

Wise words shared by a local witch



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

When I taught several online courses through Cherry Hill Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, I regularly interacted with women students preparing for chaplaincy positions across the country. Since Cherry Hill is a pagan, or earth-centered, institution, our particular focus was providing chaplain services to pagan patients and prisoners. I was teaching essential aspects of chaplaincy drawing from my years as an interfaith chaplain.

Speaking with Asheville's own "village witch," Byron Ballard, I heard similar thoughts and insights for any compassionate person to ponder. Sipping lemon tea with her at Raven and Crone on Merrimon, she told me her "land-based spirituality" is so rooted in the natural world that "I can't tell the difference." Her experience of the world is indistinguishable from her beliefs and practices. This is due, in part, to her animistic outlook—the world is teeming with soul and energy, inviting humans "into a relationship" with all of it.

This seems to be a different level, a deeper understanding, of environmentalism. A kind of participatory relationship where a person senses they are interconnected and inter-related with the earth. As she puts it, "If you find the divine in Nature, you're pagan. Love the earth enough to fight for it [because] we're not just connected to it, we're part of it."

Byron describes herself as a "polytheist goddess-worshipper" with a reverence for the feminine that she feels permeates everything. She is primarily dedicated to the goddess Inanna, an ancient Sumerian deity, "a savior who died and rose again" and a goddess of both sexuality and war. Honoring Inanna helps Byron approach people from a place of love while she also embodies "female ferocity" when she feels the need to stand up and speak out.

A Western North Carolina native, Byron has had many opportunities to speak out. Involved with interfaith work since the 1980s, she helped organize the first Interfaith Prayer Breakfast and she was a member of a United Religions Initiative cooperative circle after 9/11. She knows many clergy in the area and enjoys working relationships across the theological spectrum.

Responding to a question about people who feel uncomfortable with a witch, she said she listens, talks about mothers (we can all relate to mothers), and affirms a person's right to worship as they choose. Since the ground is sacred to her, finding common ground is a priority. This becomes clear as she explains the cycles of the seasons, that we all have our personal seasons of planting, growing, harvesting, resting.

Byron's community is the Mother Grove Goddess Temple that has a chapel and office downtown across



Byron Ballard, "Village Witch," at Raven and Crone. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

from First Baptist Church. For the most popular holidays, Beltane in May and Samhain in October, up to 150 attend and celebrate. The coven has participated in the Room at the Inn, Homeward Bound and other cooperative programs.

I asked her how the general public feels about pagan/wiccan believers. She thinks there is more of a pluralistic environment now, but Christian culture still dominates and can discriminate. Minority religions have to stay vigilant and sometimes have to take risks to stand and be heard. We discussed the good work of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a national organization with a Jewish director and members who are people of faith as well as secular. Religious freedom should not mean preference or protection for one privileged religion.

Our village witch has a refreshing take on traditions: "All religions have something in common: hospitality." When that intention is neglected, religion can become distracted by divisive beliefs. Byron's knowledge of Christian theology and history helps her relate and be hospitable to believers, even when they are intent to evangelize. She smiles, yet it's obvious her "feminine ferocity" makes her a formidable voice of balance in the face of the inhospitable.

Byron's attitude toward humanists and other non-supernaturalists is also hospitable. She said that people can "come from a place of kindness, or fear." The most desirable approach is to "not be afraid of each other." Each person can "stand in their own tradition" while at the same time speaking kindly with another, listening to their point of view.

Reflecting on the perspective that anyone "finding the divine" in Nature is pagan I wondered about those of us who don't find divinity in the natural world but still have a love for Nature. Maybe we're not pagan, but we can have a profound appreciation, even reverence, for the earth and sense a deep inter-relationship.

On her website (myvillagewitch.com), Byron describes herself as a "rootworker" and "weaver of words and webs." She invites people to share "a nice cuppa tea."

She believes, whatever our stories, we share the seasons and we're connected to the earth: "It is Us."

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