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Witchy woman

Ask about feminism, goddess worship, the rise of neopaganism and M. Macha NightMare will answer — eventually. Just don't ask about Halloween.

BY DAVID TEMPLETON

"I should warn you —I tend to talk in the verbal equivalent of Celtic knot-work," laughs M. Macha NightMare, deftly sweeping crumbs from an outdoor table and, coffee cup in hand, assuming residence of a nearby wrought-iron seat. NightMare has agreed to meet me this morning, at this very crowded Peet's Coffee & Tea near her home in San Rafael, to discuss a few of the primary passions of her professional life. But first, she explains the knot-work remark. "My conversation goes all over the place," she says, smiling, "but, like a Celtic knot, I'm told it usually all comes back to where it started.

"Now," she says, sipping her coffee as she locks her gaze directly on mine, "what is it you wanted to know about witchcraft?"

M. Macha NightMare, as her business card proudly attests, is an educator, an author, a priestess—and a witch, the latter designation being one she employs with obvious and well-practiced relish. On her Web site **www.machanightmare.com**, she confirms that M. Macha NightMare ("Capital M in the middle; the Mare who rides through your dreams") is her legal nom de broom, if not the mundane—and unrevealed—name she was actually born with; and she teasingly writes, "I'm well aware of how outrageous [my name] is. Believe me, it's not easy to wear—but there it is."

NightMare is the author of several books, including *Witchcraft and the Web: Weaving Pagan Traditions Online* (ECW Press, 2002) and *Pagan Pride: Honoring the Craft and Culture of Earth and Goddess* (Citadel Press, 2004). With renowned author Starhawk, she co-authored *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying* (Harper San Francisco, 1997). She is, without reservation, a person of faith, a worshiper of the Goddess, an articulate and outspoken representative of neopaganism; and as such, she regularly travels the country, speaking to interfaith groups and assorted assemblies of pagans and witches, promoting stronger, more effective pagan communities, encouraging and exhorting other witches to embrace a richer, more satisfying, and more mature faith.

Whatever else one might expect from having coffee with a world-famous practicing witch, one can't come away

from a meeting with Macha NightMare without being certain of one thing: She's quite religious. Not in the dangerous, frothing, uncomfortable manner one sometimes associates with unhinged religious fervor, but more in the mold of a funny, confident, appealingly eccentric nun, the kind who knows what she believes and is calmly empowered by it, the kind you might meet at a wedding or peace rally, and walk away later feeling glad you'd met her.

We have agreed, after a few moments of amiable negotiation, not to discuss Halloween today. At least, we won't discuss it very much. NightMare does admit that, as a card-carrying Goddess worshiper, she will be celebrating Samhain this weekend, honoring friends, family and ancestors who've passed away and acknowledging the rebirth of nature along with several hundred fellow pagans and Wiccans and sister witches from around the Bay Area. She will be participating, as she has off-and-on for over 25 years, in the massive public spiral dance and **Samhain ritual** she helped to establish, to be held this year at Kezar Pavilion in San Francisco.

"It should be really nice," she says. "The annual Spiral Dances are very exciting. There's no place else in the world where you'll have 15- or 1600 people all together in one place engaged in a meaningful pagan ritual."

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BEYOND THESE FEW remarks, NightMare's position is that interviewing a witch at Halloween is embarrassingly clichéd, and is even viewed by some within the pagan community as vaguely insulting. Laughing, NightMare reveals that when she told a friend about this meeting with me today, her associate said, "Not another Halloween article!" As NightMare briefly explains, witches do have lives and rituals and celebrations throughout the year, a rich and varied calendar of experiences, not just once in late October; but most Americans wouldn't know this from the way the media deals with modern neopagans. Still, press is press, and NightMare—who regularly runs a workshop titled Media Magic and teaches a course on Public Relations for Pagans through Cherry Hill Seminary (the world's first school of professional pagan ministry)—is nothing if not media savvy.
So here we are. Within pumpkin-chucking distance of October 31. Classily avoiding pagan clichés. Adamant in our mutual resolve, from here on out in this conversation, to pretty much ignore the whole Halloween thing. Moving on to other subjects. Subjects like…the Internet.

As NightMare describes in *Witchcraft and the Web*, the Internet has affected paganism and pagan communities in an incredibly powerful way.

"First of all, the Web has created a massive community of pagans where there wasn't one before," NightMare says. "There are many people on the Web who might have had pagan leanings or maybe did some stuff on their own, read a few books, did a little magic—but until they connected with other pagans on the Web, pretty much felt all alone, had no sense of the larger pagan community to which they belong."

