

Looking at the world from the perspective of a pagan



Highland Views

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Columnist

Most of us grew up with images of witches. The good and bad witches in "The Wizard of Oz." Samantha from "Bewitched." Evil witches in Disney movies. Humorous characters in "Witches of Eastwick" and "Hocus Pocus." There were always witch costumes with pointy black hats for Halloween. Any child could draw a witch from their imagination.

When we weren't amused by these imaginative depictions, we bought into the views of popular culture: Witches are the embodiment of the "dark side," conjuring spells and calling on "evil forces."

In my evangelical days, we were fearful of anything akin to the witchcraft condemned by the Bible. It's "of the Devil," we told ourselves. It was all creepy, scary, something to avoid — a threat to our faith (the Salem witch trials come to mind).

If we're not under this "spell" of misunderstanding and stereotype, we may find that, just as with people of different religions or countries or political parties, the more we meet the real human beings, the more our ignorant fantasies and fears tend to dissolve in the light of knowledge.

As a chaplain I met and worked alongside a number of pagans including Wiccans. I always found them good, decent people who honor the earth, celebrate the seasons and care about justice. I may not share their supernatural beliefs, but I can share their deep respect for Mother Earth.

As the Covenant of the Goddess explains: "Witchcraft is a life-affirming, earth- and nature-oriented religion which sees all of life as sacred and interconnected, honors the natural world as the embodiment of divinity, immanent as well as transcendent, and experiences the divine as feminine and often



Macha leads a spiral dance at Chris and Carol's wedding. COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

as masculine, as well."

I've known Macha NightMare (mare of our night dreams) for many years. I met her through our local interfaith council and we shared leadership in special events and services.

Macha is a witch in the Wiccan tradition, describing her occupation as "witch-at-large" (with the blog Broomstick Chronicles). At Macha's invitation, I taught online courses for Cherry Hill Seminary, teaching pagan students seeking chaplaincy positions in prisons, hospitals and other settings.

I asked Macha to tell me a little more about her views and practice.

Macha told me that "Wicca is a more formal name for witchcraft ... one of many manifestations of contemporary pagan thought and practices that have arisen in the past 60 or 70 years. Witch-

craft is the most common pagan religion, practiced by more than some of the others, like Druidry, for instance ... it acknowledges and rejoices in the ancestors and deities of every practitioner."

It was helpful to hear her clear statement: "Wicca has no dogma; it is experiential. We are orthopractic [right practice] and not orthodox [right belief]. So we see many and varied expressions of ... pagan spirituality."

Macha said that being a witch "means aligning one's life with the seasons where one lives, celebrating nature and natural cycles, honoring our ancestors and many of the 'old ways.' In fact, sometimes the craft is referred to as 'the old religion.'"

On a more personal level, she shares, "To me, it means engaging with the world in ways that honor all life. It

means seeing 'goddess' in every face. Also it acknowledges both light and dark, Summer and Winter, day and night, all needed to maintain good balance. I have been empowered by our practices, especially by devotion to feminine manifestations of the divine."

In response to a question about her interactions with other faith traditions, she said, "I involve myself in interfaith activities for several reasons. One is that I think overall pagan perspectives benefit the health of society as well as our Earth, which is threatened. Interfaith gives me opportunities to share some of those perspectives, and even to provide experiences of it (a spiral dance, for instance)."

Macha led a beautiful chant and spiral dance when Carol and I were married.

Speaking of the true shadow-side of religion itself, she states, "Religion has been used as justification ... for disrespecting those who are dissimilar ... for attempting to homogenize spiritual thinking. That ignores the obvious fact of diversity."

She also seeks to "clarify misunderstandings about paganism in particular because we've been demonized in media for centuries ... We breathe and eat and reproduce; we laugh and cry, we suffer and rejoice — as fellow humans."

What is the most important thing she would want people to know about Wiccans?

"We are people like everyone else... We respect all life and seek harmony with those who view the world differently." As Wiccans say, "An it harm none, do what ye will" — a nature-based ethic of freedom and responsibility.

I'm honored to consider Macha a friend and colleague.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com