to birth the vision of a new culture."

We draw from a vast array of sources — from folklore and fairy tale, from non-European cultures, from fiction, from archaeology and anthropology, from psychology, from the Western mysteries of astrology, Tarot, Kaballah, from feminist theory, from our concerns about our planet, from yoga, from 12 Steps, and from our own direct experience of the divine. We use ancient dances and songs in our rites, and we create new ones. We dance the Maypole and jump the cauldron.

Reclaiming Witches do not use any specific pantheon, although Brigit and Lugh have chosen to manifest themselves in our commu-

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nity more strongly than any other deities.

While, as I said above, some traditions of Witchcraft work exclusively with one or another pantheon, we Reclaiming Witches might just as likely call Yemaya, Quan Yin, Hekate, the Morrígan, Aphrodite, Inanna, or Nimue, depending on circumstances — our personal proclivities, the specific working, the time of year or lunar cycle. We call any deities we feel are appropriate to the working at hand. In this aspect, we resemble the broad Goddess Spirituality movement, yet we hold closely to our British roots by continuing to create sacred space for our working by warding it with Elemental Guardians and using traditional tools of magic (blade, wand, cup, pentacle). We are eclectic, like so much of American Witchcraft.

Many Craft traditions have a clearly defined hierarchy. Wiccan traditions often use titles to distinguish levels of training and elevation. So do some family traditions. Some covens make lighter of these distinctions than others. Reclaiming Witches strive to be nonhierarchical, promoting the rotation of priestess roles so that each Witch gains skill at all roles. Nor is any formal initiation required for a Reclaiming Witch to perform any aspect of ritual or to belong to a coven. Initiation is a rite of passage chosen by the initiate for her own personal reasons, and Reclaiming initiations are customized to the individual candidate, rather than being the same for every initiate.

Unlike many of our co-religionists who keep secret their workings, we gather in public parks, beaches, streets. We do open work for change in the world in accordance with our will, together with the influences of the forces of Nature and the divine. This does not mean that we don't also "assemble in some secret place" for our rites, but only that most of us are quite overtly out of the broom closet. In my opinion, large public rituals require a somewhat different set of skills than do intimate coven workings.

We Witches do not see ourselves as separate from the rest of the world. Nor do Wiccans.

We do not assume that we should "have dominion over" the world's resources. We are not alone, and we know that we cannot survive without the microorganisms, harvests, sunshine and fresh air that make up our very selves.

American Witches are decentralized. We pick up, adapt, use what comes to us from wherever it is offered, and if it works for us, we continue to use it, eventually giving it the weight of "tradition." We constantly evolve. We reinvent ourselves. We try new magical technologies, and if they work for us, we continue to use them. This often leads to deeper work, and the establishment of more "tradition."

As we say in our Principles of Unity, "we are an evolving, dynamic tradition and proudly call ourselves Witches."

Words have power. We Witches know that from our work. We know that when we summon a deity by name, that is the deity who responds, not another. We know that naming gives power over that which is named. When we can name our fears, we can begin to control them, and perhaps even overcome them.

RESPECT VS. RESPECTABILITY

Some people who are not necessarily British traditionals call themselves Wiccans because the term is less loaded than Witch. Or they may describe themselves as practitioners of the Old Religion or Nature Religion. Or as Pagans or Neopagans. To me, this is retreating from our potential. I believe people use these terms because they are less loaded than the term Witchcraft, which comes complete with centuries of bad press. They are more *respectable*. I want respect for my spiritual practices from the rest of society, but I don't necessarily want respectability.

In addition, by calling ourselves Witches, we honor our oppressed foremothers who survived centuries of inequities. Reclaiming Witches place a high value on social justice. Reclaiming a word that was used to denigrate our foremothers identifies us more strongly with them. It reinforces our work on behalf of the disenfranchised and against all forms of injustice.

Pagan writer Chas S. Clifton suggests

that some people use the term Wicca to absolve themselves of "performance anxiety." If you are "Wiccan," you are merely practicing a weird little fringe religion, but if you are a "Witch," then people want you to Do Things — bring back their lover, cure their disease, etc. I agree that this is one of the reasons, not necessarily a conscious one, why people shy from calling themselves Witches.

So we in Reclaiming call ourselves Witches for the very reason that others do not. It's an in-your-face word. We, as feminists and people who honor our own divinity as well as our interdependence with the rest of Gaia, the Mother, reclaim the term Witch.

The word Witch evokes power. What better word to describe a movement of Goddess-worshipping, Nature spirituality, Earth lovers, tree huggers, healers, performers of "all acts of love and pleasure"?

Seattle singer/songwriter/musician Charlie Murphy, although it may not have been his intent, describes our tradition of Witchcraft succinctly and eloquently in his chant "Calling on the Power" when he sings, "With visions of the past and memories of the future, claiming our power to survive."

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Women Against Rape

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groups around sexual and domestic violence. They utilize rap and role plays to bring the issue home to their fellow students. Next year, SFWAR plans to take STAND to three other high schools in San Francisco. Girls from SFWAR's Teen Prevention Program have also created the Teen Zine, for girls by girls.

In the last year, with money received from the SF Commission on the Status of Women, SFWAR has offered free self-defense classes all over the city, from Bayview/Hunter's Point to Chinatown. Classes have been translated into Cantonese, Spanish and American Sign Language, and special classes

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