NightMare actively encourages pagans to view the Internet as a "sacred technology," to use it to establish their own Web sites (like hers), to engage in chat-room conversations, to exchange information and organize

events and create large-and-small-scale social actions, and to foster better religious education for private and professional pagans of all types. On the topic of education, NightMare begins to describe the Web-based Cherry Hill Seminary and its spate of online classes for pagan clergy, but first—and this must be the Celtic knot-thing she warned me about—she interrupts herself to define a few terms regarding Wicca, witchcraft and neopaganism. As quickly becomes evident, there is a lot of confusion regarding pagan terminology.

"When people refer to pagans or witches, it's not just one thing, any more than it's one thing when you say Christian or Hindu," NightMare points out. "Paganism is a category within which are many, many traditions, kind of like Protestant denominations. The term Wiccan specifically refers to practitioners of British traditional witchcraft, which typically has a high priest and priestess, and is a lot more formal than a lot of other forms of witchcraft.

"I'm not a Wiccan, but I am a witch," she says. "Many practitioners of witchcraft choose to label themselves Wiccan, because it's not as loaded a word as witch. The result is that a bunch of people who are not technically Wiccans still use the word to describe themselves.

"That's fine, but it is confusing," she adds. "Pagan is a term I use a lot, it's a broader term, encompassing all of this stuff. All Wiccans are pagans but not all pagans are witches, and all witches are not Wiccans." Some, she explains, make a distinction between paganism and neopaganism, defining pagans as those with indigenous or tribal religions, and neopagans as folks of European descent who've come to embrace paganism.

Neopaganism—and I beg the readers who already know this to pardon the history lesson—is a movement that started in the '30s and '40s, but according to NightMare, didn't really get rolling until the 1960s, only a decade or so after the laws against witchcraft in England were finally repealed. "We are a new religious movement," says NightMare. "There's been a gradually growing sense of legitimacy toward the pagan religions, though a lot of the world and a lot of the people in this country have yet to see it, and there is a lot of misinformation about us and superstition. But in spite of the fact that we live in very intolerant times, we have felt a bit of a change. Definitely, within the local, regional, national and international interfaith organizations, we pagans are right at the table with everyone else, and that's really nice."

Now that's she's brought up interfaith, a concept she's very high on—she's been a member of the Marin Interfaith Council for the last few years—I have to throw out a few obvious questions.

"How does a witch and a priestess end up on a council alongside Christians and Buddhists and Hindus and everyone?" I ask.

"The director of interfaith [council], for a while, was a priest," she explains. "He'd been actively looking for a pagan to join the council, and they came and solicited me. They knew there were pagans around, and they felt the council could benefit from having that additional voice."

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FOUNDED IN 1982, the Marin Interfaith Council is a collaborative group of individuals from a vast assortment of faiths nurturing understanding between faiths while encouraging religious tolerance and working within the community to advocate for social justice, working together on social issues from a spiritual perspective.

"The working rationale within Interfaith is that religious leaders influence their 'flocks,' so to speak, it will filter down into the congregations," NightMare says. "If people realize that we're nothing to be afraid of, that we are just as concerned with the commonweal as everyone else is, then they won't be so inclined to demonize us."

"I'm curious," I ask, "if any of your feelings have shifted at all, by being part of Interfaith and dealing with other faiths on a regular basis. Have any of your preconceived notions, or maybe even some prejudices, been altered in any way?"

"To be honest, not a whole lot," she laughs. "Well, a little bit. But you have to understand that I grew up in that Catholic-Protestant Christian culture. Most of us pagans did come out of that. We've now got second- and third-generation pagans, but for the most part, we are people who were raised in that kind of religious environment."

The knot weaves on, and we are suddenly talking about how NightMare came to embrace paganism to begin with, which would have been a good place to start, but there's no arguing with Celtic knot-makers on caffeine.

"I came to this witchcraft thing through two main avenues," says NightMare. "One was second-wave feminism, and the other was a concern for the environment. I feel that I always had a spiritual dimension to who I am, but it wasn't until I found witchcraft that I knew what to do with my spirituality and my sense of the Divine mystery."

With a father she describes as a "hard-core Roman Catholic" and a mother who was "hard-core Methodist," NightMare was raised in what she calls "a very repressive and conservative Christian context." The rule-bound authoritarianism of her childhood left her unsatisfied, and as a young woman she began questioning everything she'd been taught about God and the world.

"What changed me," she says, "was when I fist discovered a feminine image of the Divine. It was a huge thing. The Catholics at least had a few female saints and of course they had Mary, but Protestants didn't have any kind of female to identify with as a spiritual being. Suddenly, I was introduced to Aphrodite, and Kali, and Hecate. They were a lot more interesting to me, as a female." Eventually, she embraced the Goddess, and became a student of goddess-oriented witchcraft. "Here," she says, "was a religion that not only celebrated womanhood, that celebrated the power of women and was empowering to me as a woman, that made my opinions worth listening to and my experiences worth sharing, but it also upheld the sacredness of the environment, it celebrated and encouraged a deep connection with the Earth." Hearing Goddess stories, reading books about witchcraft, being told by pagans about their faith, was just the beginning, she says. "Ultimately, the mystery cannot be told. It cannot be explained, it can only be experienced."

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IT WAS OVER 30 years ago that NightMare went pagan, and over the last three decades she's seen the movement grow and change, especially in the Bay Area.

"The heartland of America is a hotbed of paganism," she says, "but they don't tend to be out of the broom closet, so to speak. The Midwest pagans tend to build community through festivals they attend in RVs on weekends. On the West Coast, we're more integrated into the society, and I think we're a lot more accepted—at least we are in the Bay Area.

"I was talking to this one prominent pagan," NightMare continues, "and he says that the San Francisco Bay Area is to the contemporary pagan movement what Athens was in the Golden Age of Greece. This is where it's happening. There's a lot of flowering, a lot of creativity, lots of stirring of the cauldron. Some sociologists have likened the current cultural situation, with all these neopagans stepping into the light, to the time when the Christians were coming out of the catacombs in Rome, coming out of hiding after years of persecution.

"There's a little bit of truth to that," NightMare nods. "It's not a perfect parallel, but there are some similarities."

There is a short pause in the discussion, blamed in part by my cup of coffee suddenly being spilled all over my laptop bag as I attempt to turn off the cell phone that has loudly and rudely begun to ring. NightMare runs for napkins as I scoop hot latte foam off my pants leg. A magic moment, to be sure. When the ruckus is over, however, and the resulting few seconds of lapsed conversation have ended, NightMare, leans forward and asks, "Now can I talk about Cherry Hill?"

Full circle! Or…full knot!

"Please do," I say.

"Cherry Hill Seminary is very dear to my heart," she remarks. "And I think my work there says a lot about what pagans need to be doing at this point in our growth as a new religious movement."

Cherry Hill Seminary, based in Vermont—"It's really a house on 40 acres in the middle of nowhere," laughs NightMare—exists mainly in cyberspace, and students take classes exclusively online. The classes are for pagans of all types who want to acquire the skills to be effective professional ministers of their faith.

"We don't teach people how to be pagans or witches or Druids, we don't teach them how to do spells or any of that," NightMare says. "We teach ministerial skills. There is an increasing call for pagan chaplains in the military, in prison, in hospitals. There are people within the pagan community who want to be served by trained pagan clergy, professional officiants to handle their rites of passage, to do their weddings, to bless their babies, to do their funerals and memorials."

With so many pagans coming from families that hold other religious views, Cherry Hill teaches its clergy the importance of creating funeral rituals and weddings that are meaningful to everybody, and that, in the case of

memorials, will foster the sense of shared mourning.

"It's very important to create a ritual that reinforces the mutual bonds rather than amplifying them," NightMare says. "What Cherry Hill teaches is leadership skills."

Cherry Hill—with which NightMare serves as chair of the Public Ministry Department—features classes such as A Survey of Chaplaincy; A Survey of Neo-Pagan Tradition; World Religions from a Pagan Perspective; Intro to Interfaith; Boundaries and Ethics; and Religion and the Law (taught by "a Druid who lives in Benicia"). The institution has pulled together a team of pagan teachers from around the country, including one in Alaska, one in Wisconsin and seven in the Bay Area—M. Macha NightMare being one of those.

Cherry Hill, she is certain, is one more piece of evidence that modern neopaganism has begun to mature as it steps up to take its place among the other thriving belief systems and faith communities that make up the spiritual identity of the world. As pagans—pagan writers, pagan teachers, pagan clergy, pagan Web masters and all the rest—gradually continue to move into positions of authority and respect, NightMare believes there will come a time when people no longer associate "real" witches and Wiccans with Halloween alone.

"I do believe that will happen," she says, smiling. "It has to happen. It's happening already."

PHOTO BY ROBERT VENTE

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